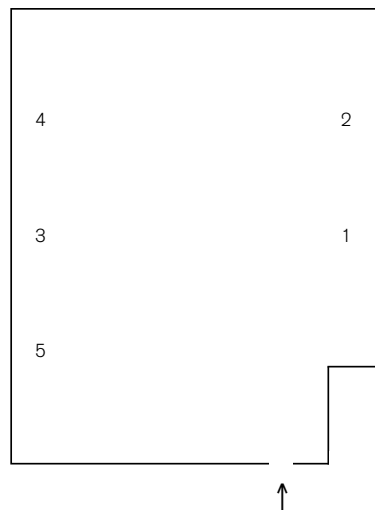


Dan Flavin: icons

April 30, 2015–April 30, 2017

Dan Flavin was born in 1933 in New York City, where he later studied art history at the New School for Social Research (1956) and Columbia University (1957–59). His first solo show was at the Judson Gallery, New York, in 1961. Flavin made his first work with electric light that same year and he began using commercial fluorescent bulbs in 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 1983, Dia opened the Dan Flavin Art Institute in Bridgehampton, New York. In 1992, Flavin created a monumental installation for the reopening of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. He died in 1996, leaving designs for a light installation for Milan's Chiesa Rossa that was realized posthumously with Dia's support. In 2004, Dia Art Foundation and the National Gallery of Art organized a major touring retrospective of Flavin's work; venues included the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris. Flavin's last completed work, *untitled* (1996), occupies a stairwell at 548 West 22nd Street in New York City, the former Dia Center for the Arts building that closed in 2004.



checklist

1. icon I (the heart) (to the light of Sean McGovern which blesses everyone), 1961–62

oil on cold gesso on Masonite and pine, and red fluorescent light
Collection of Stephen Flavin

2. icon II (the mystery) (to John Reeves), 1961

oil on cold acrylic gesso on Masonite and pine, porcelain receptacle, pull chain, and amber "Firelogs Vacuum" incandescent bulb
Collection of Stephen Flavin

3. icon V (Coran's Broadway Flesh), 1962

oil on cold gesso on Masonite, porcelain receptacles, pull chains, and clear incandescent "candle" bulbs
Private collection

4. icon VII (via crucis), 1962–64

acrylic on Masonite and daylight fluorescent light
Dia Art Foundation

5. icon VIII (the dead nigger's icon) (to Blind Lemon Jefferson), 1962–63

oil on Masonite, porcelain receptacles, pull chains, red incandescent bulbs, and socket disc flashers
Private collection

The Dan Flavin Art Institute

Corwith Avenue Bridgehampton New York
www.diaart.org

Prior to his breakthrough into the medium of fluorescent light, Dan Flavin completed a series of eight works known as “icons” between 1961 and 1964. Each icon occupies a box-like construction with a painted surface and attached light fixtures, possessing a “hierarchical relationship of electric light over, under, against and with a square-fronted structure of paint ‘light.’”¹ While grappling with this relationship, Flavin experienced a genesis moment and constructed his first sculpture made entirely of fluorescent light: *the diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)*. This work opened the door to a completely new medium that would engage the artist for the rest of his career. As such, the icons series bridges the mediums of painting and sculpture, linking the work that Flavin made early in his career to the sculptures in light for which he is remembered.

Given the artist’s Catholic upbringing and education, the use of the word “icon” seems to be a specific, and pointed, choice. Unlike traditional religious icons, Flavin created nonrepresentational artworks and dedicated them to friends, family, and cultural figures that he admired. These dedications, a process that he continued with his works in fluorescent light, lend an element of humor to the otherwise austere untitled sculptures. The dedications also carry a sense of irony and, at times, even tragedy within their titles. Flavin dedicated three of the works on display in this exhibition—*icon I (the heart) (to the light of Sean McGovern which blesses everyone)*, *icon II (the mystery) (to John Reeves)*, and *icon V (Coran’s Broadway Flesh)*—to his friends and acquaintances in New York City. His *icon VIII (the dead nigger’s icon) (to Blind Lemon Jefferson)* was dedicated to Jefferson, an influential blues singer from the 1920s, while his *icon VII (via crucis)* dramatically references the route that Christ took while carrying the cross.

The National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa presented Flavin’s first retrospective in 1969. Organized relatively early in his career despite its retrospective status, the exhibition included the full series of icons, which were not exhibited as a series again for nearly thirty years. From 1999 to 2003, five of the icons were exhibited at the Dan Flavin Art Institute (DFAI) in Bridgehampton, New York. This former firehouse and one-time church was renovated for the display of art under the direction of Flavin himself, illustrating the close relationship between his works and their architectural settings. In his own words, “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.”² Embracing his full trajectory as an artist and the leap that he made from painting to working with pure light, *Dan Flavin: icons* returns this critical early series to the DFAI.

notes

1. Dan Flavin, “. . . in daylight and cool white,” *Dan Flavin: fluorescent light, etc.* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada for the Queen’s Printer, 1969), p. 20.
2. Ibid.

bibliography

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