



F I R E

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FITCHBURG ART MUSEUM
FEBRUARY 9, 2019–JUNE 2, 2019

Cover:
Detail of **Moonbow 2**
1994/1995
oil and fire on canvas



F I R E

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O T T O P I E N E I N G R O T O N , 1 9 8 3 - 2 0 1 4



The Proliferation of the Sun
1966/1967, re-staged Neue
Nationalgalerie 2014
FAM installation 2019
25-minute multimedia performance

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Group 7

1998/1999

tempera gouache on Bütten paper

DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

Otto Piene was one of the most important artistic innovators in the second half of the twentieth century, and this exhibition is a milestone for both the artist and the Fitchburg Art Museum.

For over thirty years, Piene made his home, and his artwork, on a farm in nearby Groton, Massachusetts. He showed his work—in many different media—all over the world. He often expressed a desire to have a local show of his experimental and visionary art, so that people in his own community could see what he was up to, right in their own backyard. Unfortunately, Piene passed away before this dream was realized.

A few years back, Piene's widow, artist and poet Elizabeth Goldring, recalled her husband's hope, and with the encouragement of FAM Trustee and fellow Groton resident Carol Canner, approached the Museum about the possibility of organizing a posthumous retrospective. We immediately said YES to this rare and important opportunity to exhibit the work of a globally renowned artist in Fitchburg.

Fire and Light: Otto Piene in Groton, 1983–2014 fulfills multiple aspects of FAM's mission: it presents the work of a contemporary New England artist, and it introduces Otto

Piene to our local community in North Central Massachusetts. The exhibition tells his story, reveals the importance of Groton to Piene's practice, and affords his neighbors with the opportunity to see truly spectacular works of art that have been, until now, completely unavailable. Moreover, I am proud to add that **Fire and Light** is the largest exhibition of Piene's work to date in any American museum, and his first show in the U.S. to bring together multiple bodies of work: inflatable sculptures, Fire Paintings, tempera gouaches, sketchbooks, a Light Ballet, and his immersive light and sound installation, **The Proliferation of the Sun**. Seen together, these seemingly disparate artworks profoundly communicate Otto Piene's fearless experimental spirit, optimism, and utter joy.

The Fitchburg Art Museum is most thankful to Elizabeth Goldring and Carol Canner for making this all possible, and to FAM Curator Lisa Crossman and her team for organizing and presenting this magnificent exhibition. Thanks also to Fitchburg State University. FAM's partnership with Fitchburg State provides great value for our audiences and their students—specifically, this very exhibition catalogue.

Nick Capasso
Director
Fitchburg Art Museum





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a privilege for the Fitchburg Art Museum to organize the exhibition **Fire and Light: Otto Piene in Groton 1983–2014**. We are sincerely grateful to Elizabeth Goldring for her generous support of this exhibition and opening her home and the grounds of the Piene residency throughout the development of this show over the past few years. Without the collaboration of Elizabeth and the Piene estate **Fire and Light** would not be possible. Elizabeth's warm hospitality, as well as the ideas and materials she's shared have been vital. Carol and Carl Canner also deserve our heartfelt thanks for introducing FAM to Elizabeth and for enthusiastically sponsoring the exhibition. It has been an honor for me and for the Fitchburg Art Museum to realize **Fire and Light**.

The planning and installation of **Fire and Light** required ongoing conversations, collaboration, and the efforts of those who work closely with the Piene estate. My sincere thanks to Sandra Tobies, Sandra Hachey, and Elizabeth Hua Olson for their warm administrative assistance. Elizabeth Hua Olson, Piene's niece, deserves special thanks for sharing a lovely photo of her uncle in the **Light Silo**, for documenting the installation process, and even helping with a few labels. John Powell patiently accompanied us through the research and selection of Piene's work, prepared the **Light Robots** for exhibition and finalized their choreography, and offered technical support and the coordination of numerous logistics. I am thankful for John's sense of humor and patience throughout the process. Günter's technical knowledge and experience working with Otto, as well as his eye for perfection were crucial during the planning and installation stages of the exhibition. I learned a lot from John and Günter and heartily thank them both.

The technical components of the exhibition, mainly **The Proliferation of the Sun** and the **Light Robots**, demanded the support of other experts. The MIT Museum and Seth Riskin both contributed space and energy to the early development of the Robots, and Daniel Spikol helped with later stages. James Manning of Emerson Urban Arts: Media Art Gallery was imperative in making **Proliferation of the Sun** technically possible. I appreciate his persistence in realizing this incredible installation in FAM's galleries. I began a dialogue with Emerson College early on in the development of **Fire and Light** through conversations with Joseph D. Ketner II, formerly of Emerson. While sadly Joe was unable to join us for the installation, it was not only helpful but also comforting to have James and others who knew Joe well involved in the installation. Jeffrey Warmouth, artist and professor at Fitchburg State University, also contributed his technical knowhow to tweaking **Proliferation of the Sun**. It takes a team to make any project come to fruition, but with this exhibition I feel particularly indebted to the experts who helped to realize **Fire and Light**.

Through various stages of this exhibition, we had the privilege of consulting and working with Otto's former collaborators and students, as well as experts, who provided key insight into his work and practice, as well as archival materials. Joseph D. Ketner II should be thanked again here, as well as Lynette Roth of Harvard Art Museums, Seth Riskin of the MIT Museum Studio, George Fifield of Cyberarts, Ellen Sebring of MIT, Laura Knott of MIT, Vincent Grabill of the University of Maryland, and Kunstverlag Galerie Till Breckner. The contributions range from participation in programming, writing catalogue essays, to sharing stories and/or materials such as photo or video documentation.

Beyond individuals, **Fire and Light** was made possible thanks to the support of numerous institutions and sponsors. Otto Piene's galleries Sperone Westwater and Sprüth Magers were supportive throughout the process, and we are grateful for their cooperation. Other institutions like Kunsthalle Bremen – der Kunstverein in Bremen, the Zero Foundation, and the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin kindly agreed to our showing of **Proliferation of the Sun**. I am indebted to the work that was done to digitize Piene's hand-painted slides and to create the version of this performance at the Neue Nationalgalerie that served as a model for FAM. Additionally, thanks to Emerson College for the loan of equipment. Harvard Art Museums and their staff for kindly working with FAM on the loan of three sketchbooks that are essential for understanding Piene's practice and his connection to Groton. Special thanks to Carol and Carl Canner, Patricia La Valley and Geoff Hargadon, and the National Endowment of the Arts for their financial support of **Fire and Light**.

The scale and technical challenges of **Fire and Light** benefited from the extra time of staff members. It's a relief to know that I have the support of a hardworking team. Thanks to FAM's Director Nick Capasso for his ongoing commitment to bringing Otto Piene's work to the Fitchburg Art Museum. I accompanied former FAM Curator Mary Tinti to Groton for the first time in the summer of 2016. Thanks to Mary for her help in the early stages of this project. Thanks to our installation crew, in particular Charlie Cruz and Steve Backholm. Their extra efforts were greatly appreciated. FAM's Director of Education Laura Howick and her Education Fellow Barbara Callahan created a superb Learning Lounge that helps to frame **Fire and Light** within the context of Piene's entire artistic career and to further engage viewers

through video and activities. The Learning Lounge would not be possible without the generous support of the Clementi Family Charitable Trust, for which we are thankful.

I am so appreciative of Terrana Curatorial Fellow Candice Bancheri's dedicated assistance with this exhibition and catalogue. She deserves extra applause for her operation of the **Light Robots** on special occasions. I look forward to seeing her ongoing growth as an emerging curator. Her position would not be possible without the generous support of Dr. Anthony Terrana. Such sponsorship is essential to the educational mission of FAM.

This thoughtful and dynamic catalogue has been made possible by FAM's ongoing collaboration with Professor Robert Carr and his talented students at Fitchburg State University. This marks the twelfth semester of this rewarding partnership. Thank you catalogue students in the Document Design class: Allie St Peter, Domenic Logudice, Kaitlyn Gregoire, Ryan Wheeler, Kenzie Jacobson. Each student's individual contributions and collective work has been essential to the development of an exhibition catalogue that innovatively documents the breadth and scope of **Fire and Light**.

Lisa Crossman
Curator
Fitchburg Art Museum



NOTE FROM THE CURATOR

Early in his artistic career, Otto Piene reflected that an artist's "...response is creative in that it refers more to the future than the present."¹ **Fire and Light: Otto Piene in Groton, 1983–2014** encourages one to consider past and future while remaining firmly grounded in the present through the experiential immediacy of Piene's art. **Fire and Light** includes major bodies of work produced by Piene from the purchase of property with his wife and collaborator Elizabeth Goldring in Groton, Massachusetts in 1983 until his death in Berlin in 2014.

The use of Groton as a framework for the Fitchburg Art Museum's exhibition serves several purposes. At the most basic level, the town of Groton is nearby Fitchburg. Its geographic proximity honors the local and underscores the Piene exhibition at FAM as an opportunity for regional residents to appreciate the work of an artist who was part of the area's community. A focus on Piene's years in Groton also allows the discovery of Piene's practice beyond the historical significance of his art and ideas as co-founder of Group ZERO and his contributions to the legacy of MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies where he served as the first fellow in 1968 and as its director from 1974 until 1994. Clearly these nodes, like the fact that Piene continued to produce and show work in Germany throughout his career, are significant and crucial to understanding the scope of the artist's work. Indeed, the art on view in **Fire and Light** intersects with these two narratives. Yet there is more to the story. Groton adds a degree of the personal—a consideration of which is perhaps best guided by Piene's words of 1958: "...man will find his aesthetic sensibility to be the doorway to his spiritual self."²

Since the opening of **Fire and Light**, the sentiment that the exhibition captures Piene's spirit has been repeatedly expressed by those who knew him. The Fire Paintings, Light Ballet, **The Proliferation of the Sun**, inflatable sculpture, sketchbooks, and tempera gouaches in the exhibition are ample material to reflect on Piene's "aesthetic sensibility" and forward-thinking vision. Piene's early experimental work in postwar Germany and dialogue with the international avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s created a foundation that developed into major bodies of later work. The potency of experience and environment were at the forefront of avant-garde practice. Piene's thinking on these concepts continued to evolve in subsequent decades. FAM's exhibition includes only work produced or re-visited since 1983. Piene's fascination with fire and light as formal and philosophical questions permeate his work and act as a bridge between his early and late career, while also giving us fodder for a reflection on Piene's "spirit" and the world as it was, is, and could be from his perspective.

