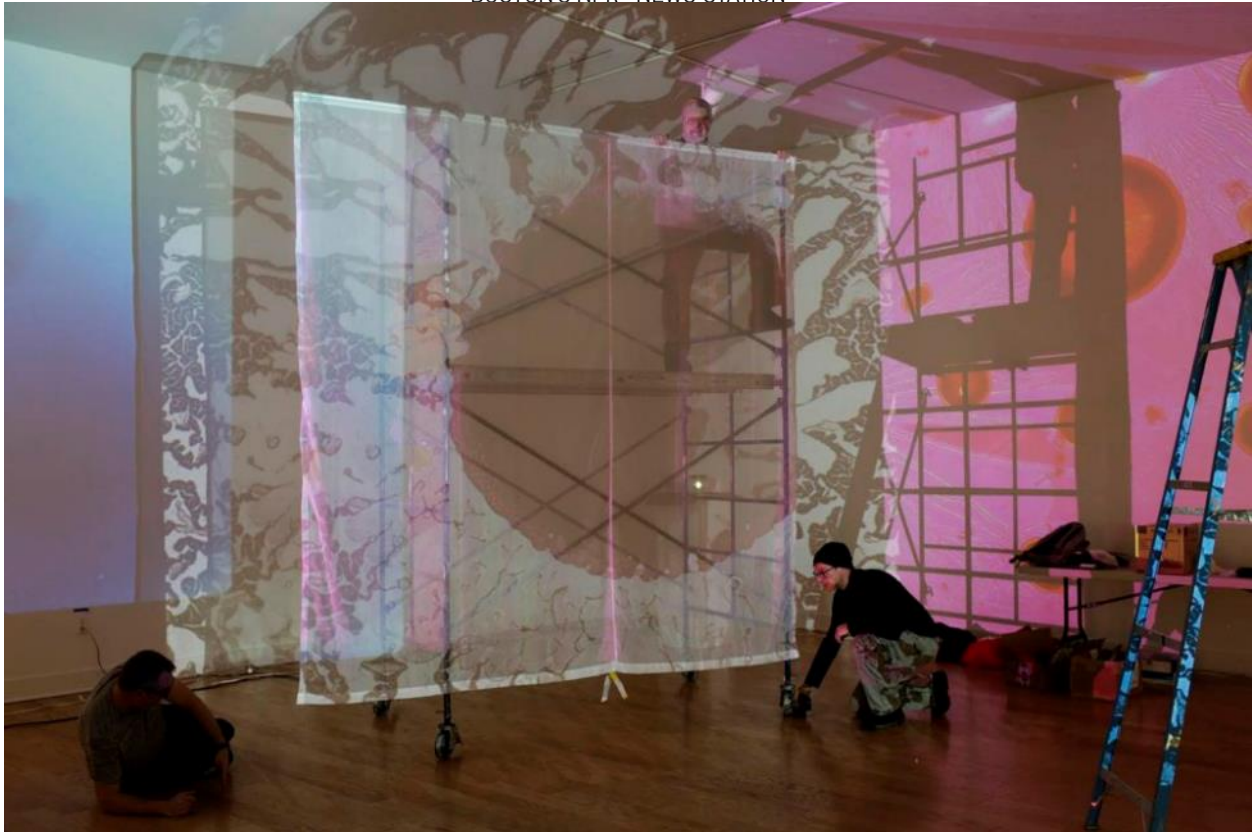


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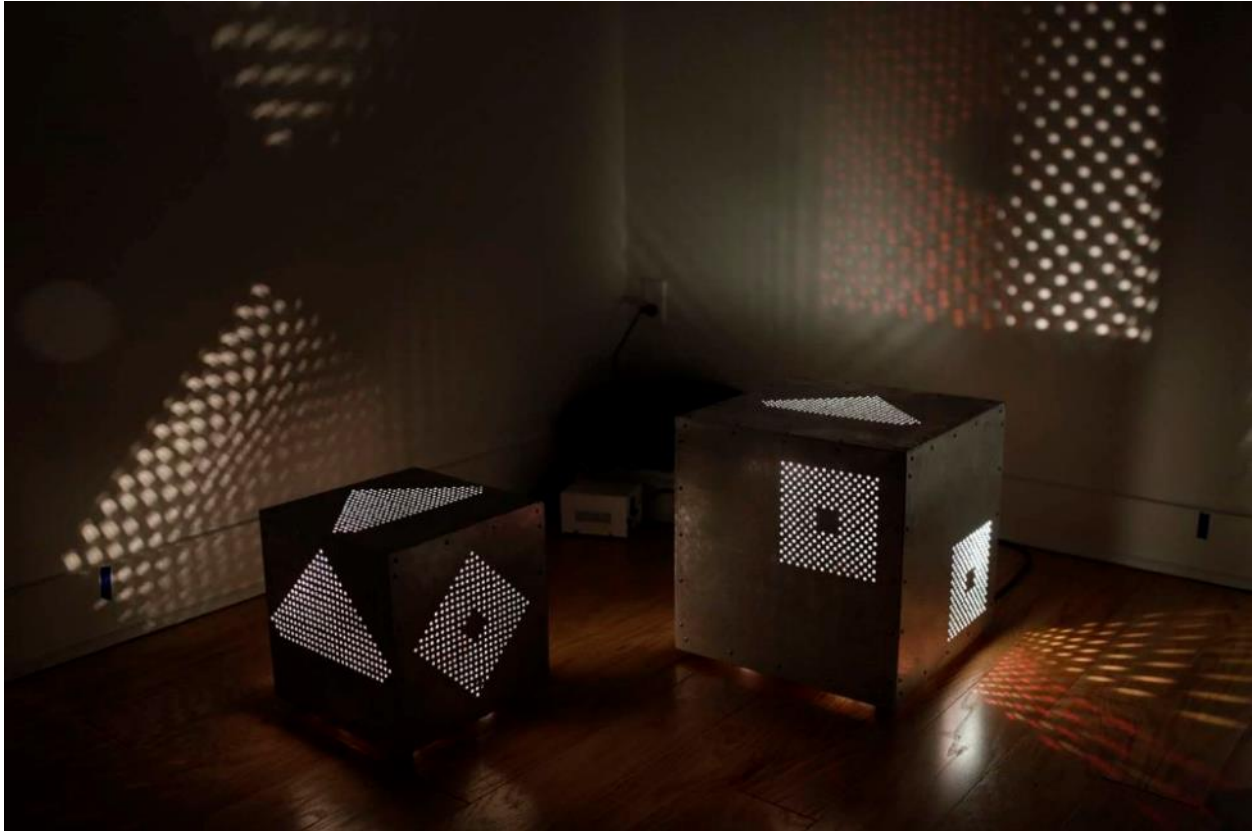
An eye-popping arc stretched across the Charles River in 1971 — but it wasn't a rainbow. It was the first of many inflatable “Sky Art” pieces conceived in German-born artist and visionary Otto Piene’s expansive imagination.

Piene’s light-inspired spectacles have wowed onlookers around the world. Multimedia works from his prolific career have been shown in galleries near and far. Piene also influenced countless students as director of MIT’s Center for Advanced Visual Studies between 1974 and 1994.

But for more than 30 years, the influential artist and educator lived and made experimental works on a quiet farm in Groton. Now the Fitchburg Art Museum is celebrating Piene’s local roots — and his enduring relationship to light — close to home, in the largest U.S. solo exhibition dedicated to the breadth of his creations.

A week before the show’s opening, in a small, white-walled gallery, I met a pair of boxy, black robots. Each one projected glowing flecks and orbs that glided past our eyes around the room.

“It’s doing its little dance now,” sculptor John Powell said as he slowly maneuvered the bots through the space with a modified drone remote control.



Otto Piene's light cubes illuminate the walls of the gallery at the Fitchburg Art Museum. (Hadley Green for WBUR)

“I worked with Otto building three robots, and they’re essentially movable ‘Light Ballets,’ “Powell explained. “Otto called his work ‘Light Ballets.’”

Powell remembers drilling perforations into the robots’ black, metal plates with Piene on a snowy morning in Groton. “He worked closely with the people who made his pieces, and he placed the dots,” Powell recalled.

They began working together in the mid-’80s after Piene asked Powell to become his teaching assistant at MIT. Their collaborations continued for decades until Piene’s death in 2014.

