

Selected Bibliography

Flavin, Dan. "...in daylight or cool white": an autobiographical sketch," *Artforum* 4, no. 4 (December 1965), pp. 21-24.

corners, barriers, and corridors in fluorescent light from Dan Flavin. Saint Louis: The Saint Louis Art Museum, 1973. Texts by Dan Flavin and Emily S. Rauh.

Dan Flavin. Installationen in fluoreszierendem Licht 1989-1993. Frankfurt am Main: Städtische Galerie im Städel, 1993. Texts by Beatrice von Bismarck, Dan Flavin, and Klaus Gallwitz.

Dan Flavin. Munich: Kunstbau Lenbachhaus, 1994. Texts by Dan Flavin, Helmut Friedel, Uwe Kiessler, Christian Ude, and Ulrich Wilmes.

Dan Flavin: drawings, diagrams, and prints 1972-1975, and installations in fluorescent light 1972-1975. Fort Worth: The Fort Worth Art Museum, 1976. Texts by Jay Belloli, Dan Flavin, and Emily S. Rauh.

Dan Flavin: fluorescent light etc. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada for the Queen's Printer, 1969. Texts by Mel Bochner, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, and Brydon Smith.

Dan Flavin: three installations in fluorescent light. Cologne: Wallraf-Richartz-Museum and the Kunsthalle Cologne, 1973-74. Texts by Dan Flavin and Manfred Schneckenburger.

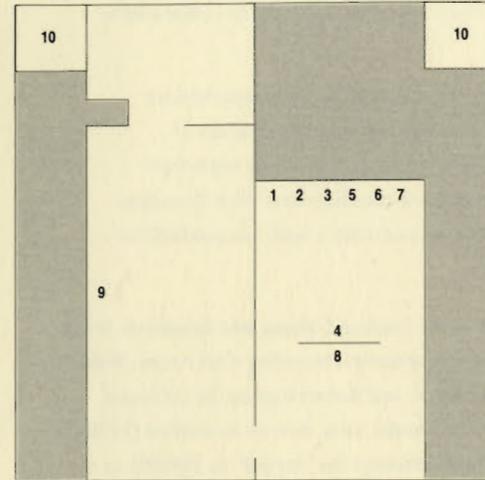
"monuments" for V. Tatlin from Dan Flavin, 1964-1982. Chicago: Donald Young Gallery for The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in collaboration with Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, 1989. Text by Dan Flavin.

Zeichnungen, Diagramme, Druckgraphik 1972-1975 und zwei Installationen in fluoreszierendem Licht von Dan Flavin; Fünf Installationen in fluoreszierendem Licht von Dan Flavin. Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel and Kunsthalle Basel, 1975. Texts by Carlo Huber, Donald Judd, and Franz Meyer.

Dan Flavin was born in 1933 in New York City, where he later studied art history at the New School for Social Research. From 1963, he exhibited nationally and internationally. In 1983 Dia Center for the Arts opened the Dan Flavin Art Institute in Bridgehampton, New York, a permanent exhibition of his works, designed by the artist in a converted firehouse. It is maintained by Dia and open to the public each summer. In 1992 Flavin created a monumental installation for the reopening of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Flavin died on November 29, 1996.

Support for this exhibition has been provided by Calvin Klein, Inc., and the members of the Dia Art Council.

