

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 | Arttransition

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 **Arttransition**, 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

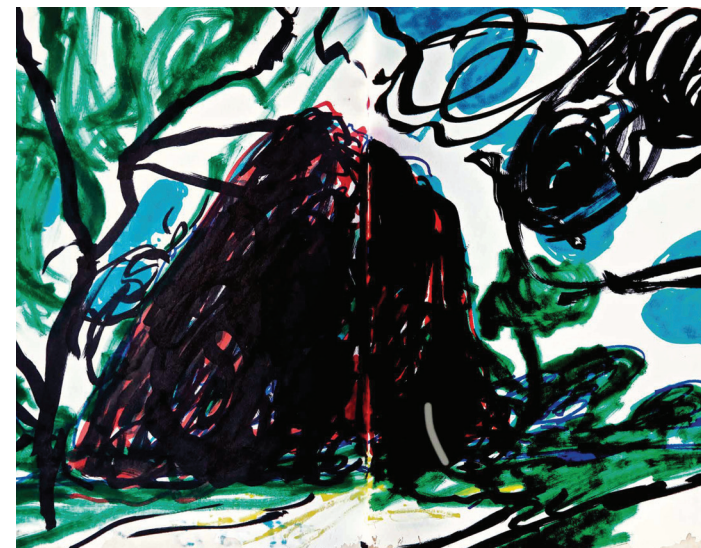
Otto Piene, **Sketchbook: Inflatable Sculpture**, 1992, mixed media, **The Light Silo**, p. 9

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

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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