Piene began to create Fire Paintings in the 1960s and continued to produce them years later in an outdoor fire studio that he built in Groton. The paintings are miraculous, in Piene's words, "survival studies." They take the painter's consideration of light to a hazardous extreme that plays at the edge of destruction for the sake of creation. To see photos of Piene setting his paintings on fire as a young man invites the viewer to marvel at his ingenuity and daring; to see photos of Piene still making Fire Paintings as a man in his eighties encourages us to see beyond the spectacle of the act and the mood of an era. The impact and trace of fire in **Sulphur** (2001), for example, is beautiful.

The movement of reds and yellows, the texture of the bubbled paint, the depth achieved through the residue of smoke are pleasing to the eye. Piene's reflection that "the platonic ideal, that the beautiful is both good and true, has not been forgotten,"³ perhaps pushes us beyond the superficial to underscore Piene's search and hope for a weightier beauty that could be achieved through fire. Fire allows for survival and causes destruction. Fire is light. It would seem that Piene's continued production of unique, sometimes subtle and later more often bold, Fire Paintings proves a deep commitment to change the essence of painting and an opportunity to try to see beyond the surface of art.

The Proliferation of the Sun was first performed in 1967 and remade in a digitized version for the Neue Nationalgalerie in 2014 that most closely resembles its incarnation at the Fitchburg Art Museum. This performance is significant in that it literally bridges past and present through the combination of digitized hand-painted glass slides from the 1960s with new ones created to replace damaged ones for the 2014 exhibition in Berlin. The most recent slides were painted in Groton. In **Proliferation** painted color is transferred and transformed through light. It maintains the experimental feel of the 1960s performance, and integrates the use of new technology (then mechanical carousel projectors, now digital ones) to create an immersive experience of color through light projection. It marks a transition from analogue to digital, from a clear performance to one that lies between performance and installation.

Proliferation is changeable in how it responds to space and the pre-existing colors, surfaces, and atmospheric interference that give it life. It would be impossible to re-create exactly the same **Proliferation of the Sun**. There is magic in its variance and the repetition of Piene's voice in every cycle. The biomorphic imagery is reminiscent

of the Fire Paintings, in particular the energetic circular forms. By taking the sun as reference, Piene brings the sky and elemental force into a contained interior space. Yet the goal is not one of mastery, but of interactivity and transformation.

The landscape surrounding Piene's Groton residence was interpreted repeatedly in Piene's drawings. He also embellished the grounds with his artwork. Piene's Groton sketchbook contains numerous vibrant drawings in marker of the Light and Bell Silos, the barn and sheep shed that he used as studios and for storage, and his home. They document the vitality of the landscape and offer a more intimate means of understanding his reflection of an experience of place and its energy.

Piene moved to Groton for access to more space and peace, while maintaining proximity to the stimulus of MIT's community. Piene's relocation to Groton does not represent a break from his ties to Germany or MIT. Rather his residence shows that Piene's passions for the elements, transformation, and art were evident even in the most personal realm of his life. Piene's observation and transformation of his residence at Groton reflects a dialogue that mimics his art—modifications and illumination that help us to experience more truly what is there. In Piene's own reflection of 1986 that links Sky Art to the forms of Fire Painting, which in turn link to his sketchbooks, he stated that "...Boards and sheets of paper are freely written pages of imaginary diaries which preserve what happened and predict what is to come [...] The hand paints the future."⁴ In **Fire and Light**, we think back to the defining moments that led to Piene's evolution and his contributions as an artist, an educator, and a thinker. We experience. And we consider a reality in which "the hand paints the future."

Lisa Crossman
Curator
Fitchburg Art Museum

Detail of **Sulphur**
2001
oil and fire on canvas



1 Otto Piene, "On the Purity of Light," in **ZERO: Countdown to Tomorrow, 1950s–1960s**, Texts by Valerie Hillings, Daniel Birnbaum, Edouard Derom, and others (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications with ARTBOOK | D.A.P., October 10, 2014–January 7, 2015), exhibition catalogue, 231. Originally published as "Über die Reinheit des "Lichts," **ZERO 2** (Oct. 1958), 24–27.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Otto Piene, **Otto Piene: Arbeiten auf Papier 1958–1986** (Mönchengladbach, Germany: Galerie Löhrl, October 19–December 6, 1986), exhibition catalogue.



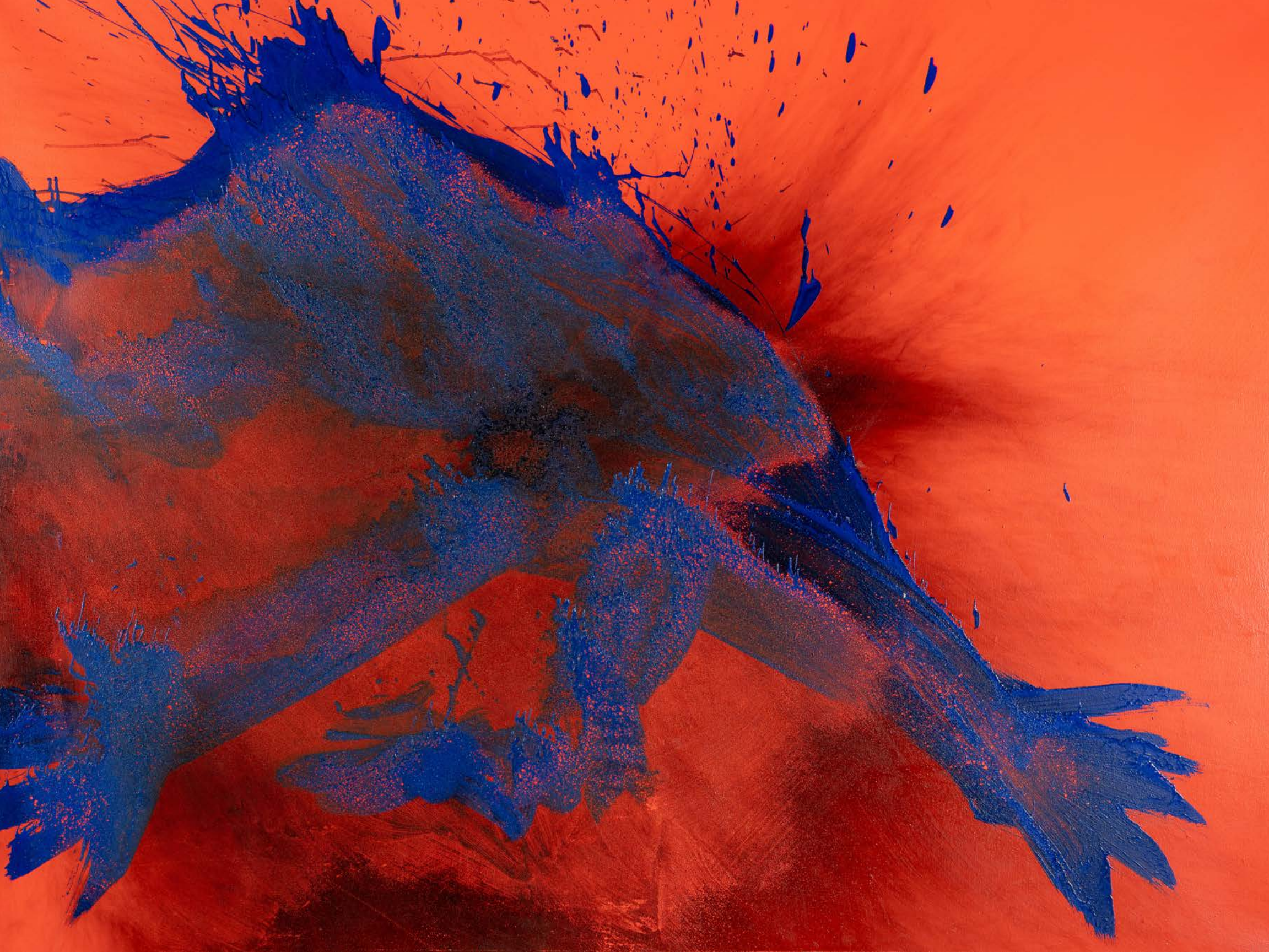
FIRE PAINTINGS

Piene's Fire Paintings evolved from the Smoke Drawings that he began in 1959. In these, Piene used a fixative to adhere soot to paper. His use of the fixative soon led to experiments with the flammable substance on canvas and paperboard. Piene's process was to spray adhesive onto a painted surface, set it on fire, and manually move the support to control the flame.

Piene continued to produce Fire Paintings throughout his life, including in Groton after he built an outdoor fire studio on the property. Fire—a form of light—was used to alter or mark the art object in an organic manner that reflected the possibility for deeper reflections on humanity and the cosmos. Fire Paintings recorded the controlled gestures of its maker and the spontaneous residue of fire.

