

ERIC STALLER
Light Years

Photographs and Sculpture, 1977-1984/March 27 - April 27, 1984

INTRODUCTION

Because of the unusual nature of Eric Staller's art both in photography and sculpture, and because of the unusual route he has taken from architecture to fine art, I was delighted when he agreed to write the following statement of his own ideals and goals as an artist. In my own readings of art history, I have always found such personal communications of the artist a helpful addendum to the writings of art historians and critics, all of which give us access to the full meaning of the work.

Much contemporary art is not readily accessible to any but the few who have found the time to devote to concentrated looking and a serious study of the evolution of art forms. The late critic Harold Rosenberg contended that important artists, willy-nilly, make not only art but art history. If one accepts that and puts it together with the haunting statement of Theilhard de Chardin that "evolution is the light which illumines everything," then clearly we must take the trouble to consider the personal evolution of the artist as well as when and where he appears in art history. Only then can we view it not only without prejudice but also with eyes fully open to see what is to be seen.

Eric Staller's photographs and sculptures are inconceivable without the advance of twentieth century technology and twentieth century consciousness. Light is his preoccupation, not because of the effect it has on the object it illuminates (as in the paintings of Vermeer), or as a challenge to the high art of illusory painting (such as in the paintings of La Tour) but as light itself with both its physical and symbolic properties. Light remains as symbolically mysterious to us now as it did to those who lived before the flowering of the modern science of physics, but modern technology has enabled us to manipulate it in new ways which expand the imagination. The advance of knowledge has not diminished but increased wonder, and Staller's work, which I find wondrous in the root sense, seems geared to bring that wonder into very clear focus.

Terence Netter
Guest Curator

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to guest curator Terence Netter, Director, Fine Arts Center, State University of New York at Stony Brook, who developed this exhibition and contributed the introduction to this catalogue.

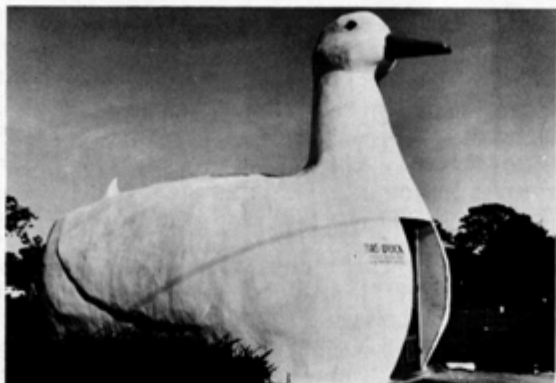
Thanks are due to the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, for participating in this exhibition. We are also grateful to the Art Gallery interns who assisted with the organization of this exhibition.

Most of all, we wish to thank Eric Staller for sharing his work with the Stony Brook community.

Rhonda Cooper
Director

Photographs courtesy of the artist.

Cover: *Poseidon*, 1980



"I was born an artist in 1969, with a spontaneous feeling that all media are fair game for my work. I had to react to the rigors of architecture school: a place that promised to purge me of my romanticism and have me building the largest box for the least bucks. This was my favorite American building." (Eric Staller)



"This was my first piece: an 8 x 40' wall made of 3000 dollars with a guard on either side." (Eric Staller)



"After college I traveled around the country before I moved to New York City with this resolve: life should be a working vacation." (Eric Staller)

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I'm the pilot of my unconscious. I'm a professional dreamer. I stare for hours into my space. It is 2000 square feet; I've lived there twelve years, and it is still empty. Space is my clean slate. My pieces are windows, holes in reality. Einstein is my favorite artist. $E=mc^2$ is a profoundly beautiful image. It conjures up thoughts of infinite time and space. What could stretch the limits of the imagination more? Isn't that the function of art? To stare at a star at night and to imagine the distance, or imagine life on it, or being a visitor to it, is to leave our ant-hill for a moment and imagine something greater, happier, forever. This is a moment of optimism about humanity, and many people having fantasies about optimism at the same time is what I believe religion really is.

I love people, I love life: these are advantages in communicating. I am a seducer, I make people smile with my work, I disarm them. If you look long enough, you will be transported to a peaceful place. For a moment you may lose sense of time and place. Maybe the lights will make you a little dizzy. I like vertigo. Maybe you will feel a tightening in your throat, like gagging on too much sweets. That's ok. Try to stay with it, try to be alone in the space with my work. Listen to the silence. These pieces are fragile. I don't know how long they will last, but I hope that they radiate an optimism that joins a kind of ozone layer.

These pieces are models for space vehicles and bridges. I want to do light-ladders that soar into space. I was moved by the prophecy in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* of city/ships travelling through space, communicating with light and sound. At our best, at our most civilized, we will someday outgrow this earth. We already fight like there's standing room only. I hope to be a magical usher pointing to a better way to be. I'm looking for a universal meditation in my work, one that is both exhilarating and relaxing, an image but not an image, a hypnotic visual tone.

