Expanding Fields: Dan Flavin in the Context of the 1960s

(or, more informally, "Searching for Dan Flavin")

Martin Patrick

There are several interrelated notions supporting the (rather ambitious sounding) title of tonight's talk: Dan Flavin emerged as a mature and now indelible figure of contemporary art in the period of the 1960s, and in a way that is not entirely beneficial to me as a critic and historian I find it very difficult to sever his connection with a specific era even though Flavin made works (and a truly staggering number of them) throughout the following decades until his death in 1996. To be glib, Flavin to me has a Sixties Look much as the Beach Boys possess a Sixties Sound. Of course just as the death knell has recently tolled for the prosaic slide projector, the fluorescent light fixture itself is becoming more and more anachronistic.

It is for example highly intriguing to me that the first major traveling retrospective (indeed really until the one that prompts my lecture here) of Flavin's work was held in Ottawa in 1969. That is to say that only five years after the initial sculptural works comprised of fluorescent tube lights were originally exhibited. This is a remarkably rapid span of time, particularly in the 1960s, for an artist to carry out the daunting trajectory from emergence to acceptance. Such early acknowledgment of Flavin's achievements reiterates how well defined and articulated his works were beyond their immediate and striking novelty in terms of the materials used and their placement within a space. (Given the context here, it also becomes interesting to note that Flavin's first solo museum exhibition was held at the Chicago MCA in 1967)

The title of my talk also refers to the seminal critical consideration of sculptural practices of the late 1960s, Rosalind Krauss's 1979 article "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." Although Krauss addresses primarily those sculptors who might be most accurately termed Post-minimalist or Post-modernist, in their expansion into the territory of landscape, as in Earthworks, Flavin—the minimalist—was one of the active generators of this intensive questioning of sculpture and its role during the 1960s. Flavin used light fixtures of the post-war industrial era to hone his single-minded insistence on a formal clarity and an atmospheric breadth in the scope of his works, which adhered to a very strict set of formal parameters, recalling the stipulations of Mondrian or other modernist titans of a much earlier time. Flavin used for example only the following hues: red, blue, green, pink, yellow, ultraviolet, and four varieties of white, as they emanated from 2, 4, 6, and 8 foot tube lights, always straight though had introduced curvilinear forms by the early 1970s.

Some background on the artist: Dan Flavin was born in Queens NY to an educator and a secretary. He attended Catholic School and reminiscenced irreverently later about its impact on him. In parochial school I was compelled to become the good student and the model child. The sisters … trained my hand in the peaceful uses of watercolor, but they did not permit much freedom for thought about what was to be drawn and washed." He disliked the lack of creativity and mundane atmosphere of school He enlisted in the Air Force and was stationed in Korea, all the while maintaining an interest in art, drawing sketching, observing. After his return he attended lectures by the reknowned Modernist painter and teacher Hans Hofmann. Although Hofmann was a major influence on such figures as Lee Krasner and Clement Greenberg, Flavin remembered "four inconclusive and disenchanting sessions".

From 1957 to 1959 he attended courses at Columbia University, including lectures by the art historian Meyer Schapiro. Flavin worked in a succession of uninteresting jobs, although he eventually worked as a guard both at the Museum of Modern Art and at the Museum of Natural History. ("While walking the floors as a guard … I crammed my uniform pockets with notes for an electric light art. "Flavin we don't pay you to be an artist," warned the custodian in charge. I agreed and quit…") Among the notable artists and critics who worked at MoMA in this period by the way were Robert Ryman, Sol LeWitt, Robert Mangold and Lucy Lippard.

His works commencing in 1961 he considered "icons" dedicated to specific significant—both personally and culturally—people and occasionally historical events. Around this time Flavin had in his words "quietly rebellious thoughts about proposing a plain physical factual painting of firm plasticity in opposition to the loose, vacuous and overwrought tactile fantasies spread about yards of cotton duck which inevitably overwhelmed and stifled the invention of their practitioner-victims—a declining generation of artists whom I could easily locate in prosperous commercial galleries." Obviously a stab at second generation and presumably second rate abstract expressionists.

