In Another Light
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Dan Flavin was the subject this season of three major exhibitions in New York, and, with that kind of high-profile exposure, it really should have been Flavin's year. Yet it didn't seem to be. Flavin is, unfortunately, taken a bit for granted. His work is familiar both historically (as a still-unfolding instance of classic Minimalism) and materially (fluorescent bulbs remain irreducibly what they are). But this familiarity is misleading, for familiarity implies a certain stasis, and Flavin's art has evolved – both the work itself and our perception of it. Its forms, means and associations seem to grow richer and more complex as time passes. New meanings accrue, the frame of reference widens.

Of the recent exhibitions, two were museum shows of older work. The Guggenheim Museum SoHo showed 26 pieces dating from 1963 to 1987, while the Dia Center for the Arts exhibited 15 works from 1964 to 1978 in a show titled *European Couples, and Others*. (Dia has also installed in its stairwell the first of a matched pair of permanent site-specific works – a line of blue and green tubes four stories high, visible from the street day and night. An identical piece will be installed on the stairwell's other side.) The third exhibition was a gallery show at PaceWildenstein in SoHo – a carefully modulated series of 12 horizontal wall pieces in colored fluorescents.

What struck me most forcibly after seeing all three shows was the clarity of the work, the inherent logic, order and legibility, all riding in tandem with the most visceral and emotional of effects. Flavin's art seems to comprise four lines of understanding and intention, operating separately but simultaneously. I see these as: appropriation from the outside world, structure, color and architecture.

This multiplicity provides many entrances into the work. It increases accessibility, but it also sets up ambiguous metaphorical situations,

readings operating at evocative cross-purposes to each other. The four dominant lines mentioned above all deal in some way with problems of perception, naming and reference – the kind of applied epistemology that Flavin is most comfortable with. But there is another aspect to his investigations, consistently denied by him but hard to ignore – that of the spiritual or transcendent. As time goes by, these more metaphysical associations continue to hover over Flavin's work, giving another dimension to the overtly factual. Are the similarities to Newman's zips or Rothko's floods of suffused color purely incidental? Is the cathedral-like feeling of an installation of the cool white "monuments" for Vladimir Tatlin just intelligently ironic? And what about the sense of blood and mystery in *monument 4 those who have been killed in ambush (to P.K. who reminded me about death)*, a deep-red corner piece looming out at us from the darkness of the Dia installation? The very nature of Flavin's artistic approach ensures he *can* have it both ways. The interpretive arena is wide open, and moreover it is the artist himself who has cleared the field, so to speak, by making art that, while full of ambiguity, has no built-in doubt. The work is always in focus: you can see it clearly at whatever level of attention you want to give it.

By the nature of its materials, Flavin's art invites a reconsideration of the neo-Duchampian readymade, the object that has been plucked from the world and installed in the context of the art gallery. Lately, readymades or their near relatives have been enjoying something of a vogue. On a recent short walk in SoHo I came across exhibitions featuring fire hoses, beds and mattresses, plastic soda bottles, and in one case an entire section of rusted fire-escape cut off a building and hung by cables from the gallery's ceiling. The effects were all very grittily poetic, but such work seems to operate in a quite different esthetic mode from Duchamp's and Flavin's. It feels arbitrary and strained, the object's removal from the world, an underlining not of artfulness or of a presiding indifference, but of its dysfunction, its pathos.

Flavin's borrowings from the quotidian world are of another order. He takes a humble object, all right, but he knows just what he wants. It's only one class of object, the commercially available fluorescent light fixture. There are a set number of colors and a set number of shapes and sizes. There is the circular fixture and the straight tube in 2-, 4-, 6- and 8-foot lengths. Flavin forms these mass-produced utility products into art objects, but they also do what they were meant to do – light up a room. Consequently, Flavin's work is untouched by the sense of profligacy that attends much recent art involving readymades, the feeling that there is an inexhaustible trove of *stuff* out there that one can art up, empty of logic and function, and turn into something that looks tough-minded but is at heart easy and sentimental.

Flavin's tubes carry with them not only the generalized atmosphere of the industrial, but also the quite specific aura of the milieus they most often illuminate – the supermarket, the office, the factory, the hardware store, the lighting shop, the building supply house. Fluorescent lights are cheap, impersonal, replaceable, modular. They are cool, simple in shape, and they radiate virtually without shadow, emitting only a low hum. They are industrial artifacts poised midway between the old idea of a machine and the new one. The classical machine was active, warm, metallic and noisy – a thing of wheels, gears, crankshafts and pistons. The postmechanical device, with its software and microchips, its optical fibres and smooth plastic, is small, silent and boxed in, but capable of the most complex interconnections.