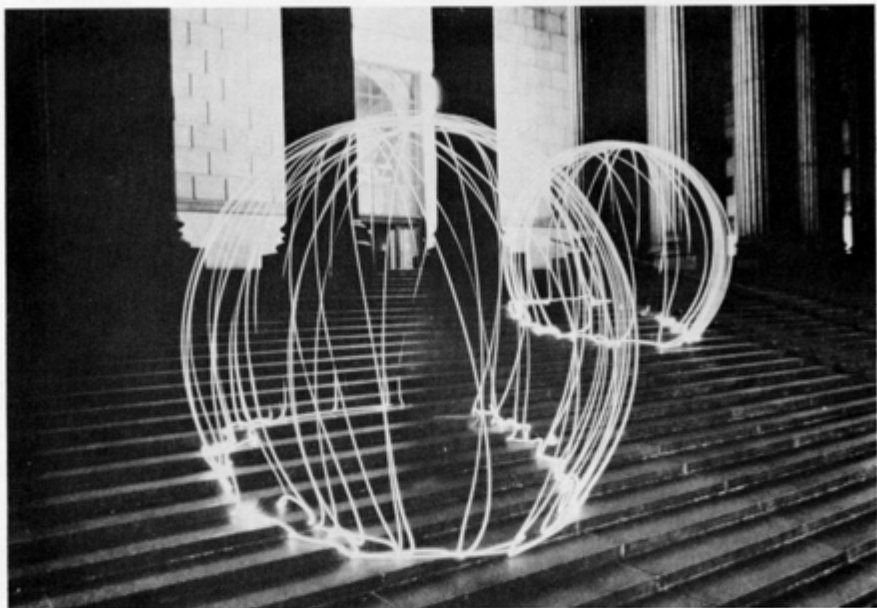
Night is for reverie. I 'space out', my Walkman is on, I listen to all the stations at the same time. Music is the pace of our time. I stare at the blank page, into space, back at the page, waiting for unconscious visions. They are fleeting, sometimes like bats in darkness, I don't always recognize them. When one comes into focus, I have to record it quickly or it may be gone. I am a disciplined pilot of my unconscious, concentrating for hours on seeing images in space, they appear ghostly, and my drawings look like they were done in the dark by someone who just woke up. Sometimes my best ideas come just before dawn when I'm exhausted, almost asleep.

Next day, when I'm rested, I examine the sketches. They look foreign. Some are good, some bad. It may take days, weeks, to know. I look for a quantum leap each time, a way to surprise myself. Sometimes a quantum leap will look so foreign that it takes months of coming across it in my notebook to know that it's a worthwhile direction. During a long night of brainstorming I may make only one crude sketch, usually with some evocative words beside it: hypnotic, levitate, cinematic, sexual, green. I decipher the clues slowly. Each of these sculptures took an average of a month to conceptualize and a month to build. The moment that the clues gel and the idea is born is orgasmic, the most exciting. When a piece is finished I am happy for a week, then I must immerse myself in the loneliness of the next discovery.

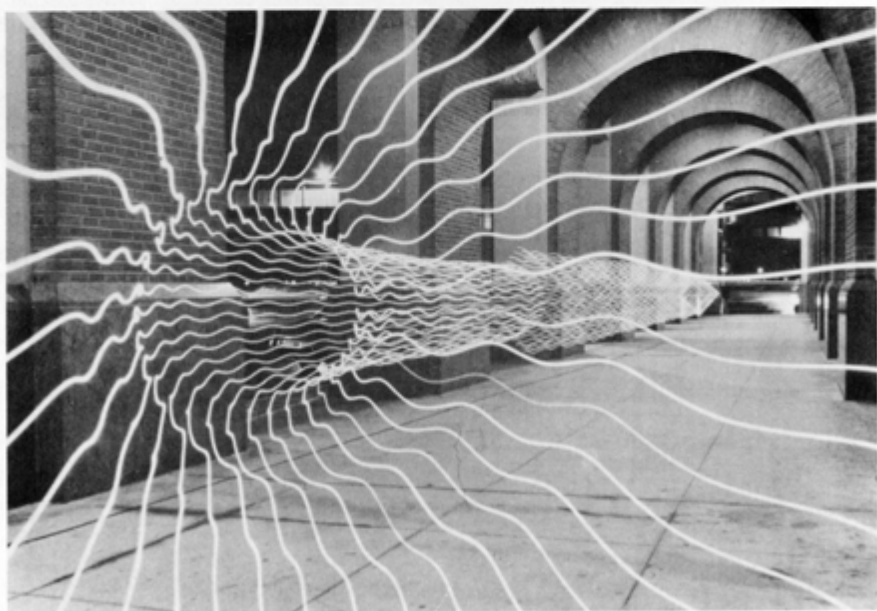
I suppose I'm happy to be an artist. I feel free. I don't particularly romanticize it, I didn't choose; it chose me. It may be an involuntary process, like the silkworm. I couldn't not do it this way. But it is fun. I make it fun by making up my own rules, then break them as soon as I get too good. I have to re-create the excitement of the first moment that I made art. I am nostalgic for that moment. But I also have a dispassionate problem-solving discipline that forbids me from beginning a new piece that isn't an intellectual or spiritual departure from the last one. Like the body-builders say: no pain, no gain.

In 1976 I had an inspired accident with a Polaroid and a sparkler. That curious photo sat on my desk for a year while I did other work. Suddenly this direction gestated, and the next three years were laid out. I began making 'drawings' with fourth of July sparklers during time-exposures around the city at night. I had to complete each drawing in two minutes, the life of the sparkler. Holding the sparkler at arm's length, I practically ran down Walker Street to complete the composition in two minutes. I proceeded to transform *Citroen*, *Pulitzer Prodigy*, *Columns*, and *Plaza Hotel*. I felt a strong sense of exhilaration, like running the one hundred yard dash with a flaming torch. I was surprised to learn that my presence was not apparent in these pictures. This is because they were done at night and, while the sparkler burned a path into the film, there wasn't enough light on me to show up.

