

“One might not think of light as a matter of fact, but I do. And it is...as plain and open and direct an art as you will ever find.”

— Dan Flavin



American artist **Dan Flavin** (1933–1996) had a bright idea: to make art with fluorescent lights! See Flavin’s unique work at the National Gallery of Art this fall. From October 3, 2004, through January 9, 2005, forty-four light installations will be displayed in the East Building exhibition *Dan Flavin: A Retrospective*.

Dan Flavin, *the diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)*, 1963, yellow fluorescent light, Dia Art Foundation. Photo: Billy Jim, Courtesy Dia Art Foundation © Stephen Flavin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

1 Electric Light Art

Born and raised in Queens, New York, Dan Flavin doodled and drew his way through school. He became an artist by taking classes on his own, reading a lot, and getting to know artists while working as a guard and elevator operator at some of the museums in New York. He made his first notes about an “electric light art” while working at the American Museum of Natural History, and soon Flavin was constructing the works that would later make him famous.



2 Why Light? Why Not?

Flavin was kind of rebellious. Traditional materials—like paint, pastels, marble, or bronze—were not for him! And he was not alone. Along with other artists of his generation, Flavin liked ready-made materials, things he could buy at the hardware store. First, he worked with light bulbs. Then, he got into fluorescent lights, which come in ten colors: blue, green, pink, red, yellow, ultraviolet, and four kinds of white. The fixtures are sold in standard two-, four-, six-, and eight-foot straight lengths and one circular shape. With these limited colors and sizes, Flavin made many variations.

Dan Flavin, *a primary picture*, 1964, red, yellow, and blue fluorescent light, Hermes Trust, U.K., Courtesy of Francesco Pellizzi. Photo: Billy Jim, Courtesy Dia Art Foundation © Stephen Flavin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

3

It's Situational!

Flavin liked to create his art for unlikely locations. Look for his light installations to appear where you least expect them: in corners, on the floor, between walls, across rooms, and around windows and doors.

Situated against the corner of a room, *untitled (to Barnett Newman to commemorate his simple problem, red, yellow, and blue)* is made of six, eight-foot fixtures, with the lamps facing different directions. Two yellow lights face outward and form intense horizontal lines of color while vertical blue and red lights are directed away from the viewer, creating a soft glow of color around the lights' metal pans. **Look closely at the reflected light and shadows on the walls, ceiling, and floor. Does the corner disappear?**

What colors do you see? For Flavin, light was like paint. In his work, the colors of light blend in the air. As a result, the light transforms the surrounding space and architecture. That's why Flavin called his art "situational."

Dan Flavin, *untitled (to Barnett Newman to commemorate his simple problem, red, yellow, and blue)*, 1970, yellow, blue, and red fluorescent light, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Barnett & Annalee Newman Foundation, in honor of Annalee G. Newman, and the Nancy Lee and Perry Bass Fund. Photo: Billy Jim, Courtesy Dia Art Foundation © Stephen Flavin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Flavin dedicated this work to his friend and mentor, abstract artist Barnett Newman. He dedicated much of his work to friends, his beloved golden retriever Airily, and earlier artists he admired, such as Henri Matisse, Piet Mondrian, and Vladimir Tatlin.



4

On and Off Art

What happens if a work stops working? The thought of burnt-out bulbs did not deter Flavin. He did not consider his work permanent. Flavin made drawings to serve as certificates of ownership and to document the sizes, types, and colors of his light fixtures. To conserve the bulbs, museum staff turn off the lights at night.

learn more

For a schedule of public programs related to *Dan Flavin: A Retrospective* or to take an online tour of the exhibition, visit www.nga.gov/exhibitions/flavin-info.htm.

Explore the science of light and color with the new DVD *Seeing Color: Object, Light, Observer*. Individual segments focus on the physics of color, color perception and its manipulation by artists, and in-depth information about featured works of art. To find out how to borrow this free educational resource, check out www.nga.gov/education/classroom/loanfinder.

Dan Flavin: A Retrospective

National Gallery of Art,
Washington

October 3, 2004 – January 9, 2005

Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
February 25 – June 5, 2005

Museum of Contemporary Art,
Chicago

July 1 – October 30, 2005

The exhibition was organized by Dia Art Foundation, New York, in association with the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The national tour is sponsored by Altria Group.

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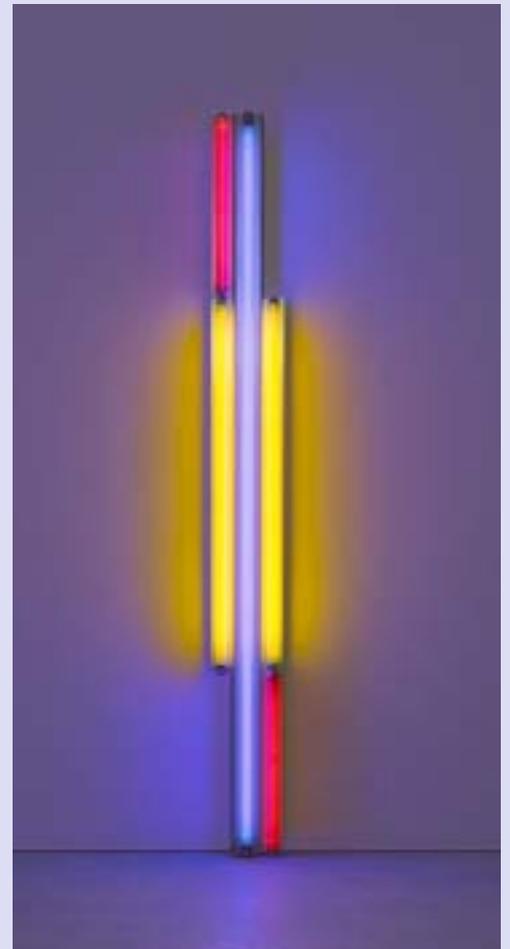
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Dan Flavin, *untitled*, 10-2-1961

Dan Flavin, *untitled (to Piet Mondrian)*, 1985, red, yellow, and blue fluorescent light, Collection Stephen Flavin. Photo: Billy Jim, Courtesy Dia Art Foundation © Stephen Flavin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Light Poetry

Flavin wrote this poem in 1961. Do you think it looks like his art? You can almost imagine it as a vibrant pole of light. It's an example of a *concrete poem*—one that takes on the shape of its subject. (For example, a concrete poem about Halloween might be written in the shape of a pumpkin, or a poem about love could be written in the shape of a heart.)

When you visit the Flavin exhibition, select a single work of art. Then, create a poem about it.

Start by writing down words that come to mind when you look at the work—they can be descriptive, like the colors of light and shapes that you see, and they can be words that express your feelings about the work. Try to include verbs, adverbs, nouns, and adjectives in your list. Use the words in the bubbles to help you get started:

Next, organize the words into phrases. Finally, arrange the phrases on a sheet of paper to form the shape of the work of art you selected. Is your poem a diagonal, vertical, or horizontal line, or did you choose a more elaborate Flavin piece as your inspiration?