Flavin presents the industrial in a low-keyed, appreciative way, as a condition of modern existence. Fluorescent light fixtures, like International Style skyscrapers, are made of metal and glass. They are opaque and transparent, strong yet fragile. Flavin's approach to material is straightforward in an essentially Miesian manner. Form follows function. Material embellishments are strictly excluded from Flavin's artistic vocabulary: no customizing, no special bending, no timers, no dimmers, no gestural drawing in space, no mixed media, no text.

The second line of Flavin's practice is the structural. Despite the seemingly limited nature of his materials, he has produced art works in a remarkable number of formal permutations. Flavin's work can be freestanding or wall-based. It can bridge corners or nestle into them, be hung from the ceiling or laid out on the floor. The tubes can face forwards or backwards. They can be oriented horizontally, vertically or diagonally, in a grid or not. There can be single tubes or multiple tubes arrayed in varying symmetries or assymmetries. The tubes can also be placed parallel and next to each other to form solid color fields. In addition, Flavin uses color not just perceptually but as a structural variant, a differentiator.

Some of Flavin's pieces have the planar, graphic clarity of a drawing on gridded paper. For example, *untitled (to a man, George McGovern)*, from 1972, is a triangular, wall-hung work made with cool-white, circular tubes. Ten fixtures run up the wall, abutting a corner, and 10 run perpendicularly to the first set, along the same wall and abutting the floor. From each of these two baselines another eight gradually diminishing rows are generated (the second row getting nine fixtures, the third eight and so on) so as to form a right isosceles triangle. The perceptual results, of course, are not at all straightforward, but the structure is. On the other hand, *greens crossing greens (to Piet Mondian who lacked green)* is a freestanding piece of great architectural complexity (and spooky emotional effect). A green post-and-lintel unit is reiterated to form two bridgelike structures, one made of small tubes in square translucent sheathing and the other of bigger ones, that cross each other at an angle, carving up the room's space in ways hard to quantify.

"Hard to quantify" does not, however, mean *impossible*. Look at any Flavin for a while and the plan starts to unfold. His work, like that of many other Minimalists or Conceptualists – Judd, Andre, Stella, Bochner or Smithson – employs simple counting, measuring and distributing strategies. The *'monument' for V. Tatlin* series, for example, begun in the mid-'60s, parallels Frank Stella's various pinstripe series of the same

decade. The fluorescent tubes and the stripes function similarly, and the symmetrical external shape is configured by the outcome of a set of logical placement decisions. Flavin's comprehensibility is helped by the modular quality of his materials. Quantities of two, four, six and eight have sets of potentially complicated, but always graspable relationships.

The serial format works particularly well for Flavin. It invites the viewer to compare and contrast. The 12 colorful horizontal sculptures in the PaceWildenstein show are a good example. They are spaced out around the large room at eye level with enough distance between them so that the hues reflected on the wall don't mix. The sculptures all have the same shape – consisting of two 4-foot tubes with a 2-foot tube centered and sandwiched in between them. But you must stop and pay attention before the color structure becomes clear. In six of the works, the short middle tube is red and the bottom tube is green. In the other six, the colors of the bottom two elements are reversed. The top tube is one of six colors: light blue, green, pink, yellow, red and deep ultraviolet, in that order. This six-color progression for the top tubes is the same for both the red-green group and the green-red group. It sounds simple, but it takes a while to see – which is, I believe, part of the point.

Color is an area where Flavin has made a major, but insufficiently understood, contribution. Along with Judd he has used color as a sensual and emotional counterpoint to the austere structural rigor of his enterprise. While Flavin by necessity has a limited palette, in practice the range of colors is enormous. It can wash and mix along the walls, in the corners and on the floor. A corner grid piece such as *untitled (in honor of Leo at the 30th anniversary of his gallery)*, exhibited at the Guggenheim, consists of five 8-foot horizontal tubes in red, pink, yellow, blue and green spanning the corner and facing us directly, and five similar vertical tubes turned the other way, bathing the corner in a

ravishing peachy glow. The pieces in the 1966–71 *European Couples* series at Dia are also 8-foot corner squares, with each sculpture done in a single color. The structure, too, is simpler. They are composed of four tubes – two verticals turned to the wall and two horizontals facing the room. The effect is startling. The corner dissolves, the edges are elegantly demarcated, and the square space turns into a subtly modulated, glowing Color Field painting – an Olitski you could walk through. There is something equally painterly going on in the new works at PaceWildenstein. The horizontal format casts soft-edged rectangles of colors both above and below the fixtures, and Mark Rothko's paintings inevitably come to mind.