Daniel Biskup (photo)
Otto Piene on the farm
Groton, Massachusetts
2014





Antigravity
1997
oil and fire on canvas



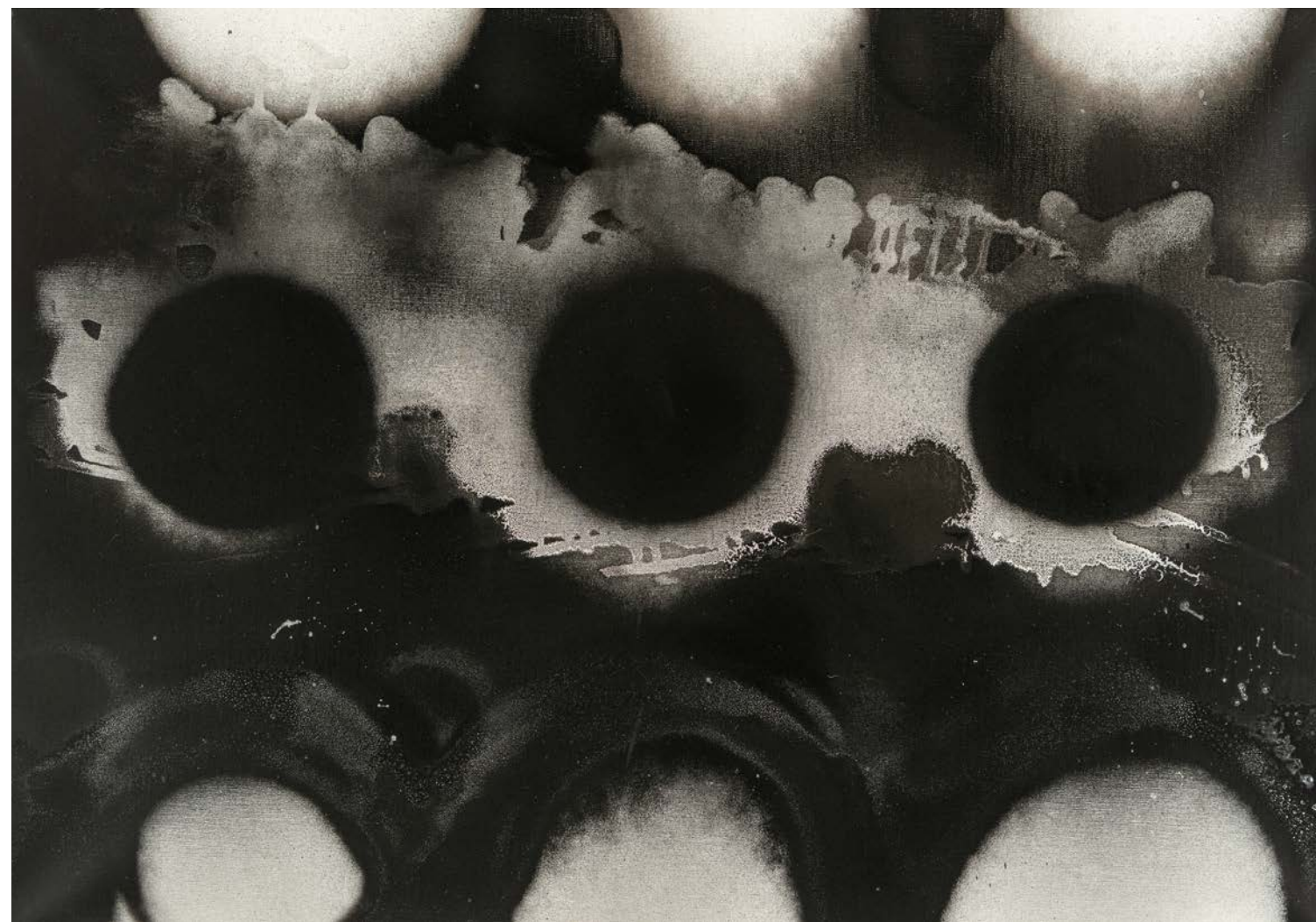
“A painting is a **field of forces**, that area where its author’s impulses all come together, there to be transformed, re-formed into movement of color.”¹

- Otto Piene, 1959

Cyclops
1993/1994
oil and fire on canvas



Plusquamperfect (Past Perfect Participle)
2003
oil and fire on canvas



Helldunkel (Bright, Dark)
2006/2007
oil and fire on canvas



Feuerrot (Fire Red)
2002
oil and fire on canvas



Detail of **Orbit**
1993/1994/1997
oil and fire on canvas

Orbit
1993/1994/1997
oil and fire on canvas





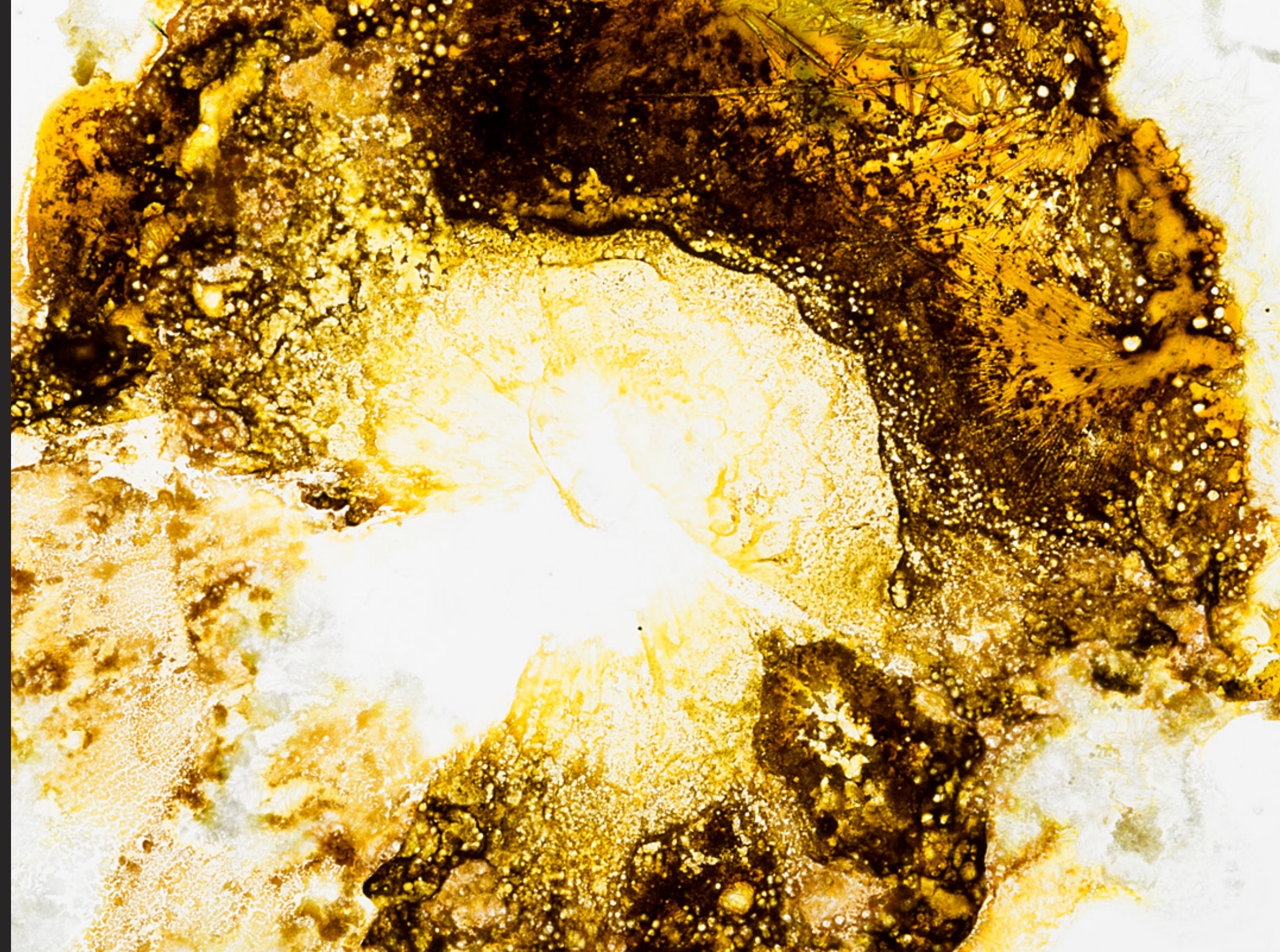


THE PROLIFERATION OF THE SUN

Image still of digitized hand-painted glass slides in **The Proliferation of the Sun**, 1966/1967, re-staged for the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin in 2014.

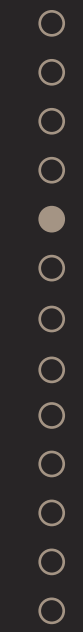
The Proliferation of the Sun debuted at the Black Gate Theatre in New York City in 1967. The original multimedia performance consisted of over a thousand hand-painted glass slides, and included five Kodak Carousel slide projectors operated by five “projectionists.” During the performance, the five projectionists manually advanced each slide as an audio recording played of Piene rhythmically reading a script of instructions. This performance reflected Piene’s exploration of light and theatrical, immersive environments that included both sound and imagery. Shown for the first time in the United States since the original analogue performance, the Fitchburg Art Museum’s installation of **Proliferation of the Sun** uses a combination of Piene’s digitized hand-painted slides created for the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, Germany in 2014 and those produced in the 1960s.

The title, **The Proliferation of the Sun**, refers to the theatrical production of the Futurist opera “Victory Over the Sun” (1913, by poet Aleksei Kruchenykh). In it, the sun is a symbol of rationality and a past that must be caught and destroyed to realize a better future. Piene instead presents light as a medium through which he could construct harmonious scenarios among technology, nature, and humans.