Powell said the artist’s life-long fascination with light began during World War II. As a young German soldier, he saw searchlights and artillery fire light up the skies around him.

“This experience made him want to create light in peace — not be afraid of the sky,” Powell said, “because that’s the way people were at the end of the war, and he wanted to reverse that.”

That’s what drove Piene to design and engineer his giant, inflatable sculptures that Powell says evoke the searchlights his mentor saw in battle. MIT students and scientists helped make and fly Piene’s massive, helium-filled pieces over the Charles River — but they weren’t just for them.

“He liked participation, he wanted people in the middle of it, and he wanted volunteers,” Powell recalled. “It’s a ballet, and everyone participates. Little kids could hold these things.”

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Sculptor John Powell stands with Otto Piene's diamond light robot as he helps with the installation process at the Fitchburg Art Museum. (Hadley Green for WBUR)



Otto Piene, Charles River Rainbow, 1971, Boston. Images Courtesy of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies Special Collection, MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology (ACT).

Piene's "Sky Art" pieces have danced over cities across the globe, including Boston, and at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. In 2011, a "Light Ballet" played at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. Now the Fitchburg Art Museum's new show, "Fire and Light: Otto Piene in Groton," reveals concepts and connections he forged throughout his long career, and proves how Piene was ahead of his time.

Curator Lisa Crossman said, "We're capturing all of the major threads of Otto's production. It's important to know Otto was about experimentation."

