

## Dan Flavin

### *untitled (for Conor Cruise O'Brien) 5c, 1990*

#### Green, red, blue, and yellow fluorescent lights

#### Edition number 1 of 5

#### Gift of Dorothy and Roy Lavine

The fluorescent light is an icon of the every-day. Despite their association with the banality of office cubicles and employee lunchrooms, Dan Flavin brought them into a new context—off ceilings and onto the walls and floors of fine art galleries. One of Minimalism's most important artists, he explored the artistic potential of fluorescent lighting for over three decades to create his own icons for the art world.

Flavin's embrace of the common lighting fixture exemplifies the Minimalist dogma; he created an immense body of work out of a mass-produced material. Begun in the 1960s, Minimalism is often characterized visually by what it physically lacks. Stark geometric forms, uniform planes of color, and limited materials were used to reject subjectivity in art, as a reaction against dramatic abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning.

Though it was never a self-proclaimed movement (and its artists often fiercely rejected being labeled), Minimalism focused on the essentials of geometric abstraction and its self-referential forms, stripped of emotion and distraction. Flavin utilized a small selection of basic forms: two-, four-, six-, and eight-foot straight tubes, and in 1972, circles. Minimalist art was mainly comprised of industrial or building materials, such as steel, fiberglass, and plywood, and were

often commercially fabricated according to the artist's specifications. For example, Robert Morris' untitled large-scale polyhedron forms were constructed from two-by-fours and gray-painted plywood.

The use of color in Minimalist art may have been restrictive, but such limitations often created bold, striking visuals. Flavin used only ten colors of lights during his career: red, blue, green, pink, yellow, ultraviolet, and four different whites. The colors of the lights bounce and blend on the walls surrounding his pieces, interacting to create unusual and surprising combinations. Also on the MIT campus, in the atrium space between MIT's new Green Center (Building 6C) and the Institute's older Buildings 4, 6, and 8, Sol LeWitt's *Bars of Colors Within Squares*, 2007 is another eye-catching example of a Minimalist color sensibility.

Flavin's fluorescent assemblages follow in the footsteps of the work of Marcel Duchamp, the revolutionary artist whose "readymades" challenged the art world as never before. His most notorious, *Fountain*, 1917, was a porcelain urinal turned on its side, signed with the pseudonym "R. Mutt" and placed on a pedestal at the New York Society of Independent Artists exhibition in New York in 1917. Though it was quickly taken down, and the original was lost or destroyed soon after, it had a powerful effect on the art world as it forced viewers to ask, "What is art?" It challenged the historical notions of what defines art: that it must use traditional materials like marble, wood, metal, charcoal on paper, or paint on canvas, that it be unique, and that it must involve a sufficient amount of craft on the artist's part. *untitled (for Conor Cruise O'Brien) 5c, 1990* defies the same perceptions, and lets the standard, commercially sold, fluorescent tube stand on its own as high art through its new context in an art environment.

At times Flavin's works hang traditionally on walls like paintings, or section off corners of rooms, allowing the light to interact with the angles. They also use windows, doorways, and hallways, or become gridded freestanding structures. Each individual piece can be considered an installation, as the light can fill an entire space, coloring the walls, floors, and ceilings as though with paint.

Jessica MacMillan, List Visual Arts Center intern

#### About the Artist

Dan Flavin was born in 1933 in New York City, where, after stints in seminary school and the Air Force, he attended Columbia University to study art history, graduating in 1959. In 1964, with a recommendation from Marcel Duchamp, Flavin received an award from the William & Norma Copley Foundation, Chicago, the same year of his first solo exhibition at the Green Gallery in New York. Major exhibitions of Flavin's work include those at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago in 1967, the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa in 1969 and the Staatliche Kunsthalle, Baden-Baden in 1989. In 1994, a major retrospective of Flavin's work was shown at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., shortly before the artist's death in Riverhead, New York, on November 29, 1996. His work is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, and the Tate Gallery, London.

**About the MIT Permanent Art Collection:**

The List Visual Arts Center oversees MIT's Permanent Collection, which is comprised of more than 1,500 artworks in painting, sculpture, photography, and print media. This collection is designed to enhance the visual environment of the campus, to increase the aesthetic awareness of both the MIT community and the larger public, and to support teaching and research in the visual arts.

The collections distinguish themselves from conventional museum holdings not only by the focus on contemporary art, but also by public visibility. The Institute itself has become the museum, with works of art sited either outdoors or in offices, lobbies, libraries, corridors, and conference rooms, thus becoming integrated into daily life and working situations of those affiliated with MIT and of MIT's many visitor populations — visiting scholars, students, parents, alumni, and friends.

In 1951, the Permanent Collection was established with a gift from the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey of 26 paintings and drawings. As there was no museum or gallery space for the permanent display of artworks, the decision was made to exhibit the works throughout the campus, in offices, hallways, and other public spaces, setting the precedent for the way the Permanent Collection is sited today.

**For more information about MIT's Public Art Collection and the List Visual Arts Center, please visit:**

**<http://listart.mit.edu>**

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