The Proliferation of the Sun
1966/1967
re-staged Neue Nationalgalerie 2014
FAM installation 2019
25-minute multimedia performance





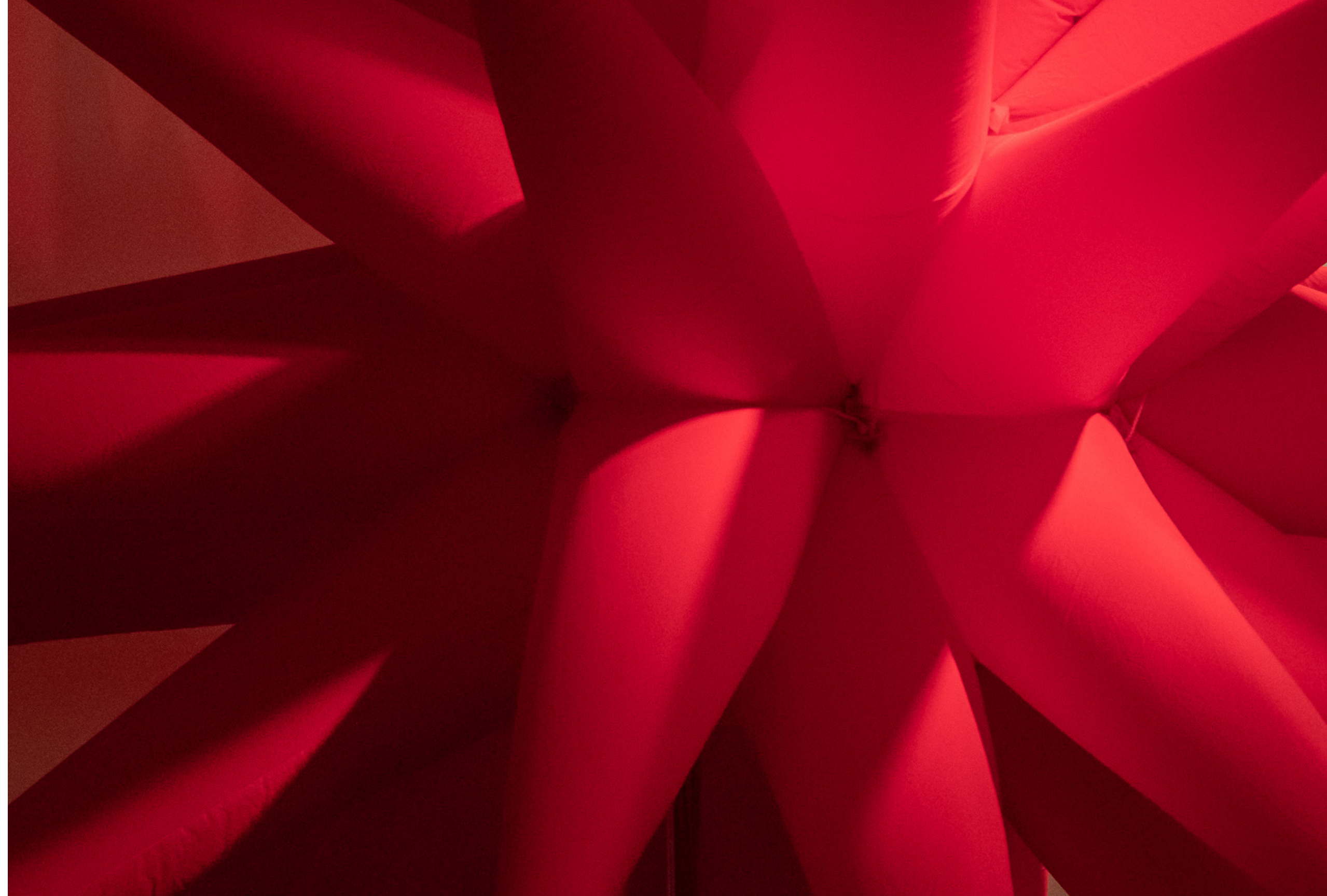


INFLATABLE SCULPTURE

Red Star
2014
inflatable sculpture (44 cones)

Piène developed his inflatable sculptures alongside other artists of the 1960s who were experimenting with soft materials in sculpture. Piène's nylon inflatables are animated as they fill with air. Set indoors, these colorful forms alter the audience's perception of an interior space.

Sky Art—a term coined by the artist in 1969—refers to his large inflatable sculptures that are flown outdoors. In Sky Art, a group of committed participants elevate one of Piène's inflatable sculptures using helium tubes. Sky Art's insertion in varying outdoor contexts makes light, atmospheric conditions, and the landscape significant focal points of the experience. Sky Art is a notable example of Piène's vision for increased participation and collaboration in art—an aspiration he pursued as both an educator and artist interested in producing art “on [a] civic scale.”

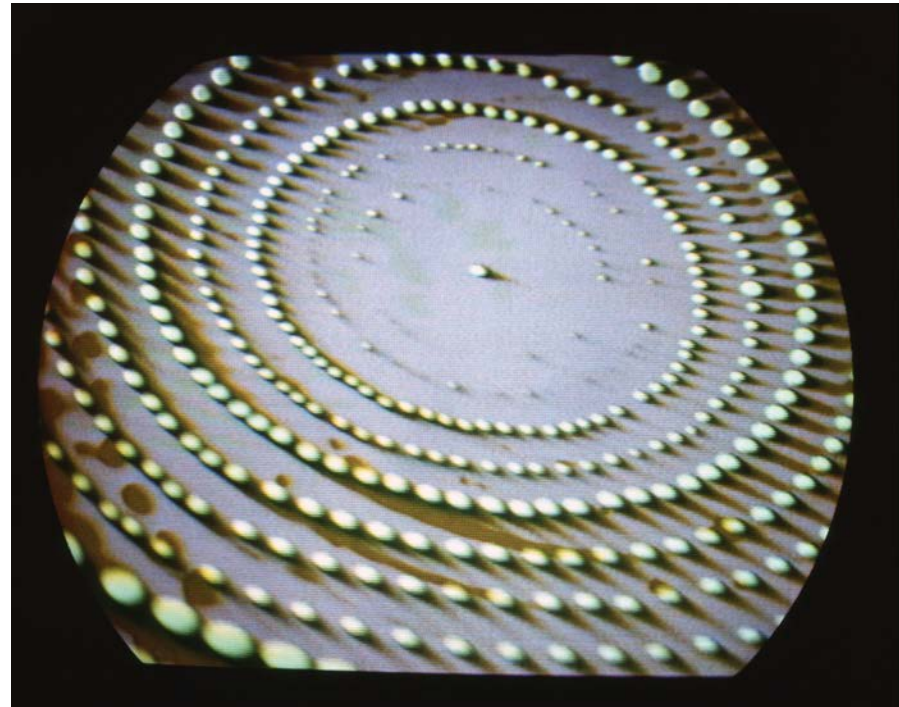




ART AND TECHNOLOGY IN NEW ENGLAND AND OTTO PIENE

George Fifield

By the mid-1980s, Otto Piene was director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at MIT and a new resident of Groton with his wife and collaborator Elizabeth Goldring. He had already confirmed his ideas that art could be technology-based, expansive, and community built. Prior to his move to Groton, Piene began his tenure at MIT in 1968, upon the invitation of György Kepes, as a fellow of the newly founded CAVS. Piene quickly advanced his idea of “Sky Art”—a term he coined in 1969 to refer to the interactive, participatory events that engage the public in spectacular feats. He went on to catalyze several generations of artists in collaborative ventures that merge nature and technology as CAVS director (1974–1994) and then later as part of his practice. The initiation of New England as an important center of art and technology in the United States and around the globe at this time was thanks largely to the contributions of Piene, his colleagues, and numerous institutions like MIT in the Greater Boston area.



WGBH-TV’s experimental collaboration with artists through **The Medium is the Medium** and the CAVS’s fellowship program for artists are significant to the history of the advancement of art and technology in Greater Boston. Piene was involved with both. WGBH producer, Fred Barzyk worked with the Howard Wise Gallery in New York to make the first American television program highlighting the work of video artists. Piene and artists such as Nam June Paik, Ted Tadlock, James Seawright, Aldo Tambellini, and Allan Kaprow were each given a segment. In the parking lot of WGBH-TV in Allston, Piene’s 1968 segment, **Electronic Light Ballet**, involved “flying” a WGBH employee’s teenage daughter, Susan Peters, via helium-filled polyethylene tubes.

Otto Piene, **Electronic Light Ballet**, 1969, for the first video artists television program, **The Medium is the Medium**, WGBH-TV studio, Boston, MA.

From that simple beginning, Piene’s inflatables got bigger and the locations became more august—eventually culminating in a series of Sky Art events that lifted cellist and performance artist, Charlotte Moorman into the sky to perform Jim McWilliams’s **Sky Kiss** in Linz, Austria and above the Sidney Opera House in Australia. Moorman also performed **Sky Kiss** at the 1981 Sky Art Conference at MIT and in Munich, Germany in 1983. Piene already had extensive experience with broadcast television as German television filmed a 1959 exhibition held in Wiesbaden, Germany of which he was a part. The year before **The Medium is the Medium**, Piene and Tambellini had created the multimedia event, **Black Gate Cologne** in a broadcast television studio in Germany. It was the first television program produced by fine artists for large-scale public broadcast. In a letter to Tambellini planning the event, Piene grandly synthesized these ideas when he wrote:

...light that is visible from considerable distances; light that is made visible after it has traveled (tv)...combination of elements such as light and sound; the striving for a new monumentality, i.e. big scale; art in the sky; communication with big audiences; social and political concern; the regaining of meaning of art to the masses; the renaissance of art.¹

The CAVS was initially created to support the development of individual creative endeavors and collaborative projects. The CAVS’s founding precept, established under Kepes and continued under Piene, was to create “art on a civic scale.” This certainly meant that art should support the municipal community in which one finds oneself. A 1971 symposium Kepes organized, entitled **Art in Civic Scale**, was prevised with the words, “The purpose of the Symposium is to bring into focus the role of the artist in the needed revitalization of our man-created environment.”² The notion of art functioning on a “civic scale” implies that art can also be created by a large community of artists and others, which indeed supported the vision of the CAVS. The size and number of collaborators in the many CAVS projects is astounding, and a credit to Piene’s leadership. In 1977, the CAVS project **Centerbeam** was installed at documenta 6 in Kassel, Germany. It was an immense collaborative sculpture involving neon, holograms, laser projections on steam, and one of Piene’s inflatable sculptures, a fifty-foot helium filled red flower emanating from a 144 foot-long structure. It involved fourteen artists, five scientists, and five engineers. The following year, **Centerbeam** was installed on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. There, the number of artists grew to twenty-two. Ultimately, 250 artists and over sixty graduate students passed through the CAVS during its history.

One of the draws to the CAVS was that artists could work with MIT scientists and engineers. Piene himself worked on projects with Harold “Doc” Edgerton for his light sculpture and with physicist Walter Lewin who helped calculate lift forces for the inflatable sculptures. CAVS fellows and graduate students represented a wide collection of technical artistic practice. Besides the traditional ones, film, dance, and music, and new concepts of environmental art/sculpture and sky and space art, individual CAVS fellows created operas, holographic prints, studied telecommunications and computer graphics. They initiated new art forms like bio-art, geothermal art, and projection into steam.