Flavin's desire for a more frontal, even confrontational, concrete art echoes the desires of artists such as Courbet or Cezanne. The notion of ICON seems to offer a more than adequate mode of address. Flavin noted in 1962: "My icons differ from a Byzantine Christ held in majesty; they are dumb—anonymous and inglorious. They're as mute and undistinguished as the run of our architecture. My icons do not raise up the blessed saviour in elaborate cathedrals, they are constructed concentrations celebrating barren

rooms. They bring a limited light." Flavin's vivid description of his intentions seems to evoke Allen Ginsburg more than Saint Augustine. In the process of Flavin's journey from his Catholic upbringing to his mature artworks, he becomes more referential and less reverential. Most works are dedicated to friends, gallery owners, artists, skeptics rather than displaying any overtly spiritual leanings.

The Diagonal of May 25, 1963 was dedicated twice, first to the modernist sculptor Constantin Brancusi, and then to the art historian Robert Rosenblum. Of the sculpture, Flavin stated: "The diagonal….is the divulgation of a dynamic plastic image-object. A common lamp becomes a common industrial fetish, as utterly reproducible as ever but somehow strikingly unfamiliar now…" In citing Brancusi, Flavin commented, "both structures had a uniform elementary visual nature, but they were intended to excel their obvious visual limitations of length and apparent lack of complication." I might also interject here that the fellow Minimalist sculptor Carl Andre described one of his lateral arrangements of firebricks he titled *Equivalents* as "Brancusi's Endless Column turned on its side."

Flavin's interest in the use of structures which in their simplicity resemble the use of bands, rays, stripes of other contemporaries, or as Barnett Newman would have it, the "zip". Among the interesting artists with whom to compare Flavin in this regard would be Stella, Newman, Noland. Of course they were all considered to a degree affiliated with differing factions of the artworld: Minimalism, Color Field, and Post-painterly Abstraction.

Donald Judd, a fellow Minimalist artist and former art critic—although Judd preferred his own term "specific objects"—wrote of Flavin's artworks that, "There isn't

any difference between the light and the colour; it's one phenomenon." (Here we see a Flavin work dedicated to Judd of 1964) Judd considered that Flavin sought a particular "phenomenon" rather than a particular type of object. Thus his analysis of Flavin leads one to consider the artist's works more experiential than materialist in character.

But a work such as *The Nominal Three (to William of Ockham)* pays titular tribute to the English philosopher (who died around 1349) who "argued that reality exists solely in individual things and universals are merely abstract signs. This view led him to exclude questions such as the existence of God from intellectual knowledge, referring them to faith alone." The material thereby trumps the spiritual.

To the many works known as Monuments for the Russian Constructivist sculptor Vladimir Tatlin, Flavin had actually appended the prefix "pseudo-". Pseudo-monuments as they introduced a different sort of temporality, rather than being fixed in stone or marble, these works were "manufactured from common fluorescent light with a life of twenty one hundred hours of temporary illumination." Flavin in a 1961 poem concisely presents these upcoming works: *fluorescent poles shimmer shiver flick out dim monuments of on and off art.*

Tatlin's sculptural design or architectural model as it were remained an offputting example of a Modernist utopia which ultimately conflicted with real world politics. Tatlin's design was to house the leadership of the USSR, a magnificently weird design of steel wrapping around a multi-level core of transparent geometric units able to revolve upon the central axis, an activated visualization of aesthetic and political revolution. It was planned to be taller than the Eiffel Tower, and the amount of materials necessitated by its construction was staggering, and ultimately became one of the many reasons it

exists only as a template, model, maquette. Tatlin in turn had drawn inspiration for creating his constructivist works from the assemblages he had seen on a visit to Picasso's studio during the Cubist moment.