The retrospective features energetic sketchbooks, projections and paintings Piene made with fire in his "Art Farm" studio. Not all, but a good deal of the work was produced in Groton.

Past exhibitions have often highlighted Piene's founding role in a collective of international artists known as Zero Group. They formed in the 1950s after World War II with a shared, edgy mission to redefine what art could be. That's where Piene developed a painting method using smoke and flames that he would practice throughout his career.

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One of his sooty, large-scale fire paintings greets visitors as they enter the exhibition at the Fitchburg Art Museum's second floor.



Otto Piene's oil and fire on canvas paintings hang at the Fitchburg Art Museum for an exhibition on the German-born artist who made much of his work in Groton. (Hadley Green for WBUR)

Crossman guided me to a large gallery where Piene's immersive, optimistic installation, "Proliferation of the Sun," was being installed.

"Proliferation is a word that we often use in relation to nuclear warfare, right?" she asked. "And so he's taking this and making it into something that is — rather than militaristic or violent — something that's very beautiful."

Organic shapes, especially circles, flashed in sequence on white scrims and the gallery walls. When this 25-minute "light performance" premiered in 1967, it required seven people to run seven projectors holding more than 1,000 slides. They did this live, in-sync with Piene's urgent but calm recorded instructions.

"Projectionists, please set your timers at high speed, high speed, high speed," Piene intones, repeating, "The sun, the sun, the sun..."

Piene's longtime friend, colleague and assistant Günter Thorn, traveled to Fitchburg from Germany to set up this work. He remembers how tense it was to be a projectionist following Piene's commands.

"It's exciting to do it," Thorn said, laughing, "Sometimes a projector doesn't work, maybe something happens. It's always fun wondering if we get through it or not."



John Powell holds the control for Otto Piene's light robots at the Fitchburg Art Museum. (Hadley Green for WBUR)

Thorn said he's always been impressed by Piene's relentless experimentation and dedication to engaging the public in art. As a German, he said he also relates to Piene's craving for light after living through World War II.

"My parents, my grandparents, were all like victims of that war. They caused it and they had to take responsibility," Thorn said. "I can definitely understand what was going on in his mind."

For a few decades, "Proliferation of the Sun" was largely forgotten, Thorn said, but interest picked up again in the '90s and 2000s. He and Piene reworked it, and now it's digitized and runs on an automated timer. This updated version premiered at Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie in 2014 and was displayed at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in 2015. The Fitchburg Art Museum's exhibition marks the updated piece's U.S. debut.

Museum director Nick Capasso is over the moon to be able to host it, right near Piene's former home. "It's just so wonderful to be able to revive something that had its roots in the 1960s and is still visually relevant today," Capasso said. "Here's a guy who's profoundly interested in light, the sun, the circle, the eye, and how all of these things connect to people. He never got a chance to do that in his own backyard, and we're doing that for him now."

The artist's widow, poet Elizabeth Goldring, still lives on the farm she and Piene bought on Valentine's Day in 1983.

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Otto Piene's "Proliferation of the Sun," a projected, multimedia performance from digitized hand-painted glass slides, is installed for an exhibition of Piene's work at the Fitchburg Art Museum. (Hadley Green for WBUR)

"He was particularly enamored by the big sky around Groton," she told me. "Even with apartments in Berlin and Boston, he saw Groton as his real home."

Drawings of the couple's "Art Farm" fill a sketchbook included in the exhibition. Its pages show the silos that Piene transformed into magical sculptures filled with light and sound rather than grain.

Goldring has been collaborating with the museum to assemble a comprehensive, rarely-seen display that she hopes will help the community get to know Piene's work better.

"People may have known his sky art, or his fire paintings, or his light work — but very often people did not know the range of his work," she said.

Goldring said she knows her husband would laud the Fitchburg Art Museum's efforts. Then she recalled Piene's final show — a retrospective of his postwar art at Berlin's New National Gallery in 2014 that became his swan song.



Otto Piene photographed in the late 1960s by Lothar Wolleh. (Wikimedia Commons)

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“All of his children were there, it was a remarkable opening, and he gave a beautiful speech. It was phenomenal,” Goldring recalled, “And the next day, he was in a taxi going back to our apartment and had a heart attack.”

She believes it was a “perfect death” for her 86-year-old husband who spent his life engaging with people through art. Goldring said she’ll forever miss the conversations they had — and Piene’s voice — but she knows his optimistic spirit is being felt nearby in Fitchburg.



Otto Piene, “Sketchbook: Groton,” 2012, mixed media. (Courtesy of Harvard Art Museum/Busch-Reisinger Museum; digital photography courtesy of Charles Sternaimolo, digital formatting courtesy of Monique Guthrie)

“Fire and Light: Otto Piene in Groton 1983-2014” runs through June 2 at the Fitchburg Art Museum. A Sky Art event is planned for Saturday, April 27 when an inflatable sculpture will be flown across the street at Lowe Playground.