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Seeking technical support and collaborators, CAVS artists had access to the entire MIT campus. There were other creative centers on campus; Ricky Leacock's film department, Muriel Cooper's Visible Languages Workshop, Nicholas Negroponte's Architecture Machine Group that later became the Media Lab—all of these had overlap and brought ideas of artistic creativity to the hard science departments. With its symposiums and celebrations, the avant-garde art world came to know MIT (including CAVS) as a place of great ideas. World-renowned artists like Claes Oldenburg, Nam June Paik, and Charlotte Moorman came to participate in the ideas and collaborate.

The CAVS participated in major international events like documenta, the Olympics, and Ars Electronica. Still, the advancement of art and technology was reinforced by the difficult creative work being done by a dedicated team of artists and engineers in the Boston/Cambridge area, long before these events took place. For example, Piene's **Light Line Experiment**, a Sky Art sculpture flown in May of 1968, would later evolve into his monumental rainbows that he first produced at MIT and subsequently flew over the Charles River in 1971. Piene's rainbows later achieved international recognition when he flew **Olympic Rainbow** for the closing event of the ill-fated 1972 Munich Olympics.

The 1983 Sky Art Conference took place in Munich with over 100 artists from the CAVS. The conference featured numerous sky events and the presentation of an outdoor multimedia opera, **Icarus**, with music by Paul Earls and libretto by Piene and Ian Strasfogel. Then in 1986, a solid year of Sky Art activities began with the **Desert Sun/Desert Moon** project at the Alabama Hills in California where eleven artists came together working collaboratively, but each with their individual Sky Art project. Activities continued in Cambridge, Alaska, São Paulo, and Paris. During this time Piene, Goldring, and Lowry Burgess wrote the **Sky Art Manifesto**, which was presented at the Paris Conference on Culture in Space at UNESCO on November 3, 1986.

The Manifesto was a declaration of what the artist's role in space exploration must be. It states:

Our reach into space constitutes an infinite extension of human life, imagination and creativity. The ascent into the sky is mirrored by the descent into inner space as it reflects the cosmos. Our release from gravity represents a fundamental shift in human consciousness—flight and release which open a new dimension of humanity. From the ancient past, artists have formed images and dreams, fired the imagination, build structures of aspiration to give the world wings to fly, and the vision to see new societies in the sky. We live in their cumulative light. Not only here on earth but there in space we must see, touch, feel and think in order to transport soul and spirit. Thus a threshold is crossed where the radiance of art brings expanded awareness in the reciprocity with the earth.³



This spiritual focus on Sky Art was followed two years later by a unique collaborative venture, the **Lights/ORAT** exhibition at Yeshiva University Museum in New York City in 1988. Goldring describe, "Initiated by CAVS Fellow and Chairman of the Fine Arts Department at Pratt Institute, Mel Alexenberg, **Lights/ORAT** expresses traditional spiritual/religious beliefs using new artistic media and contemporary artwork. It is at once an unlikely and natural alliance—if religion has breadth and art has soul."⁴ In many ways, the concept of Sky Art was a spiritual one from the beginning, as Piene says in his catalogue essay for the **Lights/ORAT** exhibit:

We breath sky because sky is air which keeps our heart beating. Outer space comes to us via light and radiation. Whereas metaphysical forces may be the motor of the cosmos, light is its fuel down to the neuro-electronic currents that run our brain and, hence, our bodies, our metered life.⁵

Piene and the Center for Advanced Visual Studies left a legacy in three spheres; first the world, which from Alaska to Australia and throughout Europe has experienced the international communal art Piene placed about it; then MIT, which has continuously maintained a strong artistic presence on campus; and finally Boston/Cambridge, which with Piene's contributions showed the world it was a center of artistic practice mixed with technological achievement—a mantel it wears to the present day.



Top: Otto Piene, **Berlin Star**, 1984, Sky Event for CAVS/MIT **Desert Sun/Desert Moon**, Lone Pine, CA, 1986. Photo by Elizabeth Goldring.

Bottom: Helium tubes, CAVS/MIT **Desert Sun/Desert Moon**, Lone Pine, CA, 1986. Photo by Elizabeth Goldring.

Otto Piene, **Star of David**, 1987, kinetic sculpture for CAVS/MIT **LightsOROT** exhibition, Yeshiva University Museum New York, NY, USA, 1987–1989. Photo courtesy of Otto Piene archive.



George Fifield is the director of Boston Cyberarts, founded in 1999 to organize the Boston Cyberarts Festival. Presently it runs the Boston Cyberarts Gallery in Jamaica Plain and Art on the Marquee, on the 80-foot video marquee in front of the Boston Convention Center. It also organizes numerous temporary public art projects in New England.

1 Otto Piene correspondence with Aldo Tambellini (April 16, 1966) in Joseph D. Ketner II, **Witness to Phenomenon** (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). Originally found in Otto Piene Archives. Piene's quote in the letter to Tambellini paraphrases his remarks published in Otto Piene, "The Proliferation of the Sun," *Arts magazine*, vol. 41, no.8 (Summer 1967), 26.

2 "Art in Civic Scale" Symposium brochure (Cambridge, MA: Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, May 19, 1971).

3 Otto Piene, Elizabeth Goldring, and Lowry Burgess in **SKY ART Manifesto** (Paris, France: November 3, 1986). First presented at UNESCO Conference on the Peaceful Use of Space, Paris, 1986; subsequently reprinted in several publications.

4 Elizabeth Goldring in **Otto Piene und das CAVS** (Karlsruhe, Germany: Deutscher Künstlerbund, Badischer Kunstverein, 1988), exhibition catalogue.

5 Otto Piene in **LightsOROT** (Cambridge, MA: Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT; New York: Yeshiva University Museum, 1988).

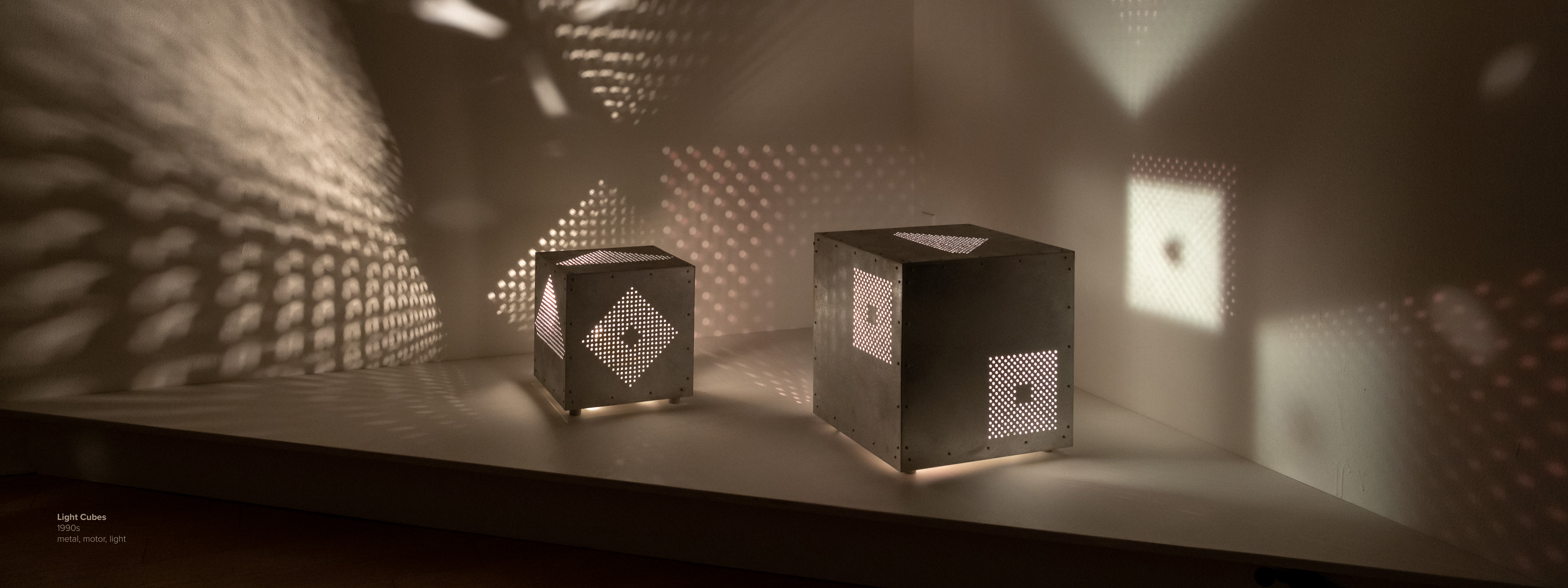
LIGHT BALLET

In the 1960s Piene's preoccupation with light took the dynamic form of mechanical, choreographed arrangements known as "Lichtballett" (Light Ballet). Piene's early light sculptures were inspired in part by the play of light and shadow in László Moholy-Nagy's (b. Austria-Hungary, 1895–1946) kinetic sculptures produced three decades earlier. These early sculptures consisted of revolving lamps and perforated metal. As in **Light Cube** (1990s), Piene would later introduce more complex control systems such as electric switchboards to seamlessly orchestrate the movement of light throughout a given space. This integration of mechanized movement, undoubtedly led Piene to the creation of his **Light Robots**. In collaboration with artist and former teaching assistant John Powell, Piene began creating the **Light Robots** in 2013. Resonant with the geometric forms of his other light sculptures, Piene's **Light Robots** are no longer limited to a stationary position. They are programmed to spin and move, projecting light without a fixed point of reference.

