

Dan Flavin nine sculptures in fluorescent light, 1963–81

In 1979 Dia Art Foundation purchased the former First Baptist Church of Bridgehampton to create a gallery for changing exhibitions and a long-term exhibition space for the art of Dan Flavin, a resident of nearby Wainscott. Originally built as a firehouse in 1908, the building was occupied by the church from 1924 to the mid-1970s. Under the direction of Flavin and the architect Richard Gluckman, Dia restored and renovated the structure to acknowledge both of its former functions; though now an art gallery, it holds traces of its former functional and spiritual uses. References to its first use were reflected in the changes made to the exterior and the fire-engine-red newel post in the entrance hall. The church doors were moved to the entrance of a small exhibition space on the second floor, created to house memorabilia collected during the renovation from and about the church, including a neon cross. This space alludes to Flavin's transformation of light and fluorescent fixtures from spiritual associations or mundane service to contemporary "icons" depleted of religious or utilitarian significance.

Flavin's early use of fluorescent light is represented in this presentation by *untitled* (1962), the final working drawing for *icon IV (the pure land) (to David John Flavin [1933–1962])* (1962–69). This drawing documents one of a group of "electric light 'icons'" that Flavin made in the early 1960s. These icons consist of boxes that hang on the wall with attached electric lights, and mark his rejection of an earlier gestural style in order to develop an art—now considered a cornerstone of Minimalism—that uses standard fluorescent lights in simple, matter-of-fact presentations. The drawing also recalls a less commonly recognized aspect of Flavin's lights: their identification as memorials, monuments, or tributes to various individuals.¹ Although Flavin abandoned the personal as connoted by expressionistic means, most of his artworks were dedicated to friends, relatives, curators, or historical personages. An autobiographical record was thereby incorporated into his work in its commemorations. But these personal tributes monumentalize neither individualism nor particular individuals; they are ordinary objects that lack the permanence of conventional monuments. While turned on, they have a magical presence; turned off, they don't exist.

In 1963 Flavin began to use only standard fluorescent fixtures and tubes mounted directly on walls. Marcel Duchamp's invention of the readymade and Jasper Johns's use of everyday objects in an artistic context—most notably in his bronze light bulbs—were certainly precedents for Flavin's use of fluorescent lights. Nonetheless, as a medium for an ongoing body of work, fluorescent light was new. To provide context and to give it formal structure, Flavin used elements from painting, sculpture, and

architecture. The six works on the second floor briefly survey Flavin's development of this chosen medium.

The single eight-foot-long red light forming a vertical line enveloped by a corner in *red out of a corner (to Annina)* (1963) recalls the vertical fields of color, the "zips," in Barnett Newman's paintings. Like Newman, Flavin used simple, straightforward composition and large scale to convey an immediate nonillusionistic presence. A more general and humorous reference to painting is made by *untitled (to Katharina and Christoph)* (1966–71), an eight-foot-square construction placed symmetrically across a corner. The structure provides a kind of picture frame for the green light illuminating the real space in back and front of it.² The constructed hallways of *untitled (to Jan and Ron Greenberg)* (1972–73) and *untitled (to Robert, Joe, and Michael)* (1975–81), which are blocked halfway through by light fixtures, similarly function as frames or containers of light. By using corner spaces, as with four works exhibited here, Flavin integrated his light constructions directly with architecture. This device, borrowed from Russian Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin, activates the walls as structural elements that work with or against the light. In *red out of a corner*, the dramatic red column is enclosed by the walls of a corner. The exhibition space's fabricated corridors do not offer passage but, rather, support the fixtures and provide surfaces for the reflection of color.

Pictorial conventions and architectural structures offered Flavin a framework in which to consider his medium, but he worked without precedents in dealing with the light and color specific to fluorescent tubes. The red, for example, in *red out of a corner* was originally intended to pull *out* space, like red paint on canvas, but in making the piece Flavin discovered that red fluorescent light does not radiate much from the tube. Fluorescent light is produced by the transfer of invisible ultraviolet light, created by burning gas, to visible light by a variety of phosphors, which coat the inside of the tube.³ These phosphors radiate at different wavelengths within the visible color spectrum, producing levels of illumination that vary according to each color. Green is the most luminous. No mixture of phosphors makes a true red, so red light is made by tinting the inside of the glass tube, thereby inhibiting the amount of light cast by the lamp. Red is thus subdued, as in *red out of a corner*, while green is so bright, especially when multiple lamps are used, that it fatigues the eye and appears white. This phenomenon becomes evident in viewing *untitled (to Katharina and Christoph)* and the back side of *untitled (to Jan and Ron Greenberg)*. As the green becomes white, the daylight through the windows looks pink.