Flavin puts his color through all its formal paces as well. He takes advantage of advancing and receding hues, of pure and mixed tones, of direct and reflected light, and of sharp contrast and subtle tonal interplay. Also brought into play are more esoteric color properties, such as the phenomenon of afterimage. The tubes – especially when set in banks, as in *untitled (to Jan and Ron Greenberg)*, with its wall of yellow backed by a wall of green – are chromatically intense. If the viewer looks at them for any length of time, shimmering ghosts of their complementary colors appear.

Flavin uses color in a consciously referential way too – the red and white of the *untitled (to the citizens of the Swiss cantons)* series, or the pink, yellow, blue and green of *untitled (to Henri Matisse)* – but his color also has strong emotional and even physiological effects, though it is hard to say how much of this is intended. It is color you just don't look at; it is color you feel – the blood reds, the antiseptic whites, the warm pinks, the sky blues, the eerie science-fiction greens. One night I sat under a big red corner piece (at Max's Kansas City), eating a steak. The food looked weird, and I had an awful headache that seemed to pulse in time to the sculpture's hum. Detached contemplating is not the term I would use to describe the experience.

The movement out into physical and optical space – the architectural side of Flavin's work – is seen to greatest effect in larger-scale installations. (In contrast, the single diagonal tube in the uptown Guggenheim's big abstraction show looked rather forlorn, as it if were fighting a losing battle against the slope of the museum's ramp.) In a big Flavin installation the air seems suffused with light and color, almost as if one could breathe it. You have a sense of anticipation and of being led along as light spills out the doorway of an adjacent room. Shadows cut floors and walls, corners dissolve; forms are blurred and doubled on polished floors; ceiling beams seem spray painted; and small architectural details – the space between two radiator strips, for example – are highlighted with the most complex blend of colors. As you look, the sculptures expand. How big are they, really – their listed dimensions or the area encompassed by their throw of light? Does the room have other sources of illumination? In that case things are different again.

At Dia, the new permanent installation gives a starkly utilitarian stairwell a sense of drama and mystery. Tubes running up the corner (blue on the two lower floors, green on the two upper) turn brick walls craggy and painted walls glassy, functioning as a radiant armature for the turnings of the stairs. In Flavin's installations the entire space that houses them is subtly reconfigured. The modifications feel as permanent as any architectural renovation, but to undo them, all you have to do is throw a switch.

Minimalism has had great staying power. In sculpture, especially, it has been something that artists (and critics) have had to deal with in their practice. You may be for or against it, but it is difficult indeed not to take it into account. The best of classic Minimalism has continued to present a very good case for itself. Dan Flavin's work is in many ways paradigmatic. While remaining true to its principles, it has continued to grow in complexity, both of effect and interpretation. In the process, somehow, it has taken on a richer, almost affective character.

Classic Minimalism depends upon – and, in a sense, embodies – a

built-in rigidity, a stubborn insistence on the factual and the phenomenological. Implicit in this esthetic is a desire for control that has led most Minimalist artists (Stella is an exception) to keep strict rein on their work's formal variables. While this rectitude might seem to be an impediment to long-term development – certainly it would be anathema to Picasso or Matisse – it has for the most part served the Minimalists well. By maintaining a built-in link to formal variation, the Minimalists have preempted temptation, particularly the temptation to devolve to the overtly personal. The result is an unusually firm grasp of the rule, the better (sometimes) to break them. In fact, the analytic quality of Minimalist art, its seeming clarity of method and intention, actually increases its potential for ambiguity. Minimalism's facets have been sharply defined from the outset, and, over time, inherent contradictions and instabilities establish themselves as reliable generators of interpretational and perceptual complexity. Flavin's work continues to have deep resonance. It still "is what it is" – in the proper Minimalist sense – but then "to be" is, after all, a very tricky verb.

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