Otto Piene with John Powell and MIT Museum Studio
Light Robots (Diamond and Sphere)
2013
powder-coated aluminum, electronics

Light Cubes
1990s
metal, motor, light





Light Cubes
1990s
metal, motor, light

“Everything is striving for larger space. We want to reach the sky. We want to exhibit in the sky, not in order to establish there a new art world, but rather to enter new space peacefully—that is freely, playfully and actively, not as slaves of war technology.”²

-Otto Piene, 1965

Otto Piene with John Powell and MIT Museum Studio
Light Robots (Diamond and Sphere)
2013
powder-coated aluminum, electronics





TEMPERA GOUACHES

Much like his sketchbooks, Piene's tempera gouaches represent larger connections with his practice. Many of these works on paper reflect past Sky Events and abstract considerations of the human experience of the sky. While varied in subject matter, Piene's tempera gouaches highlight the significance of gestural marks in his work, giving reference to the centrality of the body in his practice.



Iowa Star
1992
tempera gouache on paper

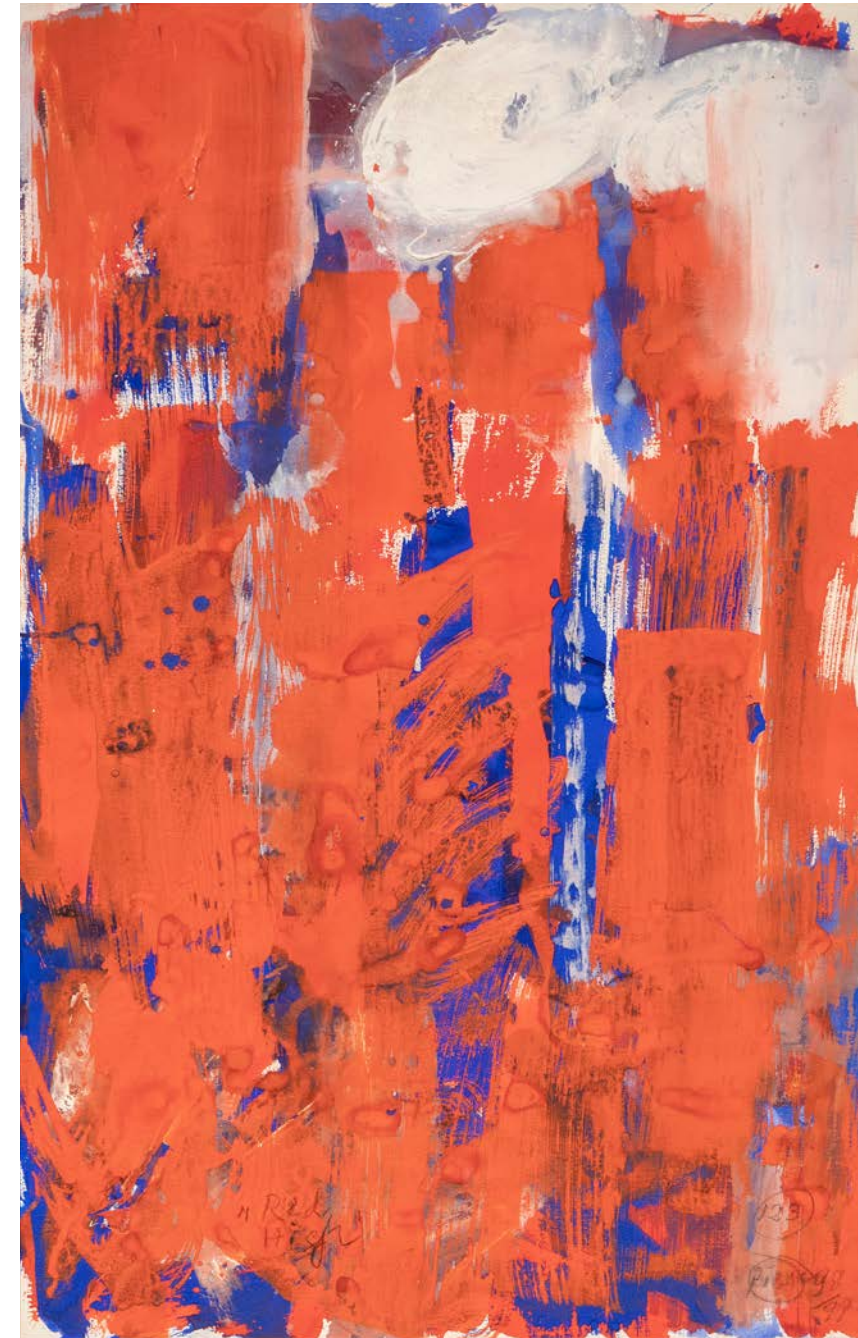


High Blue
1998/2000
tempera gouache on paperboard





Siena 9
2004
tempera gouache on paperboard



Red High
1998/1999
tempera gouache on paperboard



SKETCHBOOKS

Piene kept sketchbooks throughout his life. Even as a young soldier in WWII, Piene managed to keep with him a sketchpad and box of watercolors, recording and reflecting on his experiences—a practice he continued to maintain long after the war. The three examples on display were created between 1999 and 2014. Together they showcase the breadth of Piene's work and international influence. They are biographical and capture important aspects of his practice, including sketches of his residence in Groton, urban landscapes connected to personal travels, plans for a number of realized projects, and reflections.



Daniel Biskup (photo)
Otto Piene on the farm
Groton, Massachusetts
2014

“The farm in Groton has become a genuine place for creativity [...] a place for dialogues and artistic and poetical exchanges, where life is good.”

-Ante Glibota, 2010



THE LIGHT SILO AS INSIGHT INTO OTTO PIENE'S
"ART FARM" HOME IN GROTON

Ellen Sebring

This text draws on **The Light Silo**¹, a book that combines Otto Piene's marker drawings from several of his sketchbooks (including one on view in **Fire and Light**) and Elizabeth Goldring's poetry for a rare look at the domestic world of their "art farm" in Groton, Massachusetts. Completed just a month before Piene passed away on July 17, 2014 amidst several days of his spectacular sky events in Berlin, **The Light Silo** celebrates heart and home. This final publication delves into Piene's sketchbooks, a daily habit and diary of sorts, for a glimpse behind the professional output of a prolific and innovative artist. As director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at MIT, Piene drove the international collaborative projects that helped make CAVS a pioneering institution in the field of art, science, and technology. I knew Otto Piene as my Master's thesis advisor, as a project director when I became a CAVS fellow, as a book collaborator, and, in time, as a friend.

Transit | Transition | Artrransition

Otto loved being in transit: at the wheel during the long commute between Groton and Cambridge, in the air for the longer monthly commute to his studio in Düsseldorf, Germany, and points beyond. Transit and transition—moving between places, the planes of earth and sky, professional roles and private life—underscored his expressive palette that spanned multiple media. His inflatable sculptures, for example, inhabit rooms like oversized beings, breathing, moving, and evoking an "Alice in Wonderland" perspective on architectural spaces that surpass human scale. The forms the inflatables took—flowers, stars, sea creatures, animals, and mythical characters—also appear in his flat works, maintaining their dynamic energy despite being fixed in two dimensions on the page. He worked with earthy materials like fire, metal, glass, paint, and ceramics, and reached for the celestial sphere including flight, sky, stars, and outer space within a genre he originated called "Sky Art."



Transition also explains Piene's attachment to the rural despite his active urban engagement. The need for solitude—time to think and paint—balanced his participation in seminal associations like Group ZERO early in his career, and later on, CAVS, with its artist community, group projects, and conferences. Pairing intellectual understanding with aesthetics and the physicality of art-making was central to CAVS as a research laboratory at MIT. In 1975, Piene wrote about transition-as-art in the catalogue for **Artrransition**, his first conference after assuming the directorship from CAVS founder, György Kepes.

ARTTRANSITION means acting and creating artworks according to the insight that to humankind all matter is spiritual, a form of energy which we are here to articulate . . . The result—art—is the living link of thought and matter, of the cerebral and the physical, because it is at once spiritual and sensual whether in painting, on television, or in public celebrations.²

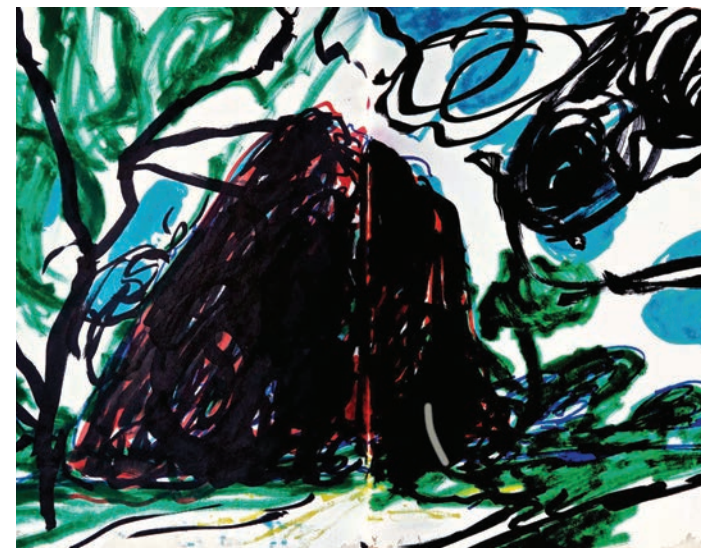
Otto Piene, **Sketchbook: Inflatable Sculpture**, 1992, mixed media, **The Light Silo**, p. 9

Transformation | Weeping Beech

The backyard spreads and loses itself over a hill. In the middle of the field, the craggy outline of a tree dominates, branches pointed down, a “Weeping Beech” or “Mourning Beech” as Otto and Elizabeth called it. Piene rendered the tree as an abstract form in deep hues. Seen together, the Weeping Beech drawings reveal the art of looking and looking again as the times of day and seasons change. Marker ink saturates the page, spilling off the edges and bleeding through to the backside (often reproduced in the book along with the front). The broad strokes evoke the sound of markers scratching across the paper, and their toxic smell. Comparative looking reveals multiples, seeing double, Elizabeth tucked into the landscape caught in the act and the art of transformation.



