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DAN FLAVIN

Series and Progressions

November 5 – December 19, 2009

Opening reception: Thursday, November 5, 6 - 8 pm



David Zwirner is pleased to present *Dan Flavin: Series and Progressions*, the first exhibition of the artist's work at the gallery since having announced its representation of the Estate of Dan Flavin.

From 1963, when he conceived *the diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)*, a single gold, fluorescent lamp that hangs on a diagonal on the wall—a work which marks the artist's first use of fluorescent light alone, until his death in 1996, Flavin produced a singularly consistent and prodigious body of work that utilized commercially-available fluorescent lamps to create installations of light and color.

Curated by Tiffany Bell, this exhibition will examine Flavin's use of progressions and serial structures, ideas that were central to the artist's practice throughout his career. Flavin has been credited with being "one of the first artists to make use of a basically progressional procedure,"¹ and the systematic arrangement of color and light fixtures was an aspect of his work that not only led to it being characterized as Minimal art but which moreover influenced Conceptual artistic practices.

On view will be *the nominal three (to William of Ockham)*, 1963, an installation that was of seminal importance to the artist's body of work, in that it was the first work by Flavin to explore a systematic procedure. Here, Flavin has extended the primary unit of fluorescent light into a serial, additive system that consists of six fluorescent lamps (in three vertical sets, grouped as one, two, and three lamps). As Michael Govan explains, *the*

nominal three "is at the crux of Flavin's emerging practice. The vertically-oriented single fixture in white, known as one [according to a drawing by the artist], must have been considered a reduction to the simplest of formulations. Yet Flavin's final resolution involved three sets of lights, a series rather than a consolidated whole, which realized the possibilities implicit in the first diagonal—that it could be extended endlessly.... *the nominal three* was not a fixed composition, but rather a concept—whose premise had enormous implications for a form of art that could be drawn out from an idea."² The work is dedicated to the Medieval English theologian and philosopher known for expounding the methodological principle ("Ockham's Razor") of forming a hypothesis based on the most concise means possible.

Flavin would continue to explore themes of seriality in a number of key works, including his "barriers," which literally extend the notion of potentially endless repeatability into the exhibition space. The exhibition will include *untitled (to Helga and Carlo, with respect and affection)*, 1974, a work configured in a modular sequence of square units that dramatically bathes the surrounding space in blue light. Here, the artist has constructed a fence-like structure of fluorescent lamps that cuts across the length of a room and disrupts the surrounding architecture. Part of a series of four related "barriers" (created in blue, pink, yellow, and green), this work has not been exhibited since it was first on view in 1975 in a solo presentation of Flavin's work at the Kunsthalle Basel (*fünf Installationen in fluoreszierendem Licht von Dan Flavin*); the dedication is to Carlo Huber, who was the director of the Kunsthalle Basel, and his wife Helga.

Filling one of the galleries at David Zwirner (the 519 West 19th Street space) will be a large-scale work that Flavin originally created for his first solo museum exhibition. In 1967, the artist devised an arithmetically expanding system of 8-foot lamps that were placed vertically along the available gallery walls of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Titled *alternating pink and "gold,"* the installation was comprised of alternating units of pink and gold fluorescent light, installed at progressively larger intervals from one another, beginning at the center of each wall: two lamps (one pink, one yellow) were placed at the mid-point of each wall; then single lamps of alternating colors were placed on both sides of the pair, spaced at intervals of 2 feet, 4 feet, 6 feet, etc. – as many times as space allowed.

¹ Mel Bochner, "Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism," in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968; reprinted 1995), p. 99.

² Michael Govan, "Irony and Light," in *Dan Flavin: The Complete Lights 1961 – 1996* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, in association with Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 37-38. Govan goes on to explain how artist "Sol LeWitt saw the *nominal three* as a key to his own evolving ideas about series and systems, which formed the core of his brand of Conceptual art."

The recreation at David Zwirner presents one of the earliest examples of installation art: encompassing all available walls of the gallery, *alternating pink and "gold"* produces an immersive, site-situational environment of light and color.³

Also on view will be the nine works from 1968 that belong to a series titled *two primary series and one secondary*. Comprised of three sets of three works (one set in red and yellow fluorescent light; the second in red and blue; and the third in red and green), each set is composed of a cumulative system of vertical lamps. While they each stand alone as individual works, these constructions demonstrate Flavin's interest in serial and permutational configurations. This series was first shown in its entirety at Galerie Heiner Friedrich, Munich in 1968, and a complete group of all nine works is in the collection of the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main.

