

# **The Eclipse of Painting: Dan Flavin and Light as Medium**

By Amy Sedivi

## **I. Introduction**

Throughout history, light was often a central element in art, particularly in works by such painters as Vermeer, Caravaggio, and Monet. These artists, however, depicted light through mediums such as oil and watercolor, rather than through light itself. Light had rarely been used as a medium until Dan Flavin began his professional artistic career in 1961. Flavin's decision to use physical light as a medium brought a new feature to art. In this essay, I will analyze Flavin's use of pure light in terms of iconography, social history, and biography in order to prove that Flavin's use of light should be considered an innovation.

It should be noted that Flavin was not the first to produce light works; rather, Flavin simply advanced and popularized the medium. The use of physical light in art goes back to Louise-Bertrand Castel, who, in the eighteenth century, "experimented with an 'ocular harpsichord' using candles placed behind colored transparent tapes to create color combinations that correspond to the flow of music" (Bach, 324). The invention of electric light was a crucial event in the shift away from Castel's candles. This occurrence brought about the creation of the cinema, which has since evolved into its own art form, and advances in photography. The importance of light in photography was brought to the forefront by Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy, who "proclaimed light a new medium of expression, even suggesting a 'Light Academy,' which would apply aesthetic inquiry to the developing body of scientific knowledge" (Bach, 324). Moholy-Nagy's "Light Academy" opened a new door for artists interested in light's role in art and paved the way for Flavin's own light works.

The invention of the fluorescent light tube, similar to Moholy-Nagy's "Light Academy," was essential to Flavin's mature period. "Fluorescent lighting was first theorized about by the

French physicist Alexandre Becquerel in 1857 and was introduced into everyday life by General Electric in 1938” (Gilbert-Rolfe, 82). Flavin created his fluorescent tube work in 1963, less than three decades after the introduction of the tubes to the public. This suggests that Flavin clearly supported Moholy-Nagy’s desire to create art from emerging technology, such as fluorescent light, since he turned this industrial product into museum-quality work a mere twenty-five years after its development.

Flavin did not always use fluorescent light tubes. He originally studied painting and drawing at Columbia University. In 1961, he began to create “icons,” which were essentially a series of colored, box-like forms surrounded by electric light bulbs. *Icon V (Coran’s Broadway Flesh)* (1962, Private Collection, New York), perhaps Flavin’s most popular icon, is merely a red box with seven light bulbs lined up on each of the square’s four sides. These icons, for multiple reasons, such as the connotation of the term “icon” and the use of light and color, were considered “symbolically loaded” and “expressionistically romantic” (Potts, 1). Flavin departed from these icons in 1963 with his creation of *the diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)* (Dia Art Foundation), which consisted solely of pure golden light from a slanted fluorescent tube placed directly on the wall. This work, according to many scholars, marked Flavin’s entrance into minimalism.

## **II. Symbolism**

Despite the categorization of Flavin as a minimalist, I will argue through the use of iconographical and biographical method that many themes such as mortality and spirituality can be found in Flavin’s work. Flavin’s use of light portrayed specific themes in a novel manner, due

to light's dual position as both a medium and a symbol itself. In an interview with Phyllis Tuchman in 1972, Flavin stated, in reference to his early icons, "those constructions are just so much less" (192). Flavin does not specify what is implied by the phrase "so much less," but it could easily be assumed that he realizes that his fluorescent works do produce plentiful amounts of symbolism, but in a more innovative method than that of his icons.

In Flavin's fluorescent tubes, content can be found through the medium itself. The most apparent theme is that of mortality, which is conveyed through the ephemeral quality of electric light. His works can easily be considered fleeting and "anti-monumental not because they may eventually burn out but also because they can be turned on and off at will" (Bell, 114). This quality is reminiscent of a poem written by Flavin featured in the Ottawa 1969 retrospective that reads: "fluorescent/poles/shimmer/flick/out/dim/monuments/of/on/and/off/art" (cited in Potts, 11). "On and off art" relates to Flavin's light tubes and can just as easily be equated to the ability to turn electric light on and off as to the human process of birth and death. This metaphor is enhanced by the fact that the production of fluorescent light tubes "are controlled by marketing, not by the exigencies of an artwork, [and] there is no guarantee that the lamps and fixtures will continue to be produced" (Bell, 112). Thus, while the tubes in Flavin's work may continue to be replaced, there will certainly come a time when this can no longer occur; this is highly symbolic of death.