Otto Piene, **Sketchbook: Landscape with Figure, Groton Farm, 2012**, mixed media, **The Light Silo**, p. 22–23



(Left column, top to bottom) Ellen Sebring, **Weeping Beech: winter view without leaves**, December 16, 2012; **Weeping Beech: summer views**, August 17, 2015, Groton, Massachusetts. (Right column, top to bottom) Otto Piene, **Sketchbook: Weeping Beech (View Looking East to Fields)**, July 11, 2012; **Sketchbook: Weeping Beech (Silos Garden with “Burning Bushes”)**, October 5, 2012, on view in **Fire and Light**, also found in **The Light Silo**, p. 92–93 and p. 82–83.

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Transcendence | The Light Silo

Elegant old forms converge in a pair of grain silos, their function recast as containers for sound and light. They house pure energy, Piene's idea of "creating artworks according to the insight that to humankind all matter is spiritual, a form of energy."³ Two doors beckon, the latches tricky. Once inside, the walls close in, forcing you to look up and around at these conical shells that reflect and resonate. The observer needs to activate the artworks. In one tower, a bell designed by Paul Matisse, once struck rings long, inching towards audible silence. In the other tower, darkness is penetrated by choreographed light unfolding in the "ballet mécanique" of one of Piene's kinetic sculptural Light Ballets. The viewer is enveloped in slowly spinning, modulating light forms. In these silos, movement and stillness converge in an immersive art of transcendence.

Otto Piene, **Sketchbook: Groton (View of Silos from Creek)**, 2012, mixed media, on view in **Fire and Light**, also found in **The Light Silo**, p. 52–53



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THE MARCH BELL

Hectic in ice,
frozen in rain,
only the ambulance gets through.

Snowberries quake
like tin soldiers in retreat.
Birds rehearse
songs
against the drying sheets.

Inside the silo
a single note expands,
long as a train ride,
fresh as a glass of water,
circling the octagon
inside my head,
inside the silo.

The gong
presses down
from the heights of the tower.
In the folds
and creases of space
a chord,
a harp,
a palate of voices.

Angels?
No:

Outside,
the hegemony of spring mud
and morning rooster crows.⁴

Elizabeth Goldring, **The Light Silo**



THE LIGHT SILO

We trucked in gravel,
installed new doors.
Rolls to sit on
were brought from the barn,
dusted off.
We polished the star
(a perforated Star of David
made for Yeshiva).
Using a winch we hoisted it up.

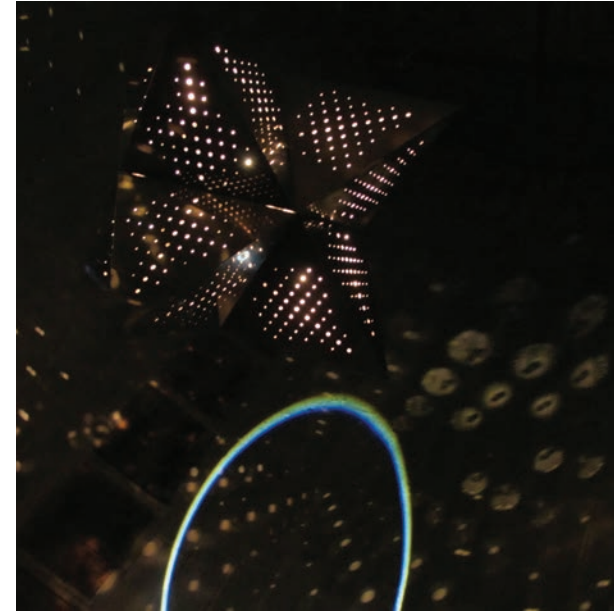
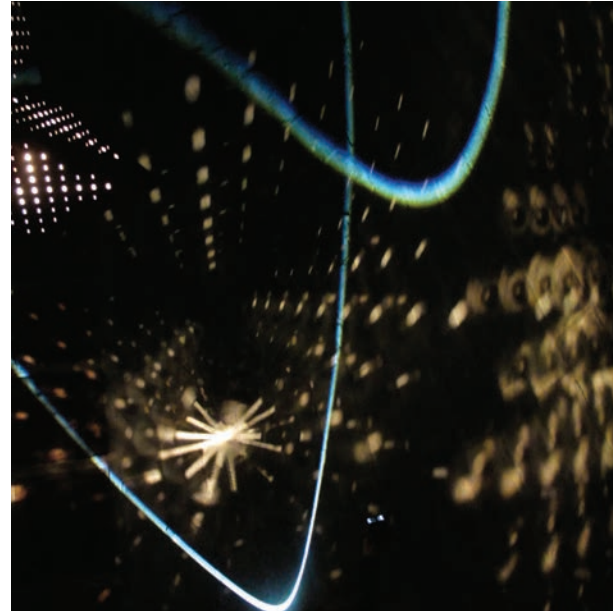
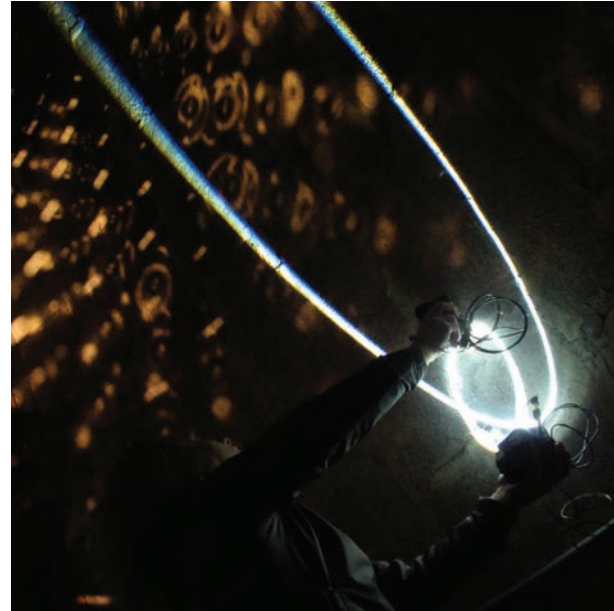
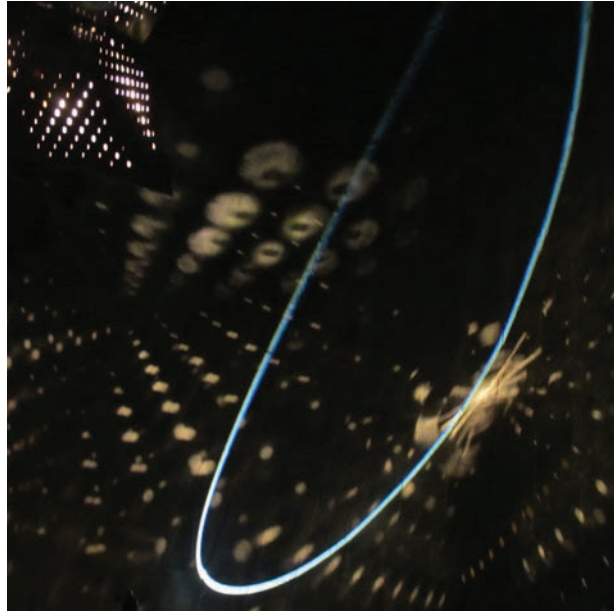
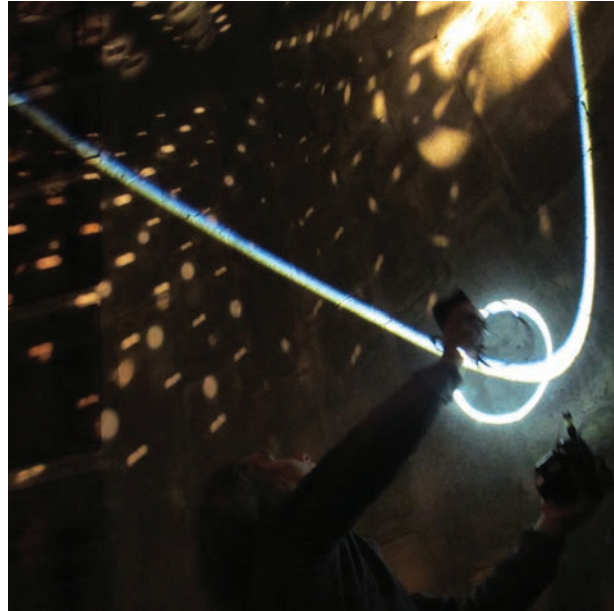
A star in low suspension,
a dark spot,
a mote in the oculus.
That night
the only sound,
the sound of acoustics:
our magnified breaths,
waiting for magic,
waiting
for the throw of the switch
to turn it on.

Faucet opens. Light
gushes forth
flooding the silo.
Projected ghosts
scamper the walls,
straddle oceans' air.
Ingots of stars
rain from our fingers,
reflections of reflection
spin without spinning
dissolving shoals,
shorelines,

until once again
the eye goes dark,
is blind.⁵

Elizabeth Goldring, **The Light Silo**

Ellen Sebring, the two silos—Paul Matisse Bell Silo (left) and Otto Piene Light Silo (right)—morning after a blizzard, March 12, 2018; photograph, Groton, Massachusetts.⁶



Ellen Sebring, inside the Light Silo with Otto Piene's Light Ballet, light artist/performer Seth Riskin adds circular light patterns projected with his body movements, December 16, 2012, photographs, Groton, Massachusetts.

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Stasis

At home, Otto did the cooking. The narrow kitchen corridor was a foil for the large oak table adjacent to a wood-burning fireplace that was laid daily. An adjoining corridor with two wingback chairs and a small television formed an unlikely resting place where he sat, dissolved in thought. Vibrant reds and oranges emanated from the thick carpets, his and colleagues' artworks, and tokens of a creative life, including his shimmering star design porcelain china set, and a giant glass rooster. The Groton farm was peace for a busy international artist, a place of home and family, and an ever-creative private world.

WILDFLOWERS

Daisies, dianthus
and phlox
outdo the planted perennials.
Stars
unframed in the wheat fields
wild,
unpainted.
Here and there a wizened carcass,
or a snake
looking like a stick in the grass.
I want to pick these fields for you,
bring them into the barn
where you are painting
blue women. ⁷

Elizabeth Goldring
The Light Silo



Ellen Sebring, Elizabeth Goldring in the Garden in Groton, June 3, 2013, photograph, Groton, Massachusetts.



