

SEEING

Don Flavin literally 'turned on' the world of modern art, using ordinary fluorescent light bulbs to create stunning pieces of art.

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expressions

THE LIGHT

Modern art. You either get it or you don't. Vague splashes and daubs of paint; mind-boggling swirling images; everyday household objects — can these be art?

Asked if a domestic fluorescent light bulb could be art, you would most probably answer 'no'.

But only if you had never seen Don Flavin's work. And you would have to see his work up close — and turned on. A photo would not do; it simply cannot capture the surprising intensity and beauty of Flavin's lights. See his pieces and any modern art sceptic could not fail to be enthralled. How could something so simple produce such a stunning effect?

LET THERE BE LIGHT

One of the most innovative artists of the late 20th century, Flavin first emerged on the New York art scene in the early 1960s. Along with Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and others, he proposed a new art of radically reduced forms and industrial materials which soon became known as 'minimalism' — a word Flavin himself loathed.

Flavin took ordinary, mass-produced, commercially available fluorescent lights (close up you can read '20 watts - made in the USA') and turned them into unexpected but highly effective art forms. Using basic and what would



appear to be limited materials — mainly two, four, six and eight-foot bulbs in only 10 colours — Flavin created an extraordinarily rich and varied body of work.

A pioneer of installation or 'situational' art, as Flavin called it, he responded directly to the architecture of spaces in which he worked, and used his lights as 'structural proposals' which integrated real materials with a particular space. Some were created for corners, others for corridors and some were intended as dividers, or 'barriers' as Flavin described them. "I knew the actual space of a room could be broken down and played with, by planting illusions of real light, electric light, at crucial junctures in the room's composition," he said.

Creating an exhibition of Flavin's work poses many challenges as each piece needs to

be sited in the appropriate space as originally intended by the artist himself. So the exhibition of his work now underway in Europe is a major achievement. It's the first-ever comprehensive Flavin exhibition and the first time his major large-scale works have been seen in Europe. The exhibition begins in London and goes on to Paris and Munich.

IMPACT IN SIMPLICITY

I visited London's Hayward Gallery, itself an icon of the 1960s, which has been purposely stripped back to create a striking setting for the contemplation of Flavin's work. His lights illuminate the galleries with, in his own words, "as plain and open and direct an art as you will ever find". The first piece I encounter is a huge barrier piece — a 50-ft fence-like structure which breaks the massive empty room in two. Made entirely of bright green fluorescent tubes, the lights themselves appear drained of colour and yet the surrounding space is washed with a green light. The piece is called *Untitled (to you, Heiner, with admiration and affection)*, 1973. Flavin described the dedications he made in his work as "mostly extraneous but personal. They're sentimental...a lovely incidental thing".

I'd seen photos of his work, but in this exhibition I saw the light. The monumental impact is in the simplicity itself. There is no frame; the brightness and colour spill out from the shape and create the image in the surrounding space.

Flavin's first work, a single yellow diagonal fluorescent tube, is here. He saw it as a breakthrough in his life's work, calling it "a diagonal of personal ecstasy". A simple eight-foot bulb, it appears to rest simply on the floor, yet the angle makes it appear as if it is floating while soft warm, honeylight is spread on the walls and floor.

Yellow was his starting point in terms of colour. Flavin went on to use 10 fluorescent colours in his work: yellow, pink, blue, green, red, four types of white (daylight, cool, warm and soft white) and filtered ultraviolet. He often chose ultraviolet for outdoor works, although later in his career he progressed to using it as a means of blending colour. For example, in *Untitled 1991*, he mixes ultraviolet with red, yellow and green. Set in a room

apart, these three pieces work together or separately, showing the relationship and impact of different colours.

ECLECTIC INSPIRATIONS

Playing with the viewer's changing visual perception of colour was Flavin's greatest skill, and he



Untitled (to you, Heiner, with admiration and affection), 1973

also experimented with perspective, particularly in corridor installations. In *Untitled (to Jan and Ron Greenberg)*, 1972-73, positioned in a corridor eight foot-wide and eight foot-high, the intense barrier of light from the yellow fluorescent tubes is broken only by a narrow opening which allows the bright green contrasting colour from the other side of the corridor to seep through. From one side, the green light appears turquoise because of the effect of the yellow lights while on the reverse, the intensity of the green lights appears to fade to white.

Flavin derived his inspiration from eclectic sources, including gilded religious paintings of the early Renaissance, the writings of a 14th-century English theologian, the works of a 20th-century Russian constructivist, and American glassware and crafts. One such piece inspired by glassware — *Untitled (to the "innovator" of*

Wheeling Peachblow), 1966-68 — pays tribute to a glass factory in Wheeling, West Virginia. Here high quality, mass-produced glass, with colours resembling that of Chinese Peachblow porcelain, was produced in the late 19th century. Flavin's piece is square, made with two vertical eight-foot lamps on each side facing into a corner, and single

eight-foot horizontal lamps at the top and bottom facing out. It was, he said, "intended to be beautiful, to produce the colour mix of lovely illusion, to render the wall junction above the 'fact' of the floor triangle less visible than in usual lighting".

The same cross-corner format is used to different effect in *Untitled (in honor of Harold Joachim) 3*, 1977. Here a portcullis of pink, yellow, blue and green fluorescent lights creates a dramatic effect — the pink and yellow face forward while the blue and green lights face into the corner, creating a hue of colours on the wall behind and ceiling above.

Flavin's work may be described as minimalist, but it has an enormous personal impact. It makes one question colour, shape and context. "Do I see the same colour and shape as you?" Flavin's light art exploits space, colour, shadow — and your mind's eye. ▲

factfile

WHERE?

The *Dan Flavin: A Retrospective* exhibition is touring Europe: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 9 June – 8 October 2006 Pinakothek der Moderne Munich, 15 November 2006 – 4 March 2007

WHY?

Extraordinary art that makes you question perception. The lighting is so intense that the colours blur or make you see the opposite colour. The context and positioning affect the colours and influence the image. Flavin's work is both invigorating, yet strangely calming.



WHO?

Dan Flavin (1933–1996) was born in New York City. In the mid-1950s, he served in the US Air Force and after a brief spell in Korea as an air weather meteorological technician, he returned to attend art school. He began with collages and drawings and then started experimenting with electric light in 1961. His first solo exhibition entirely in fluorescent light was held at the Green Gallery in New York in 1964. His recognition soon spread to Europe and beyond.

WHAT?

Mass-produced fluorescent tubes form the basis of his legacy to the art world. Among his important large-scale installations was his project to light the entire rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, following its restoration and reopening in 1992. Three of his most ambitious installations were not completed until after his death, including the lighting of a 1920s Catholic church in Milan.