Colored light does not mix like pigment: the primary colors are red, blue, and green. Green mixed with red makes yellow light, and all the primaries mixed together make white. These effects are perhaps most apparent in *untitled* (1976), an eight-foot pink lamp backed by green and blue lamps, which lean into the corner. The pink light forms a line highlighted by an intense blue and green pyramid of color on the wall. As blue mixes with pink light, it forms a purple band, and green with pink makes a yellow area. Flavin used color to its fullest in *untitled (in honor of Harold Joachim) 3* (1977). The eight-foot gridded construction across a corner combines pink, blue, green, and yellow lights in pastel squares on the wall, but the overall ambient light is white. In 1972 Flavin added circular fluorescent lights, which produce varying qualities of white light, to his inventory of materials. The three colors of *untitled (to Jim Schaeufele) 1, 2, and 3* (1972)—cool white, daylight, and warm white—accommodate the existing architecture by providing necessary illumination in the stairwell.

Open to the public since 1983, this small presentation offers a mini-retrospective of Flavin's work with fluorescent light. By viewing all the lights and the architecture as a single, continuous installation, one can most appreciate the extent to which the artist developed his medium. By manipulating the formal, phenomenal, and referential characteristics of light, Flavin provided an experience built of provocative contrasts—between colors, intensities of light, structure and formlessness, the obvious and the curious, the serious and the humorous.

Tiffany Bell

notes

- icon IV* was dedicated to the artist's twin brother who died in 1962. Its all-over whiteness was chosen as a reference to the white used in Chinese funerals, an Oriental influence reinforced by the scroll-like presentation and calligraphic white marking in the drawing exhibited here. See Brydon Smith, *Dan Flavin: fluorescent light, etc.* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada for the Queen's Printer, 1969), p. 142.
- As is often the case in Flavin's work, the references might have multiple meanings. Here, the square format associates the work with that of his Minimalist colleagues. But in creating a frame-like structure, Flavin was also commenting in a characteristically ironic way on the distinctions being made at the time in the critical dialogue between pictorial space inside a frame and the real space of Minimalist sculpture.
- See Smith, *Dan Flavin*, p. 208.

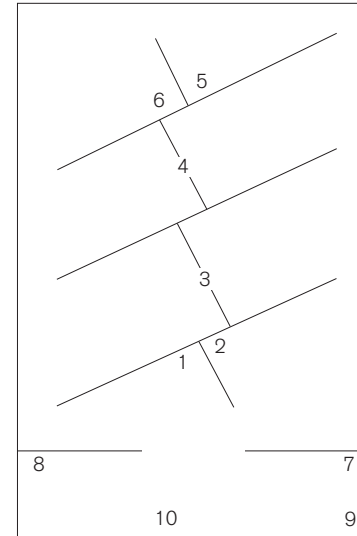
Dan Flavin was born in 1933 in New York City. In the mid-1950s, he served in the US Air Force, after which he returned to New York, where he studied art history at the New School for Social Research and Columbia University. In 1961 he had his first solo exhibition at the Judson Gallery, New York. Later that year he began experimenting with electric light in a series of works called "icons," which led him to his first work made solely of fluorescent light, *the diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)* (1963). Major exhibitions of Flavin's work include those at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (1967), the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (1969), and the Staatliche Kunsthalle, Baden-Baden (1989). In 2004 Dia organized a traveling retrospective in association with the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. In 1983 Dia opened the Dan Flavin Art Institute, a permanent exhibition designed by the artist in a former firehouse and Baptist church in Bridgehampton, New York. Flavin died in 1996 in Riverhead, New York.

selected bibliography

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- corners, barriers, and corridors in fluorescent light from Dan Flavin.* Saint Louis: Saint Louis Art Museum, 1973. Texts by Dan Flavin and Emily S. Rauh.
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site map and checklist

- red out of a corner (to Annina)**, 1963
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures
Edition 2/3
The Estate of Dan Flavin
- untitled**, 1976
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures
Edition 2/3
Dia Art Foundation
- untitled (to Robert, Joe, and Michael)**, 1975–81
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures
Edition 2/3
Dia Art Foundation
- untitled (to Jan and Ron Greenberg)**, 1972–73
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures
Edition 2/3
Dia Art Foundation
- untitled (in honor of Harold Joachim) 3**, 1977
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures
Edition 1/3
Dia Art Foundation
- untitled (to Katharina and Christoph)**, (from the European Couples series), 1966–71
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures
Edition 1/5
Dia Art Foundation
- untitled (to Jim Schaeufele) 1**, 1972
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures
Edition 1/3
Dia Art Foundation
- untitled (to Jim Schaeufele) 2**, 1972
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures
Edition 1/3
Dia Art Foundation



- untitled (to Jim Schaeufele) 3**, 1972
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures
Edition 1/3
Dia Art Foundation
- untitled drawing for icon IV (the pure land) (to David John Flavin [1933–1962])**, 1962
Pencil and chalk on paper
Collection of Stephen Flavin

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