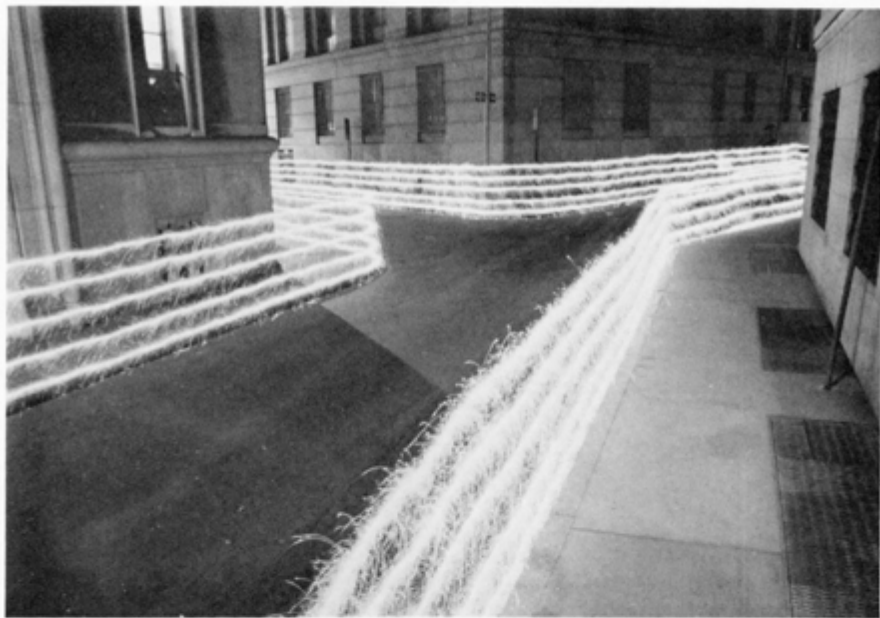
The element of surprise is built into all of my work. I soon wanted to realize more elaborate fantasies with light. Up until this time it was difficult to imagine what would show up on film as I couldn't step back and view my elusive drawing. It was vanishing literally in the air the instant I passed over a car, street, or monument. But as the results became more predictable (routine is the enemy of the artist) I began to imagine forms that weren't there for me to draw over. Each of the resultant photographs is based on a unique choreography or movement with the light. This is how I can surprise myself and stretch the limits of my imagination. I discovered that a ten-minute sparkler was