Spirituality is almost as apparent in Flavin's work as the theme of mortality. Despite his Catholic upbringing and brief education at a seminary, Flavin often claimed that there was no religious aspect to his art. This is contrary to the direct association between light and spirituality, which has been made for centuries. Caravaggio, for example, would often highlight religious scenes by creating a sharp contrast between light and dark. For Flavin to claim that he did not

intend any religious symbolism with his fluorescent tubes seems absurd, especially upon reading his autobiographical sketch entitled “...in daylight or cool white.” In this autobiography, he states: “In time, I grew curiously fond of the solemn high funeral mass, which was so consummately rich in candlelight, music, chant, vestments, processions and incense” (189). It is notable that the first aspect of the mass that Flavin recalls from his childhood is the candlelight. This could imply that a relation between light and religion was rooted in Flavin’s unconscious mind. Thus, a studied viewer could easily associate Flavin’s light works with religious symbolism.

On July 13, 1982, in an interview with art historian Tiffany Bell, Flavin said the following:

In the past, you can read, I was against spiritual and psychological outlooks on art. And I guess I skirted symbolic usages from time to time... But you know, I was young and isolated and somewhat romantic too. You do these things. I’m not saying there wasn’t symbolic reference there. That’s what I am saying, there is.

But sometimes the literature got to be a burden (196).

This makes it clear that, despite past objections to doing so, Flavin intended for viewers to read a level of symbolism, particularly spiritual symbolism, in his art. He simply did not admit it to himself or the public until later in life. His reluctance to acknowledge a spiritual reading of his art makes it apparent that these works were highly personal and related to his religious upbringing. It is possible that he felt too vulnerable about this spiritual aspect to discuss it early in life.

### **III. Modern Technological Fetishes**

Flavin's use of light as a medium was not just innovative in terms of symbolism. It also added a technological feature to art and thus highlighted scientific progress. Flavin often described his works as "modern technological fetishes" (cited in Foster, 139). Despite this, Flavin supposedly "was contemptuous of 'technological' art, which in 1967... he dismissed as so many 'concoctions of theatrical ritual, of easy, mindless, sensorial abuse'" (Foster, 144). It remains, however, that Flavin's work was truly fitting for an era of technological innovation, with the introduction of the fluorescent light tube just a few decades beforehand and a number of other inventions arising at the time. Flavin even associated his work to other artists who appreciated scientific features in art. He claims that "*monument*" *7 for V. Tatlin* (1964, Dia Art Foundation) is a work that "memorializes Vladimir Tatlin, the great revolutionary, who dreamed of art as science. It stands, a vibrantly aspiring order, in lieu of his last glider, which never left the ground" (cited in Potts, 9). Flavin's contempt for technological art is questionable considering his appreciation for Tatlin's ideas of "art as science."

#### **IV. Ready-mades**

Flavin's "modern technological fetishes," could also be considered an innovation of the ready-made. The use of fluorescent tubes, which are mere industrial objects, calls to mind the ready-mades of Dada artist Marcel Duchamp. Similar to Duchamp, Flavin used a specific, unchanged object that he chose, rather than created himself. Fluorescent light tubes were already a familiar object at the time Flavin began to use them, considering that they had been on the market for twenty-five years, as of 1963. Flavin, however, changed ready-mades because, unlike Duchamp, he used a familiar object to create a phenomenon separate from that object. Flavin's works are more than just the tubes themselves. His art is both the tube and the colored light

sprawling across the wall; it is the interaction of the light with the room, the way in which light is mixed, and the shadows in the corners. With a Flavin, “the viewers are held by a tension between the material object,” which can be considered the ready-made, “and the immaterial light,” which is the phenomenon of Flavin’s work (Foster, 134). Both of these aspects of Flavin’s work are central to the experience and it is the addition of this interactive phenomenon that causes these fluorescent tubes to be a different type of ready-made.

It could be argued that the tube itself should not be regarded as a part of Flavin’s work. Many scholars insist that the object, meaning the fluorescent tube, is actually “dissolved by the light it generates,” (Gilbert-Rolfe, 88). Flavin himself once said, in reference to *pink out of a corner (to Jasper Johns)* (1963, The Museum of Modern Art, New York), an “eight-foot fluorescent light pressed into a vertical corner... can entirely eliminate the definite structure” (cited in Foster, 142). The elimination of the specific object separates it from the ready-made. This essentially puts Flavin’s light works in new genre, which suggests that Flavin’s light works added another feature to the art world. Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917, destroyed), unlike Flavin’s artwork, is solely about the choice of the object, the conceptualization. It was meant to challenge the art world. Flavin’s work adds to this. It is about both the conceptualization of the work and the interactive phenomenon that takes place upon viewing. His work takes into account both the thought process involved in the creation of the work and the eventual interaction between the work and its viewers. Thus, instead of following Duchamp’s tradition of the ready-made, Flavin has branched away from the ready-made by showing innovation with specific objects. This, it could be argued, has added another feature to the art world.