Otto Piene, **Sketchbook: Groton (Sheep shed Studio, Fire Studio with Rooster Sculpture by Joe Davis and Pile of Light by Otto,** 2012, mixed media, on view in **Fire and Light**, also found in **The Light Silo**, p. 88–89

Ellen Sebring earned the SMVisS degree at MIT, and the PhD at the Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Integrative Arts at Plymouth University in the UK. She was a Fellow at CAVS, Creative Director of Visualizing Cultures at MIT since 2002, and last year, Post-Doctoral Associate at Duke University. Sebring has co-authored with Elizabeth Goldring the first major book on CAVS, **Centerbook: the Center for Advanced Visual Studies and the Evolution of Art-Culture-and-Technology at MIT**, to be released fall 2019 (SA+P Press, ZKM Karlsruhe, and MIT Press).

¹ Full Citation for **The Light Silo** is as follows:

Otto Piene, Elizabeth Goldring, and Ante Glibota, **The Light Silo**, ed. Ante Glibota (Delight Edition, 2014).

The Light Silo was designed at the same size and aspect ratio (35.4 x 55.4 cm) as Piene's sketchbooks in order to reproduce the drawings as they originally appeared. Otto Piene's sketchbook images included in **The Light Silo** were photographed by Ante Glibota, editor and co-author with Otto Piene and Elizabeth Goldring Piene. Corresponding page numbers for images and poems are cited in catalogue captions. Images of Piene's sketchbook exhibited in **Fire and Light** were photographed by Charles Sternaimolo.

² Otto Piene, **Arttransition**, (Cambridge, MA: Center for Advanced Visual Studies, MIT, 1975) exhibition catalogue, xi.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Otto Piene, Elizabeth Goldring, and Ante Glibota, **The Light Silo**, p. 55.

⁵ Ibid, p. 57.

⁶ Ellen Sebring's photographs were taken at the Piene farm during events on December 16, 2012, June 3, 2013, and March 12, 2018. All photos © Ellen Sebring; please request permission from the photographer to reproduce these images and obtain appropriate caption information.

⁷ Otto Piene, Elizabeth Goldring, and Ante Glibota, **The Light Silo**, p. 25.



ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Otto Piene was born in Bad Laasphe, Germany in 1928. He was drafted into the German army during WWII in 1943 (along with all other boys over the age of 15) and was trained as an anti-aircraft gunner. Piene would later reveal that his fascination with light was both informed and complicated by his experience as a young soldier, recalling his time searching the sky for signs of enemy artillery fire.

After the war, Piene studied painting at the Academy of Art in Munich and earned a degree in art education from Staatliche Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, Germany. He then went on to receive his degree in philosophy from the University of Cologne in 1957. That same year, Piene co-founded Group ZERO (1957–1963) with artist Heinz Mack. They were later joined by Günther Uecker. Group ZERO, although established in Düsseldorf, became affiliated with an avant-garde international network. Group ZERO is widely recognized for challenging the bounds of painting and exploring visual perception through new media—interests Piene continued to pursue throughout his career as an artist.

After serving as a visiting professor at the University of Pennsylvania in 1964, Piene was invited by György Kepes to become the first fellow of the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) from 1968 to 1971. He later served as director of the program for two decades (1974–1994). In 1983, Piene along with his wife and collaborator, Elizabeth Goldring purchased property in Groton, Massachusetts. Piene lived and worked there until his death in 2014, transforming the property and its existing structures into an important site for his production. The “art farm,” as it affectionately came to be known, maintains its creative pulse. Today, Piene’s former collaborators, students, and friends continue to preserve Otto’s memory and vision for artistic exchange.

Piene worked in Düsseldorf, Cambridge and Groton, Massachusetts. His visionary work operates at the intersection of art, nature, and technology and continues to receive international recognition.

Daniel Biskup (photo)
Otto Piene on the farm
Groton, Massachusetts
2014

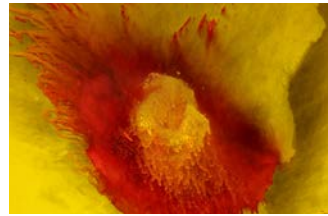


References for Single-page Quotes

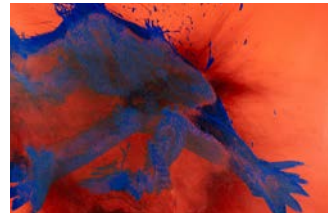
- 1 Otto Piene, in **Rainbow** (Tehran, Iran: Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2015), exhibition catalogue, p. 207.
- 2 Otto Piene, **Piene – Light Ballet** (New York, NY: Howard Wise Gallery, November 4–20, 1965), exhibition catalogue.
3. Ante Glibota, **Otto Piene** (A. Glibota and Delight Edition, 2011), p. 39.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

FIRE PAINTINGS



Sulphur
2001
oil and fire on canvas
47.9 x 47.8 inches
Private Collection



Antigravity
1997
oil and fire on canvas
64.2 x 48 inches
Private Collection



75,95,97
1975/1995/1997
oil and fire on canvas
77.9 x 101.9 inches
Private Collection



Yesterday
2006
oil and fire on canvas
35.4 x 47.2 inches
Private Collection



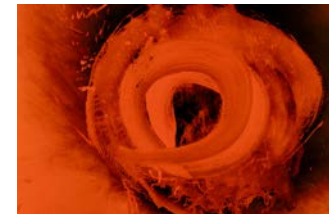
Orbit
1993/1994/1997
oil and fire on canvas
77.6 x 102 inches
Private Collection



Moonbow 2
1994/1995
oil and fire on canvas
77.6 x 77.6 inches
Private Collection



Feuerrot (Fire Red)
2002
oil and fire on canvas
78.7 x 102.4 inches
Private Collection



Cyclops
1993/1994
oil and fire on canvas
29.9 x 39.8 inches
Private Collection



Plusquamperfect (Past Perfect Participle)
2003
oil and fire on canvas
31.5 x 39.4 inches
Private Collection



Helldunkel (Bright, Dark)
2006/2007
oil and fire on canvas
27.6 x 39.4 inches
Private Collection



Vielfliege (Frequent Flyer/Fly)
1998/1999
fire gouache on paperboard
28.7 x 40.1 inches
Private Collection



Black Beast
1984
fire gouache on paperboard
25.6 x 39.4 inches
Private Collection

THE PROLIFERATION OF THE SUN



The Proliferation of the Sun
1966/1967
re-staged Neue Nationalgalerie 2014
25-minute multimedia performance
with digitized hand-painted glass slides,
sound, 7 digital projectors, 8' diameter
white inflatable sphere, 3 screens
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of Junsthalle Bremen - der
Kunstverein in Bremen, the Zero
Foundation, the Neue Nationalgalerie,
Berlin and the estate of Otto Piene

SKETCHBOOK

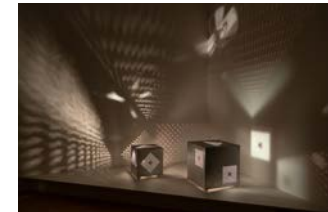


Sketchbook: Groton
2012
mixed media
11 x 14 x 3/4 inches
Courtesy of Harvard Art Museum/Bush-Reisinger
Museum, Anonymous Gift
(entire sketchbook was made viewable in digitized
format)

**Sketchbook: Sun Eureka Berlin "Mies Berlin" /
Berlin Neue Nationalgalerie/John Cage/Groton**
2010–2014
mixed media
11 x 14 x 3/4 inches
Courtesy of Harvard Art Museum/Bush-Reisinger
Museum, Anonymous Gift

Sketchbook: Light Pieces DDF/Kubus/Dresden
1999–2000
mixed media
11 x 14 x 3/4 inches
Courtesy of Harvard Art Museum/Bush-Reisinger
Museum, Anonymous Gift

LIGHT BALLET

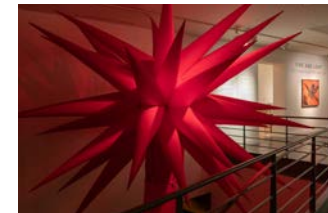


Light Cubes
1990s
metal, motor, light
Dimensions variable
Private Collection



Otto Piene with John Powell and MIT
Museum Studio
Light Robots (Diamond and Sphere)
2013
powder-coated aluminum, electronics

INFLATABLE SCULPTURE



Red Star
2014
inflatable sculpture (44 cone)
Dimensions of star: 14 3/4 feet
Length of tube 22 feet
Courtesy of Spruth Magers Gallery, Berlin, Los
Angeles, London

TEMPERA GOUACHES



Group 7
1998/1999
tempera gouache on Büttner paper
38.2 x 49.9 inches
Private Collection



High Blue
1998/2000
tempera gouache on paperboard
40.16 x 59.8 inches
Private Collection



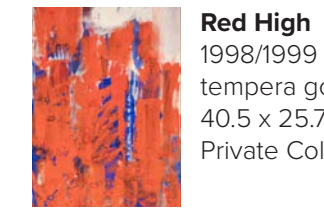
Siena 9
2004
tempera gouache on paperboard
40.1 x 60 inches
Private Collection



Der Kamm schwillt (The Comb
Swells/ Enraged)
1995
tempera gouache on paperboard
23 x 30.3 inches
Private Collection



Iowa Star
1992
tempera gouache on paperboard
39.4 x 27.6 inches
Private Collection



Red High
1998/1999
tempera gouache on paperboard
40.5 x 25.74 inches
Private Collection

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This catalogue accompanies the exhibition
Fire and Light: Otto Piene in Groton 1983–2014 presented at the Fitchburg Art Museum, February 9–June 2, 2019. The exhibition was organized by FAM Curator Lisa Crossman and Terrana Curatorial Fellow Candice Bancheri.

Text by Lisa Crossman, Candice Bancheri, George Fifield, and Ellen Sebring
All installation photographs and images of individual artworks in **Fire and Light**
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