FOCUS: DAN FLAVIN

There isn’t any difference between the light and the color; it’s one phenomenon.  

Donald Judd

Isn’t white that which does away with darkness?  

Ludwig Wittgenstein

After struggling for years to find his medium, Dan Flavin (American, b. New York, 1933–1996), was liberated by fluorescent light. It was a paradoxical choice: commonplace commercial fixtures would be reconfigured into artworks that both suppressed the artist’s hand and, through this absence, magnified his presence.

Once transformed into finished pieces, this anonymous medium often received a personal dedication. Carlo Huber, then director of the Kunsthalle Basel, and his wife, Helga, were thanked with untitled (to Helga and Carlo, with respect and affection), 1974, a magnificent example from Flavin’s “barrier” series. Although Flavin disliked thinking of his work as sculpture, in this piece the hardware (bulbs, ballasts, frames) does double duty, both supporting the physical mechanism that makes possible the flow of light and aggressively bifurcating the gallery space into passable and impassable sectors.

At the time Flavin adopted them as the building blocks of his work, fluorescents were thought of as utilitarian, modern, and not particularly easy on the eyes—most readily employed to provide cheap, unforgiving illumination in industrial, or at least commercial, environments. To turn them into the very stuff of art was a radical gesture.

And yet Flavin’s work doesn’t shrink from aesthetics. A master colorist, he experimented relentlessly with the way commercially available hues combined with specific geometries to create new perceptions of color and space.

The Hirshhorn’s barrier piece employs only one color and yet it is perceived most intensely the farther you are from its source. Seen from the Second Level escalator lobby, the blue of untitled is intensified by contrast with the everyday whiteness of Flavin’s “monument” for V. Tatlin, 1967. Move closer and untitled alters the colors you bring into the room: medium green can turn to light brown, gray to dull lavender, bright yellow to pale orange. Black stays black and blue, of course, stays blue, but gaze at the lights themselves and the blue seems to be leached out of the tubes. Stare long enough and they become almost white, although a kind of white that remains somehow dark, even at the lamps’ combined 6600 watts.

It was Flavin’s genius to discover and explore the full range of play between opacity and softness, materiality and energy. And it is the unique achievement of his barriers to project that dynamic forcefully into architectural space, linking light and matter in an encompassing, unresolvable tension.

Glenn Dixon
Web Content Producer and Editor


Dan Flavin, untitled (to Helga and Carlo, with respect and affection), 1974. © 2011 Stephen Flavin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Cathy Carver