

Dan Flavin

Few artists are more identified with a particular medium than Dan Flavin. After 1963 Flavin's work was composed almost entirely of light, in the form of commercially available fluorescent tubes in ten colors (blue, green, pink, red, yellow, ultraviolet, and four whites) and five shapes (one circular and four straight fixtures of different lengths). He arranged fixtures in varying autonomous configurations, as in the series of "monuments" for V. Tatlin (1964–90), and then increasingly in color and in relation to architecture, exemplified by the monumental work *untitled* (1970). Flavin once summed up his practice as "decisions to combine traditions of painting and sculpture in architecture with acts of electric light defining space."

Despite dedicating many of his untitled works to a person or a personal reflection, and his deep awareness of the historical symbolism of light in art, Flavin always refused to attach any symbolic or transcendent significance to his works. His simplified formal vocabulary can be related to the work of contemporaries such as Carl Andre, Walter De Maria, and Donald Judd, in its reduction of formal devices, emphasis on serial and rational rather than gestural forms, and focus on the phenomenological presence of the works rather than their narrative implications. The systematic repetition of form culminates in *untitled*, a large-scale barrier in red and blue light (the first version of which was made for Judd's loft on Spring Street, New York). Flavin had invented the "barrier" in 1966 as a freestanding series of fixtures that physically block a passageway or a segment of a space with light.

Flavin often proclaimed respect for the work of pioneering abstract artists, from Constantin Brancusi to the innovators of the Russian avant-garde. He was particularly interested in Vladimir Tatlin, to whom he dedicated his most sustained series of works, "monuments" for V. Tatlin, a myriad of variations of two-, four-, six-, and eight-foot fixtures. The zigzag wall arrangement, which the artist designed, allows for individual consideration of each work and the

full series at the same time. The invocation of Tatlin illuminates both formal inventions in Flavin's work and its context within the history of art. Tatlin's art epitomized the utopian revolutionary spirit of the avant-garde. Flavin's monuments reference Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1920), the planned but unrealized spiral tower. Yet as Flavin noted, he always used "monuments" in quotes to emphasize the irony of temporary monuments such as his fluorescent light sculptures, whose parts have a limited life span and need to be replaced regularly. He used his humorous historical reference to Tatlin precisely to separate his work from the kind of symbolic significance to which Tatlin aspired. At the same time, though, he clearly revered Tatlin as a tragic human individual, and his "frustrated, insistent attitude to attempt to combine artistry and engineering." Flavin's use of commercial light fixtures, far from a celebration of an industrial revolutionary culture as Tatlin's work was intended to be, is simply phenomenological fact, tangible and temporal.

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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 November 1996 in Riverhead, New York.

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| 1. “monument” 1 for V. Tatlin, 1964
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 3/5
Dia Art Foundation | 9. “monument” for V. Tatlin XI, 1964
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 3/5
Dia Art Foundation | 16. “monument” for V. Tatlin, 1969
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation |
| 2. “monument” XI for V. Tatlin, 1964
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation | 10. “monument” for V. Tatlin, 1966
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation | 17. “monument” for V. Tatlin, 1969
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation |
| 3. “monument” for V. Tatlin VI, 1964
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 3/5
Dia Art Foundation | 11. “monument” for V. Tatlin,
1966–69
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation | 18. “monument” for V. Tatlin, 1970
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation |
| 4. “monument” 12 for V. Tatlin, 1964
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation | 12. “monument” for V. Tatlin, 1966
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation | 19. “monument” for V. Tatlin, 1981
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
exhibition copy
Collection of Stephen Flavin |
| 5. “monument” 7 for V. Tatlin, 1964
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation | 13. “monument” for V. Tatlin, 1968
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation | 20. “monument” for V. Tatlin, 1981
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 3/5
Dia Art Foundation |
| 6. “monument” for V. Tatlin, 1964
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation | 14. “monument” for V. Tatlin, 1969
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation | 21. <i>untitled</i> , 1970
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 2/3
Dia Art Foundation |
| 7. “monument” for V. Tatlin 45, 1968
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 3/5
Dia Art Foundation | 15. “monument” for V. Tatlin, 1969
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation | |
| 8. “monument” for V. Tatlin, 1964
Fluorescent light and metal fixtures;
edition 4/5
Dia Art Foundation | | |