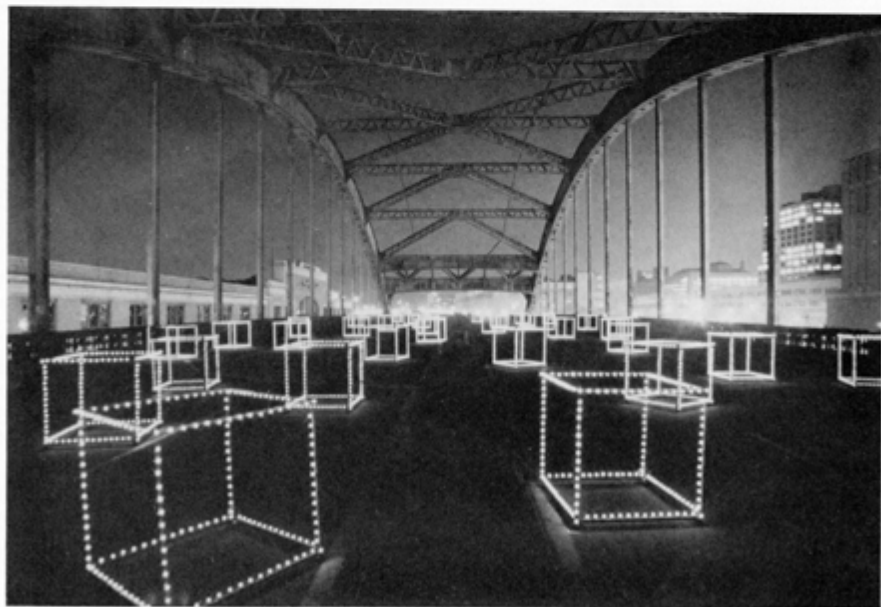
Lightdomes, 1977



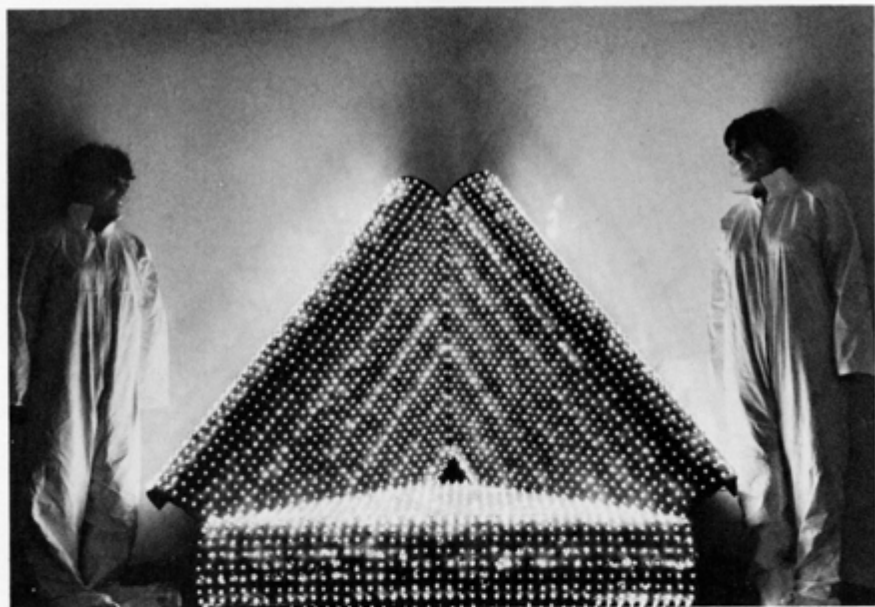
Hydrascope, 1979



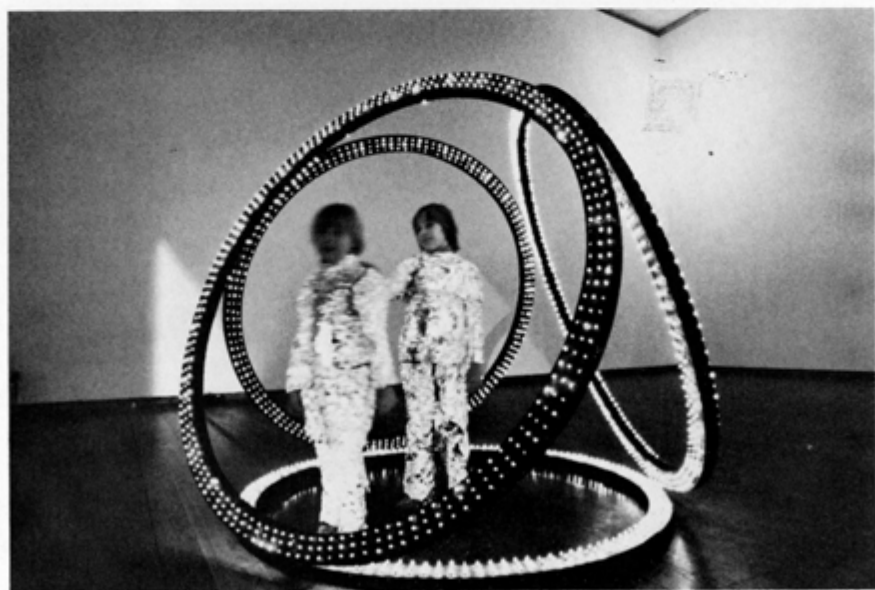
Ribbon on Hanover Street, 1977



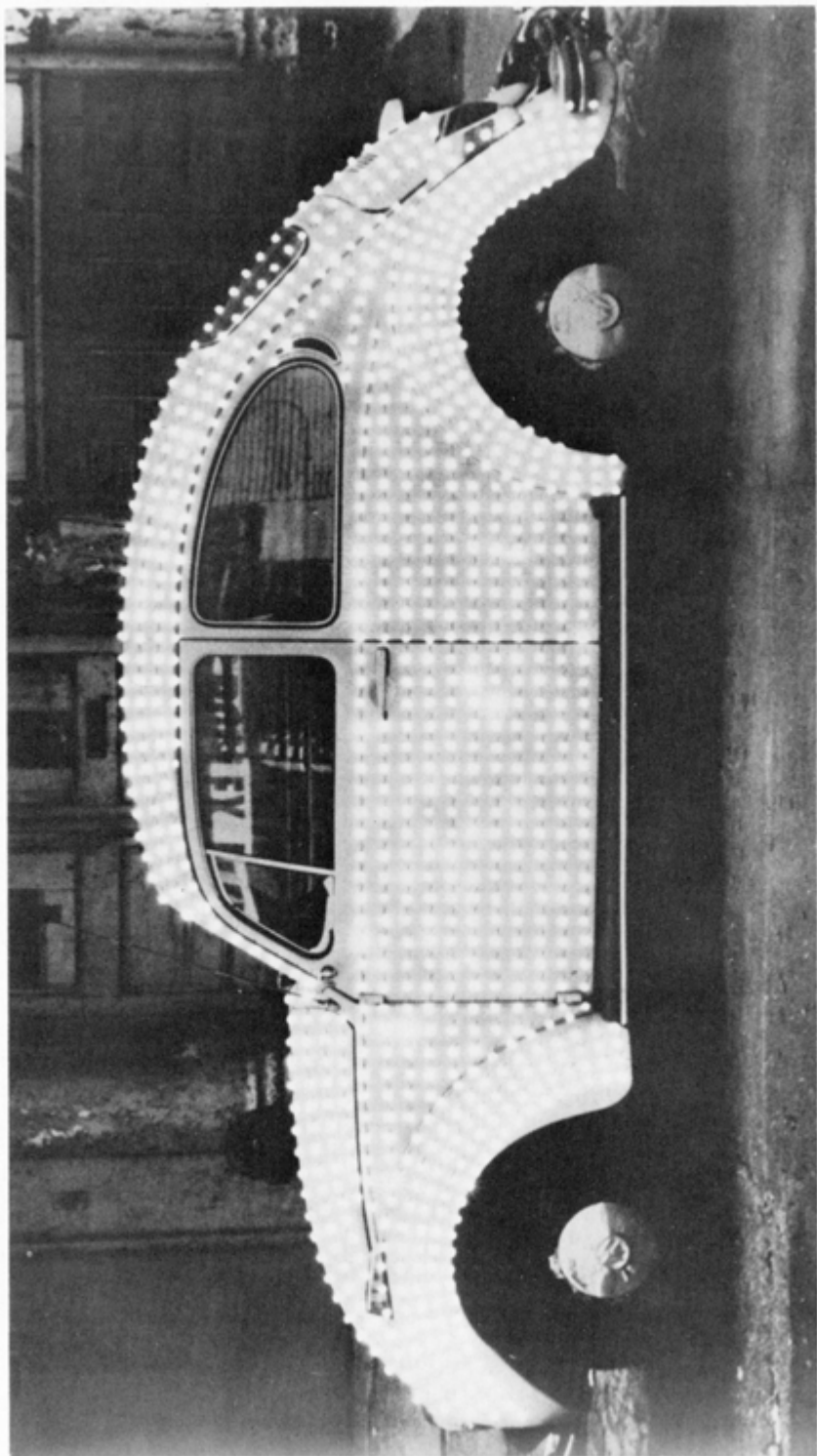
Dear Mom and Dad, 1979



Girls contemplate *Girlfriend*, 1982



Kids cavort in *Light-go-round*, 1982



Proposal for *Lightmobile*, 1983

available. In *Midnite Met* I spun the sparkler on the end of a string as I traversed the steps. In *Lightunnel* I walked up the middle of the street with the sparkler on the end of a broomstick, while making many arcs overhead with the stick held at arm's length. I started to think of using the geometry of my body as a basis for my choreography.

When I imagined creating domes of light for *Lightdomes*, I knew I needed more control of my light source (sparklers are dangerous, illegal, and hard to keep lit). I began to use a battery powered light. I pivoted in the center of each dome, making arcs overhead with the bulb on the end of the broomstick. I was surprised that my arm was such a perfect compass. When I imagined that I had enough arcs for a dome, I turned off the bulb and repeated my dance further up the stairs.

For *Hydrascope* and *Parkfast* I made two-dimensional constructions of Christmas lights that I carried through the spaces to create extrusions of light. I was delighted to find a feeling of velocity in these when my film came back from the lab. By the time I made *Synergy* I was carrying a three hundred foot extension cord and had learned how to "borrow" electricity from street lights. For *Dear Mom and Dad* I used one plastic cube on wheels. I rolled it into place, turned the lights on for ten seconds, turned them off, and moved the cube. This exposure was twenty minutes.