Flavin employed systematic compositions throughout his career, and the exhibition will include a group of late works from 1990 that project a sequential color arrangement into space: *untitled (for John Heartfield) 3a-d* forms a series of four individual works. While each of these works are arranged in the same construction of vertical and perpendicular lamps, they are distinctly organized in terms of a progression defined by the artist's employment of color.

On the occasion of the exhibition, the gallery will publish an extensive monograph devoted to the artist's work in collaboration with Steidl, Göttingen. The publication will contain rare archival documentation and new scholarship on the artist by contributors that include Tiffany Bell and will be available in spring 2010.

Dan Flavin's (1933-1996) first solo exhibitions were held at the Judson Gallery in 1961 and the Green Gallery in 1964, both in New York. His first European exhibition was in 1966 at Galerie Rudolf Zwirner in Cologne, Germany; and in 1969, the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, organized his first major museum retrospective. His work was included in a number of key early exhibitions of Minimal art in the 1960s, among them *Black, White, and Gray* (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, 1964); *Primary Structures* (The Jewish Museum, New York, 1966); and *Minimal Art* (Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, 1968). Flavin's work would continue to be presented internationally over the course of the pursuant decades, at such venues as the Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri (1973); Kunsthalle Basel, Basel; Museum Boymans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (both 1975); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1986); and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1992), among others.

A major museum retrospective devoted to Flavin's work was recently organized, in cooperation with the Estate of Dan Flavin, by the Dia Art Foundation in association with the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., where it was first on view in 2004. The exhibition traveled from 2005 to 2007 to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Hayward Gallery, London; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris; Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles. This first comprehensive, posthumous retrospective of the artist's work was the culmination of a research effort that included the publication of the catalogue raisonné of Flavin's work authored by Tiffany Bell.

Flavin's work is included in major museum collections, and was most recently on view at the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in St. Louis, Missouri, in the 2008 solo exhibition, *Dan Flavin: Constructed Light*.

A major permanent installation of the artist's work can be found in Marfa, Texas. This large-scale work in colored fluorescent light is installed in six buildings at the Chinati Foundation. Initiated in the early 1980s, the final plans were not completed until 1996, and the work was inaugurated in October 2000. Another long-term installation can be seen in Bridgehampton, New York, where in 1983 Flavin began renovating a former firehouse and church to permanently house several of his works and to serve as an exhibition space and printmaking facility for local artists. The building was named the Dan Flavin Art Institute, and is maintained by the Dia Art Foundation.

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Dan Flavin. *untitled (to Helga and Carlo, with respect and affection)*, 1974. Blue fluorescent light. Dimensions variable (modular units, each made with two 4-foot (122 cm) vertical fixtures and three 4-foot (122 cm) horizontal fixtures) © 2009 Stephen Flavin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; courtesy of David Zwirner, New York.

³ Flavin disliked the term "installation art," preferring instead to call this kind of work "site-situational."

Dan Flavin. *alternating pink and "gold,"* 1967

Statement

Friends, when as its artist I write about my proposal for fluorescent light, I develop a continuity of suggestive speculation. But, please understand that I do not wish to enforce conclusions against your individual participation with it, that would be as abusive as so much premature and presumptuous corrective art criticism. At best, I can advise inconsistently; certainly feel uninhibitedly qualified off on your own intelligence, as I had to be similarly, diagramming this appropriately obvious order.

Since the same confronting vertical pattern of alternating colored light for all walls is so apparent, it need not be discussed, except to indicate the variety that was deliberately sought from the varying lengths of each wall to be involved in installation. A relieving difference for me, but simple, discrete fixture placement adapted to coincide with similar structurally restrained aspects of the entire interior space is opposed by deploying the alternations of gaudy pink and gold. Then, I conclude that our peculiar informative gain with the exposition is the concrete delight of a vastly felt illuminated paradox.

Thank you,

Dan Flavin
December 6, 1967

(This statement was originally published in the exhibition catalogue that accompanied this installation when it was first on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago in *Dan Flavin: alternating pink and "gold,"* December 9, 1967-January 14, 1968, Flavin's first solo museum exhibition.)