## **V. Situations and Relationships**

In 1969, minimalist artist Donald Judd wrote, “I want a particular, definite *object*... I think Flavin wants... a particular *phenomenon*” (cited in Foster, 134). Flavin’s desire for a “phenomenon” once again changes to the art world by broadening art’s intention. With most painting and sculpture, a viewer would simply appreciate the static image. The use of light as a medium causes Flavin’s art to be anything but static. With Flavin’s light works, spectators observe an action. Light, of course, is constantly moving. In addition, a spectator standing or walking in front of one of Flavin’s works would cast shadows that would change the surrounding area. If a Flavin were displayed in a windowed room, the light emitted from the art would play and mix with the natural sunlight streaming in from the outdoors. Indeed, Flavin’s work could almost be considered situational. This does appear to be Flavin’s intent. The artist once claimed, “I intend rapid comprehensions – get in and get out situations. I think that one has explicit moments with such particular light-space” (cited in Foster, 143). Clearly, Flavin meant for his works to foster aesthetic discoveries. The potential for interactive situations with Flavin’s light tubes is a novel feature that separates this light work from the basic observational activity that often occurs with paintings and sculptures.

Due to the interactive situations that come from the use of light as a medium, a new relationship between the artwork and the viewer is formed. It is impossible to achieve this new relationship with another medium, because the effects of Flavin’s art are specific to light. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe writes:

Fluorescent is too bright to stare at for long. Our eyes can’t move rapidly enough to keep up with the intensity of electric light. Our relationship to the work has to be of a different kind from the one we might have with [a] painting (let alone a

colored sculpture) and the difference has to do with the speed as well as the intensity – in practice they are inseparable – of electricity (87).

The use of electricity potentially influences the span of time a viewer will observe a light work. The viewer will be unable to look directly at a light work for an extended period of time, without damage to his or her vision, due to the work's luminescence. This interaction could be considered a limiting factor of the medium of light. I argue, however, that this supposed limiting factor has simply added a new aspect to art. With a work by Flavin, I argue that the art is partly in control of the observatory situation, in that the intensity of the work might dissuade a viewer from staring directly at one of Flavin's light tubes. The work, in essence, directs the spectator. As a result, there is a tension between the viewer and the work of art. This tension can not be found easily in works of painting and sculpture, considering that, with most works, one may observe the art for as long as they deem necessary. In addition, the brief viewing period strengthens the ephemeral quality of the work by linking the observation time with the symbolism of mortality that could be associated with Flavin's light works.

There is also a strong interaction between Flavin's fluorescent artworks and the work's environment. The interaction that results between a light work and the surrounding area can not be achieved with painted or sculpted works. Flavin's works affect everything else in the room, whether it is the wall on which it hangs, the floor below it, a bench ten feet away, or a painting or sculpture nearby. Surely, it could be assumed that many artists would prefer that their own work not be placed next to a Flavin, as the light emitted from a Flavin tube work will always cast a glow that will interact with and change their artwork. Yet, this interaction is essential to viewing any light work. With a Flavin, "what we look at... is what fluorescent light is doing to the space. It is the light it casts – in which we are likely to be standing – that defines, or, more precisely,

blurs the work's relationship to wall, room, and viewer" (Gilbert-Rolfe, 87). It is this new way of looking at art, namely, the inclusion of the surrounding environment, that proves that Flavin's work should be considered an innovative feature in the art world.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Donald Judd once said, "It looks like painting is finished" (cited in Flavin, 189). While painting never died, it could be argued that painting was "eclipsed" during the 1960s with the rise of Dan Flavin and other minimalist artists. During this period, traditional painters stepped away from the forefront as artists began to experiment with a number of innovative new materials. Flavin's fluorescent light tubes were just one new feature of the period, and, I argue, a feature of great importance. His use of light as a medium added to the art world in terms of the method of portraying symbolism and society's scientific advancement, as well as the creation of a more interactive relationship with the viewer and the environment. Since Flavin's creation of *the diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)*, a number of other artists began to use light to create their artwork, rather than such mediums as oil paint, plaster, watercolors, and wood; they have both mimicked and expanded on Flavin's innovative work. Contemporary artists such as James Turrell and Olafur Eliasson use a number of different lighting methods, not specifically fluorescent light, in their art. Jenny Holzer, a conceptual artist, mainly works with texts. In the majority of her works, however, she embraces the use of light projections in order to convey her text. Spencer Finch, an up and coming artist, currently has a retrospective at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. He is notable for using a number of different mediums, including fluorescent light tubes. These artists, among many others, added novel aspects to Flavin's already innovative medium. As Flavin said in his interview with Tiffany Bell,

“I think I’m one of those people who, for better or worse, really believes in some of the simplest materials as being the best ones to think through” (195). Clearly, the medium of the fluorescent light tube allowed Flavin to brilliantly express his modern ideas.

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