Window Dressing was very satisfying because of its succinct integration of my light forms with the existing architecture. Almost scientifically I exclude arbitrariness and gesture from my work. I prefer to distill the essence of what the medium can do. However, when I feel I've backed into an intellectually dry corner, I try to season my work with humor (*Poseidon* and *Happy Street*).

In 1980 I had a scary moment, the kind that every artist at one time or another faces: I ran out. The results were becoming predictable. I was jaded by facility. I had to begin again, reintroduce the possibility of failure. I noticed that the light constructions, until then only a means to an end, had a strong presence of their own. I was looking through lots of books for ideas and I was struck by the Dadaist images of machines. So the first sculpture was flat on the wall, in the shape of a machine, with gears and belts. Then it became a natural extension to animate the lights. Through trial and error I taught myself the ground rules of the medium, which showed me the way to go. And then I had one of the highest moments an artist can have: I got a glimpse, in my mind's eye, of the next few years, where I could take it.

In my next works I explored the sinuous and fluid sensations suggested by the colors and configurations of lights. Falling water was something I emulated for its mesmerism. Then blazing fire and shimmering ice. I

try to evoke different sensations in each piece. One piece has waves of blue light radiating from the center and has the effect of pebbles being thrown into a pond. *Kite* quivers like a living thing as it hovers overhead. I can't start a new piece until I learn from the last one. The pain, without which there is no gain, comes from trying to grow spiritually deeper. *Glimpse of Happiness* comes the closest to this ideal. It has an elusive presence, blazing lime-green for twenty seconds, then fading to black, it floats, crucifix-like in a ceiling corner of the room. It's really my simplest piece. It always startles me when simplicity is the best; makes me wonder if I'm thinking too hard.