Site Map

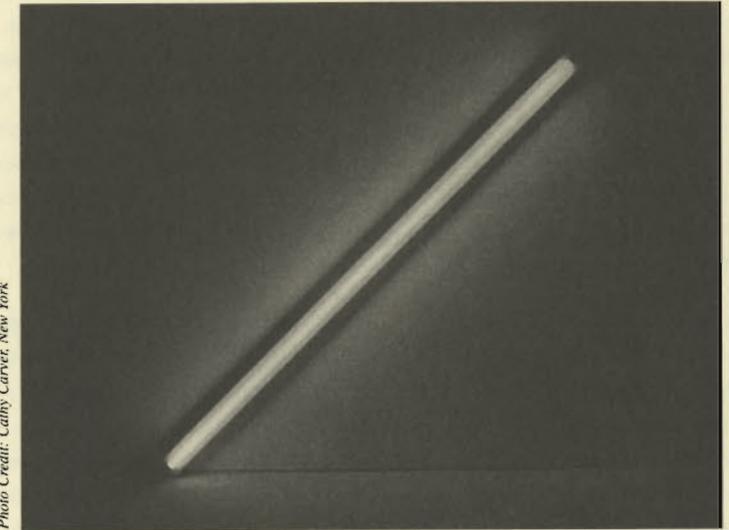


1. *icon I (the heart)(to the light of Sean McGovern which blesses everyone)*, 1961-62. Oil on gesso on masonite and pine, red fluorescent light. 25 1/8 x 25 1/8 x 4 5/8 inches, excluding lamp and fixture. Estate of Dan Flavin.
2. *icon II (the mystery)(to John Reeves)*, 1961. Oil on acrylic masonite and pine, porcelain receptacle, pull chain, amber-colored fire logs, vacuum incandescent bulb. 25 1/8 x 25 1/8 x 4 5/8 inches, excluding bulb and fixture. Estate of Dan Flavin.
3. *icon III*, 1962. Painted wood box, red light bulb, red fluorescent light. 25 1/8 x 25 1/8 x 6 inches, excluding bulb and fixture. Collection Donald Judd Estate.
4. *icon V (Coran's Broadway Flesh)*, 1962. Oil on masonite, porcelain receptacles, pull chains, clear incandescent "candle"

- bulbs. 31 5/8 x 31 5/8 x 9 7/8 inches, excluding bulb and fixture. Private Collection.
5. *icon VI (Ireland dying)(to Louis Sullivan)*, 1962-63. Oil on masonite, painted steel receptacle, glass cap, red incandescent bulb, socket disc flasher. 25 1/8 x 25 1/8 x 10 3/8 inches, excluding bulb and fixture. Collection Donald Judd Estate.
 6. *icon VII (via crucis)*, 1962-64. Mars Black Liquitex on masonite, daylight fluorescent light. 25 1/8 x 25 1/8 x 10 1/8 inches, excluding bulb and fixture. Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of Barbara Rose, New York.
 7. *icon VIII (the dead niggers icon)(to Blind Lemon Jefferson)*, 1962-63. Oil on masonite, porcelain receptacles, pull chains, red incandescent bulbs, socket disc flashers. 25 1/8 x 25 1/8 x 10 7/16 inches, excluding bulb and fixture. Private Collection.
 8. *the diagonal of May 23, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)*, 1963. Yellow fluorescent light. 8 feet long. Collection Dia Center for the Arts, Gift of the artist.
 9. *untitled*, 1970. Blue and red fluorescent light. 97 1/2 inches x variable length x 3 3/4 inches.
 10. *untitled*, 1996. Blue and green fluorescent light. Site-specific installation in a pair of staircases. Collection Dia Center for the Arts. Gift of Nancy Brown Wellin in memory of the friendship between Alice and George R. Brown and John and Dominique de Menil.

(1962/63, 1970, 1996)

Photo Credit: Carily Carver, New York



DIA CENTER FOR THE ARTS

May 22, 1997-June 14, 1998

548 West 22nd Street, New York City

DAN FLAVIN

(1962/63, 1970, 1996)

Few artists are so identified with a particular medium outside painting or sculpture than Dan Flavin. After 1963, Flavin's oeuvre consists almost entirely—except for drawings and prints—of light in the form of commercially available fluorescent tubes in all nine colors and all five shapes (one circular and four straight fixtures of different lengths). His art, systematically deployed in this limited vocabulary of form and color, is often situated in relationship to a specific architectural context. One of Flavin's last installations, *untitled* (1996) in the two four-story staircases of Dia's exhibition building, exemplifies the aesthetic principles consistent throughout his work; a simple line of two-foot lights of two colors (blue and green), placed vertically in a corner, fills the space with luminous color. As Flavin himself concluded in 1965, just two years after his first manifestation of an art of pure light: "What has art been for me? In the past, I have known it (basically) as a sequence of implicit decisions to combine traditions of painting and sculpture in architecture with acts of electric light defining space."¹

The three defining moments in Flavin's career presented in this exhibition—his first invention of fluorescent light art in 1961–62, his most ambitious free-standing work created in 1970, and the site-specific staircase work commissioned last year—illustrate the artist's enduring preoccupation with the diversity of artificial light's aesthetic application. The simplicity and systematic character of his work, as well as the almost scientific ingenuity of his discovery of an art of light and the relentlessness with which he explored it, has earned Flavin a reputation as a progenitor and chief exponent of Minimalism. Yet the artist himself disliked the label Minimalism and even an abbreviated review of his early works requires a more complex reading.

Flavin's proclaimed discovery of fluorescent light art came in an instant:

From a recent diagram, I declared *the diagonal of personal ecstasy (the diagonal of May 25, 1963)*, a common eight-foot strip with fluorescent light of any commercially available color. At first, I chose "gold."...