Flavin's colleague the sculptor and eloquent writer Robert Smithson wrote of the significance of the artist's work in an essay entitled "Entropy and the New Monuments" (worth quoting at length--Smithson always is…):

"instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future. Instead of being made of natural materials, such as marble, granite, plastic, chrome, and electric light. They are not built for the ages, but rather against the ages. They are involved in a systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds, rather than in representing the long spaces of centuries. Both past and future are placed into an objective present. This kind of time has little or no space; it is stationary and without movement, it is going nowhere, it is anti-Newtonian, as well as being instant, and is against the wheels of the time-clock. Flavin makes "instant-monuments"; parts for "Monument 7 for V.Tatlin" were purchased at the Radar Fluorescent Company. The "instant" makes Flavin's work a part of time rather than space. Time becomes a place minus motion. If time is a place, then innumerable places are possible. Flavin turns gallery-space into gallery time. Time breaks down into many times. Rather than saying, "What time is it?" we should say, "Where is the time?" "Where is Flavin's Monuments?" The objective present at time seems missing. A million years is contained in a second, yet we tend to forget the second as soon as it happens. Flavin's destruction of classical time and space is based on an entirely new notion of the structure of matter."

The installation and placement of Flavin's works is also redolent of the seemingly newfound insistence of 1960s sculptors on using the floor rather than setting their work apart from the space on cumbersome pedestals and plynths. A few other examples to better illustrate this point: Rauschenberg, Judd, LeWitt, Hesse.

Many artists were using light as a tool, subject, technique, material however one might describe it as a creative agent. Perhaps this had a lot to do with the fact the use of a material which is in turn a manifestation of electrical (or sometimes solar) energy continued this notion of the expanded work. The work thus escaped the grasp of its initial steps, so to speak we look at the activity of light not the actual surface of the fluorescent tube.

Certain artists of the period had adopted "neon", among them the Americans Smithson, Bruce Nauman, Joseph Kosuth, Peter Downsbrough, and strikingly in the context of the Italian arte povera (or "poor art") movement, Mario Merz. Other artists were using projections of film and slides, most famously Warhol's insistence (a posture at best) that he had abandoned painting for film.

Flavin drew often, making many preliminary sketches and diagrams for his artworks, as he wrote once: "When I stop to record an idea (which isn't always), I must be brief, impetuous marks, sudden summary jottings within but 3x5 inches of a ringed back notebook page, those of a kind of intimate, idiosyncratic synoptic shorthand (by now, mainly my 'style') That an extensive and impressive modular-architectural system of circular fluorescent light may become proposed thusly is just another of those terrific ironies of art. And I thrive on them." In his manner of drawing, Flavin parallels such artists as Bruce Nauman, another master of quick, spontaneous draftsmanship. Such

descriptions are of a piece with Flavin's most famous artist statement entitled "*…in Daylight or cool white: an autobiographical sketch*". From which I have extracted almost all of the quotes from the artist thus far.

Flavin's art thwarts many people's expectations—including my own. In creating his light installations he keeps the critic at bay. Sure one can speak of the prosaic materials, structural organization, and their aesthetic impact, but in many ways these installation-sculptures in their very peculiar amalgam of materiality and transcendence repel and reject my accumulated arsenal of critical tools.

Today a revaluation and reassessment of Flavin's importance is undoubtedly underway, and of course the DIA foundation and its project to lavishly support and exhibit work by artists sharing Flavin's generation and aesthetic sensibility. With the opening of the new DIA foundation center in Beacon New York the Times triumphally headlined an article on the Minimalists in their Sunday magazine "The Greatest Generation" and indeed, it is striking how for some one grand narrative supplants another, as the heroic litany of Judd, Morris, Flavin, say, displaces Pollock, DeKooning, and Rothko.

Yet to my mind the reason why I am warming to the cool light of Flavin is the belief in his steadfast rigor of purpose mixed with a highly idiosyncratic view of the world, drawing upon a notion that energies manifest through light act to combat against closure and a one-dimensional approach to art and life. Flavin uses his light to better evoke the evanescent mysteriousness of the world even as his insistence on using industrially fabricated components helps maintain a sharp and poignant awareness of our living in, interacting with, and interrogating the altogether material world.