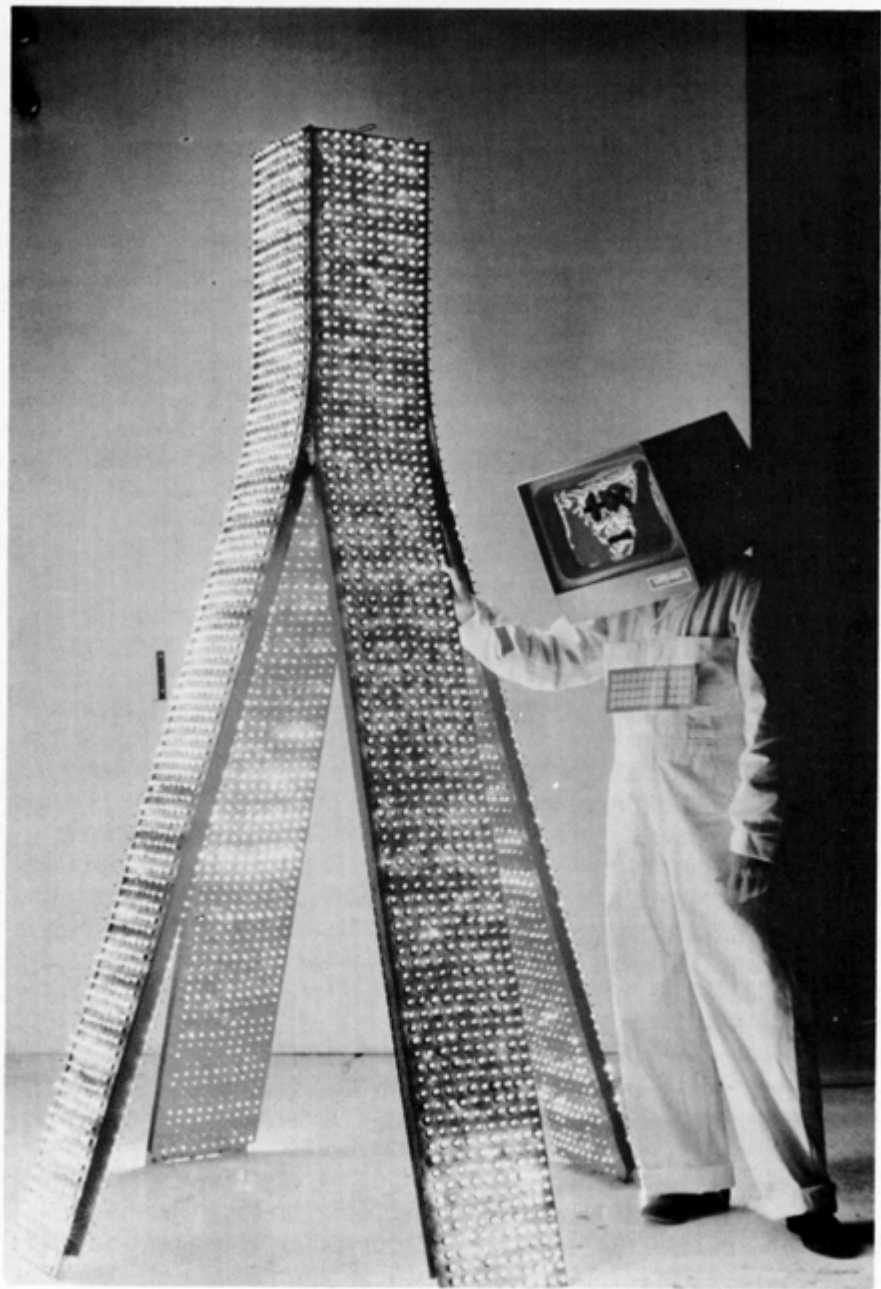
Girlfriend is also a corner piece: pink lights suck the viewer into a black vortex. This is probably the best sculpture in the show. It transcends the conventions of "sculpture" the most and becomes a sensual liquid. *Light-go-round* is visual music I did when John Lennon's "Watching the Wheels" was buzzing in my head:

People say I'm lazy dreaming my life away
Well they give me all kinds of advice designed to enlighten me
When I tell them I'm doing fine watching shadows on the wall . . .
I'm just sitting here watching the wheels go round and round
I really love to watch them roll

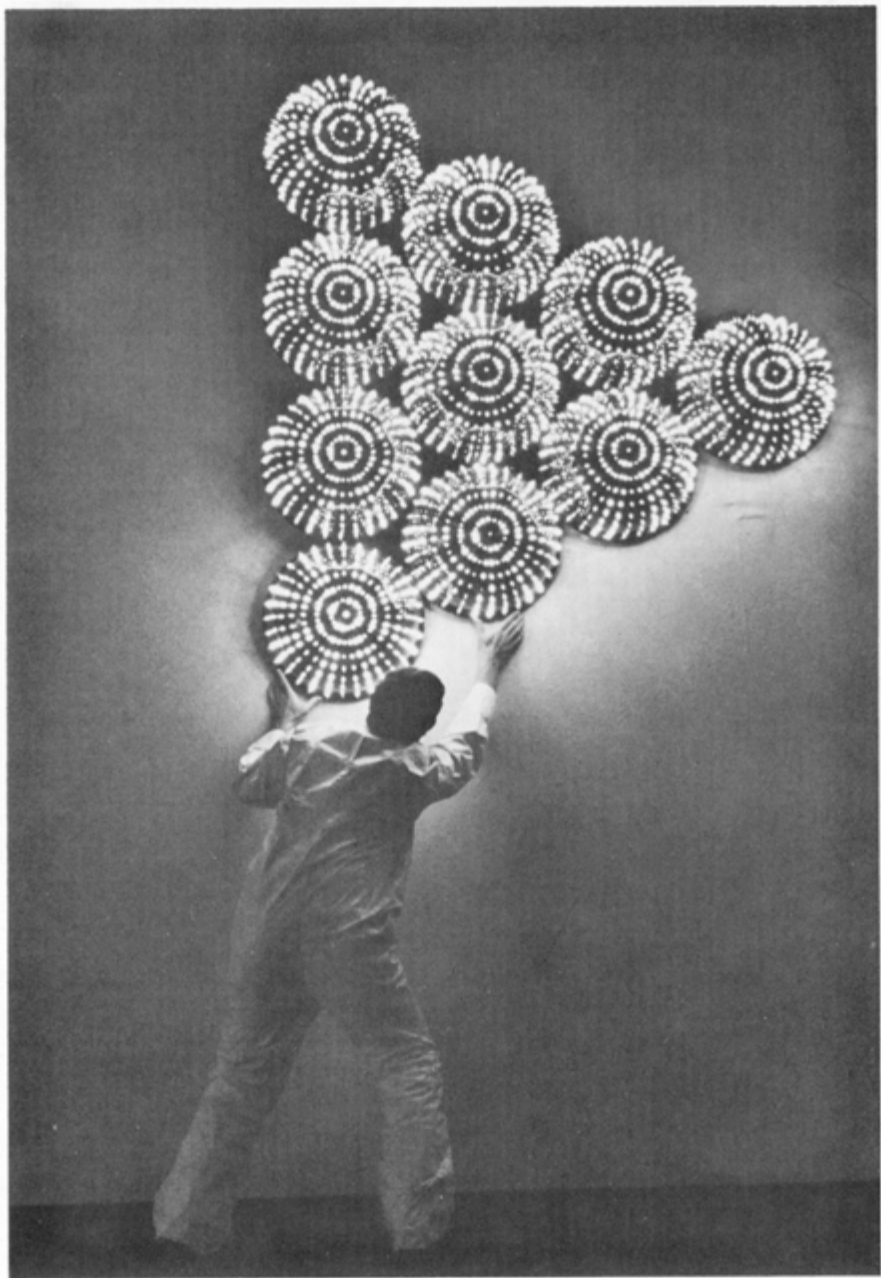
I have had fantasies for a long time about the ways the world might be better. In architecture school I couldn't concentrate on designing homes, office buildings, schools, stores. I hate the conventions that dictate and separate these. I was fantasizing about making architectural gestures, gifts, surprises, daily shots of optimism. I was thinking about an ephemeral architecture, changeable, that would encourage community, integrating social functions, like a huge-family. I have the luxury as an artist to idealize. If the more idealistic the artist the better, then Christo is heavyweight champ. The bigness of his gestures begins to approach nature's and are ephemeral like nature. I admire Christo's ambition, his politics of generosity, his Don Quixote of bureaucracy. And you don't even have to be there; the idea can be appreciated by millions on television.