(I put the paired lamp and pan in position at an angle forty-five degrees above the horizontal because that seemed to be a suitable situation of resolved equilibrium but any other positioning could have been just as engaging.)²

Flavin later dedicated the gold diagonal to Constantin Brancusi in reference to the systematic elementary structure of the Romanian artist's *Endless Column*:

That artificial *Column* was disposed as a regular formal consequence of numerous similar wood wedge-cut segments extended vertically—a hewn sculpture (at its inception). The *diagonal* in its overt formal simplicity was only the installation of a dimensional or distended luminous line of a standard industrial device. Little artistic craft could be possible.

Both structures had a uniform elementary visual nature, but they were intended to excel their obvious visible limitations of length and their apparent lack of complication. The *Endless Column* was like some imposing archaic mythologic totem risen directly skyward. The *diagonal*, in the possible extent of its dissemination as common light repeated effulgently across anybody's wall, had potential for becoming a modern technological fetish.³

The serial and systematic repetition of form in the *Endless Column* was ubiquitous in not only Flavin's work but that of many of his contemporaries, including Carl Andre, Walter De Maria, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, and Robert Ryman. Its influence persisted in Flavin's work—albeit usually in horizontal form, as seen in *untitled* (1970), a large-scale barrier in red and blue light.⁴ (Flavin invented the "barrier" in 1966/68 as a free-standing series of fixtures that physically block a passageway or segment of a space with light.)

Flavin's confident matter-of-fact update of Brancusi's masterpiece in his diagonal and his later unparalleled application of those ideas in the monumental barrier belie the more ironic and self-conscious qualities of his first experiments with light in 1961 and 1962: a series of eight painted boxes with attached fluorescent and incandescent light fixtures of differing types, colors, and sizes which he called "icons." Among their memorable dedications are *icon I (the heart)(to the light of Sean McGovern which blesses everyone)*, *icon II (the mystery)(to John Reeves)*, *icon V (Coran's Broadway Flesh)*, and *icon VI (Ireland dying)(to Louis Sullivan)*. Flavin continued to dedicate most of his work to friends, acquaintances, and others throughout his career with equal doses of respect and irony, but rarely with the sentiment intimated in these early pieces.

By investing the archetype of the icon with ironic significance, Flavin devised his own subtle theology of form and material:

Last week in the Metropolitan, I saw a large icon from school of Novgorod. I smiled when I recognized it. It had more than its painting. There was a physical feeling in the panel. Its recurring warp bore a history. This icon had that magical presiding presence which I have tried to realize in my own icons. But my icons differ from a Byzantine Christ held in majesty; they are dumb—anonymous and

inglorious. They are as mute and indistinguished as the run of our architecture. My icons do not raise up the blessed savior in elaborate cathedrals. They are constructed concentrations celebrating barren rooms. They bring a limited light.⁵

Despite Flavin's claim to have made an arbitrary choice of color in his breakthrough *diagonal*, the selection of gold light obviously conjures the traditional religious artefact, if ironically.⁶ Forced by his father to attend a Roman Catholic seminary, Flavin had cultivated an educated rejection of traditional theology. Two of his first fluorescent works of 1963 were dedicated to William of Ockham, a medieval philosopher and founder of Nominalism who proposed that faith in God must be held separately from any rational deduction from facts of this earth. Flavin's invocation of Nominalism—known in the more popular dictum that "no more entities should be posited than are necessary" (Ockham's Razor)—could be considered a Rosetta stone for Minimalism. Flavin's art neither rejects nor summons faith since the question of God is never raised. For, art is matter and is, therefore, no proof of anything spiritual.

Created by an artist steeped in traditions of art and canons of Catholicism, Flavin's *icons* and fluorescent works offer nothing less than a reconsideration and deconstruction of art's past through both the systematic use of form and light and the tool of irony. Thus, he pits the transcendent aspirations of art against the practical commonality of the commercial light fixture, allowing neither to prevail.

M. G.

1. Dan Flavin. "...in daylight or cool white: an autobiographical sketch," *Artforum* 4, no. 4 (December 1965), p. 24. Flavin later revised and republished this text in several exhibition catalogues.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *untitled* (1970) is an eight-foot tall version of a work made in 1967, *an artificial barrier of blue, red, and blue fluorescent light (to Flavin Starbuck Judd)*. *untitled* was also installed in Donald Judd's Spring Street loft in New York.

5. Dan Flavin, quoted in *etc. from Dan Flavin* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1969), p. 176. The notes are taken from a record book dated 9 August 1962, which is related to a drawing for a proposed icon VI (Novogorod) dated 22 October 1962.

6. Flavin also describes the diagonal position of the eight-foot tube as arbitrary, although it is difficult not to imagine its connection to the diagonal dynamic of compositions of Russian avant-garde artists such as Kasimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, and El Lissitzky, whose work was constantly of interest to him.