I think about the science of broadening my audience: confronting people with my work in unexpected places. I hope to get "Lightmobile" on the road in 1984. Two thousand weather-proof lights will be built into a Volkswagen and computerized into motion. I will hire a driver to tour the country with it. I am planning to light up some other building this year. In the future I want to make a film. And I expect someday to build my fantasy architecture.

ERIC STALLER



Modern man views Teepee, 1983



Workman installs *Bobbles*, 1984

ERIC STALLER

Born 1947, Mineola, New York. Lives in New York City. Attended University of Michigan (Bachelor of Architecture, 1971).

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 1984 Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York
42nd Street Bus Terminal, Port Authority of New York and New Jersey
- 1983 Pennington Gallery, Nashville, Tennessee
College of William and Mary, Richmond, Virginia
O.K. Harris Gallery, New York, New York
- 1981 National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C.
"New Americans," Rome, Italy
The After Image, Dallas, Texas
O.K. Harris Gallery, New York, New York
- 1979 International Center of Photography, New York, New York
Institute of Art and Urban Resources, New York, New York
Maryland Institute, College of Art, Baltimore, Maryland
City University of New York Graduate Center, New York, New York
- 1977 O.K. Harris Gallery, New York, New York
International Art Fair, Dusseldorf, Germany
Gertrude Kastle Gallery, Detroit, Michigan
Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Measurements are given in feet and inches, height preceding width preceding depth. All works are on loan courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

Cibachrome Photographs

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| <i>Citroen</i> , 1977, 16 x 20" | <i>Hydra</i> , 1979, 22 x 30" |
| <i>Columns</i> , 1977, 16 x 20" | <i>Hydrascope</i> , 1979, 26 x 40" |
| <i>Lightdomes</i> , 1977, 16 x 20" | <i>Parkfast</i> , 1979, 26 x 40" |
| <i>Lighttunnel</i> , 1977, 16 x 20" | <i>Underwater</i> , 1979, 16 x 20" |
| <i>Midnite Met</i> , 1977, 16 x 20" | <i>Battery Park</i> , 1980, 26 x 40" |
| <i>Plaza Hotel</i> , 1977, 22 x 30" | <i>Cubes on Bridge</i> , 1980, 22 x 30" |
| <i>Plaza Sweet</i> , 1977, 16 x 20" | <i>Happy Street</i> , 1980, 26 x 40" |
| <i>Pulitzer Prodigy</i> , 1977, 16 x 20" | <i>Poseidon</i> , 1980, 16 x 20" |
| <i>Ribbon on Hanover Street</i> , 1977, 22 x 30" | <i>Self Portrait</i> , 1980, 16 x 20" |
| <i>Walker Street</i> , 1977, 16 x 20" | <i>Stop</i> , 1980, 22 x 30" |
| <i>Dear Mom and Dad</i> , 1979, 26 x 40" | <i>Synergy 1</i> , 1980, 26 x 40" |
| <i>Express and Local</i> , 1979, 26 x 40" | <i>Synergy 2</i> , 1980, 26 x 40" |
| <i>Ferris Wheel</i> , 1979, 16 x 20" | <i>Window Dressing</i> , 1980, 26 x 40" |
| | <i>Rockettes</i> , 1981, 22 x 30" |

Sculptures

- Zig-zag*, 1981, masonite and lights, 9 x 9'
- Girlfriend*, 1982, masonite and lights, 5 x 5 x 5' (Courtesy Everson Museum of Art)
- Light-go-round*, 1982, masonite and lights, 6 x 6 x 6'
- Kite*, 1983, masonite and lights, 5 x 5'
- Proposal for *Lightmobile*, 1983, photograph with lights, 40 x 60"
- Raging Bull*, 1983, masonite and lights, 5 x 5'
- Teepee*, 1983, masonite and lights, 4 x 4 x 8'
- Blimps of Happiness*, 1984, masonite and lights, 4 x 4 x 4'
- Bobbles*, 1984, masonite and lights, 6 x 6'

PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS AT THE ART GALLERY

- 1975** FACULTY EXHIBITION
- 1976** MICHELLE STUART
RECENT DRAWINGS (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
SALVATORE ROMANO
- 1977** MEL PEKARSKY
JUDITH BERNSTEIN
HERBERT BAYER (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
- 1978** LEON GOLUB
WOMEN ARTISTS FROM NEW YORK
JANET FISH
ROSEMARY MAYER
THE SISTER CHAPEL
- 1979** SHIRLEY GORELICK
ALAN SONFIST
HOWARDENA PINDELL
ROY LICHTENSTEIN
- 1980** BENNY ANDREWS
ALEX KATZ
EIGHT FROM NEW YORK
ARTISTS FROM QUEENS
OTTO PIENE
STONY BROOK 11, THE STUDIO FACULTY
- 1981** ALICE NEEL
55 MERCER: 10 SCULPTORS
JOHN LITTLE
IRA JOEL HABER
LEON POLK SMITH
- 1982** FOUR SCULPTORS
CECILE ABISH
JACK YOUNGERMAN
ALAN SHIELDS
THE STONY BROOK ALUMNI INVITATIONAL
ANN McCOY
- 1983** THE WAR SHOW
CERAMIC DIRECTIONS: A CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW
CINDY SHERMAN
THE FACULTY SHOW
- 1984** BERNARD APTEKAR: ART AND POLITICS

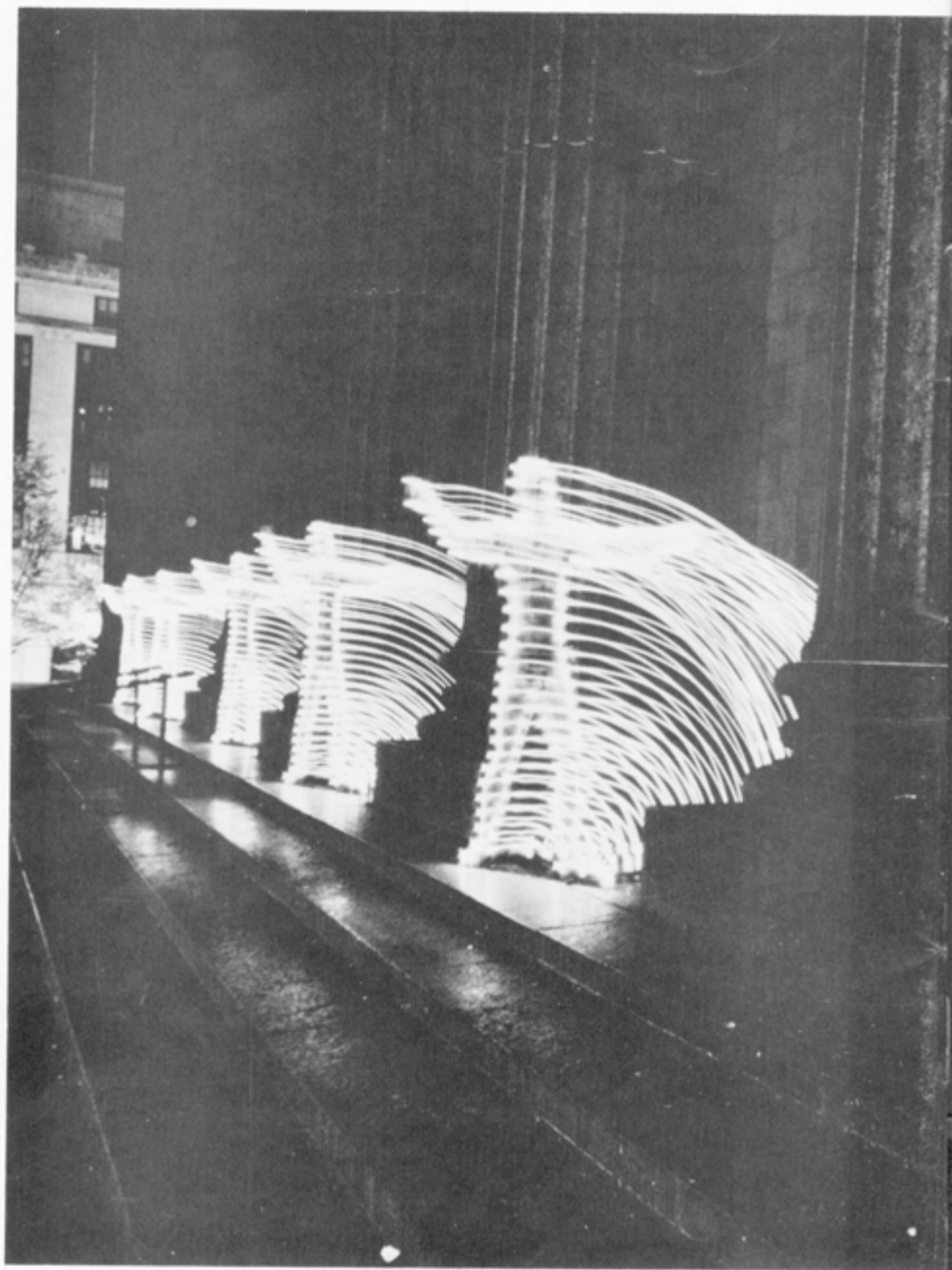
Director RHONDA COOPER

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK

THE FINE ARTS CENTER



art gallery



THE FINE ARTS CENTER ART GALLERY
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK