

# 1 Electric Light Art

American artist Dan Flavin had a bright idea: to make art with fluorescent lights!

Born and raised in Queens, New York, Dan Flavin (1933–1996) doodled and drew his way through school. He became an artist by taking art classes, reading a lot, and getting to know artists while he worked as a guard and elevator operator at museums in New York City. He made his first notes about “electric light art” while employed at the American Museum of Natural History. Flavin was soon constructing the works that would later make him famous.



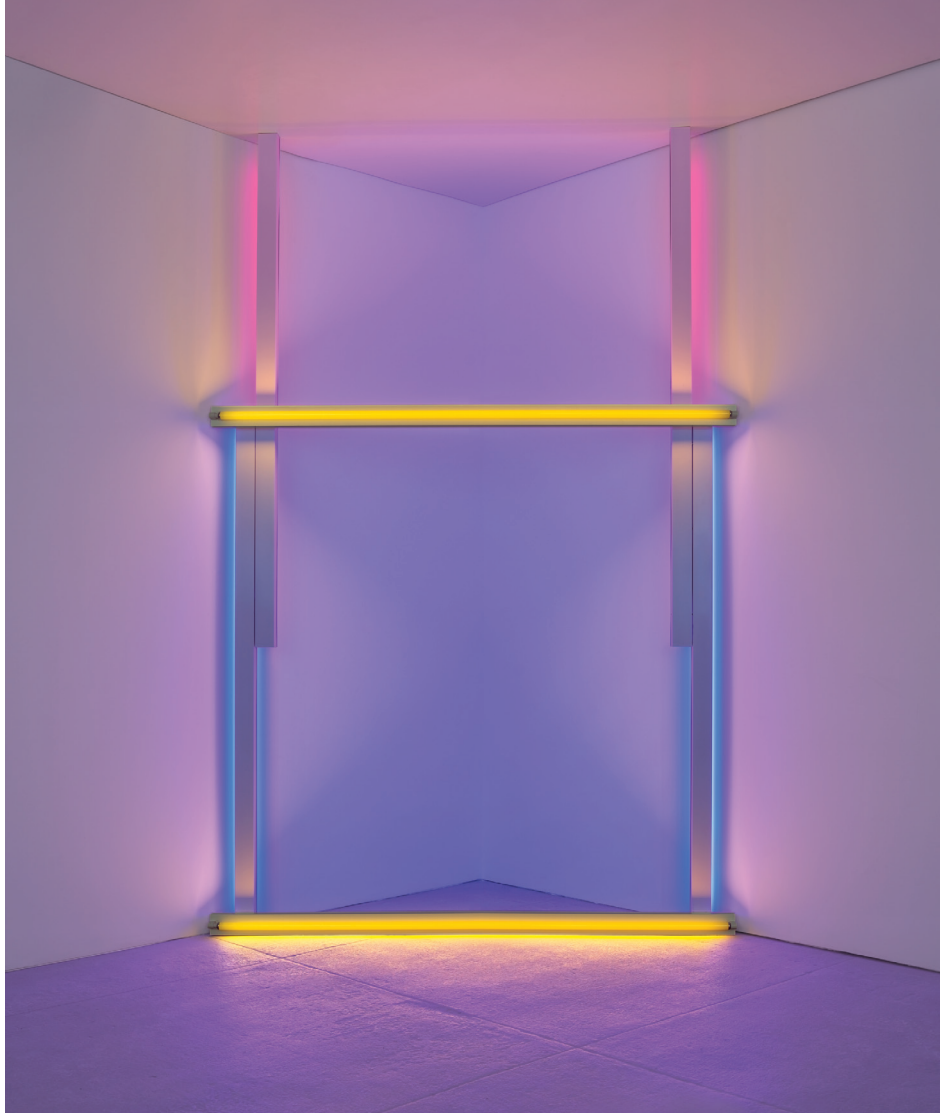
above: Dan Flavin, *a primary picture*, 1964, red, yellow, and blue fluorescent light, Hermes Trust, U.K., Courtesy of Francesco Pellizzi (photo: Billy Jim), Courtesy Dia Art Foundation © Stephen Flavin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

right: Dan Flavin installing *fluorescent light, etc. from dan flavin*, at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1969. Photo courtesy of Stephen Flavin © 2013 Stephen Flavin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; courtesy of David Zwirner, New York / London.

## 2 Why Light? Why Not?

Traditional materials, such as paint, pastels, marble, or bronze, did not interest Flavin. Along with other artists of his generation, Flavin preferred to create art with ready-made materials that he could buy at the hardware store. First, he worked with light bulbs. Next, he experimented with fluorescent lights, and restricted his palette to ten colors: blue, green, pink, red, yellow, ultraviolet, and four kinds of white. The tubes were made in standard straight lengths of two, four, six, and eight feet, plus one circular shape. Flavin managed to make many variations with these limited colors and sizes.

**“One might not think of light as a matter of fact, but I do. And it is . . . as plain and open and direct an art as you will ever find.” Dan Flavin**



Dan Flavin, *untitled (to Barnett Newman to commemorate his simple problem, red, yellow, and blue)*, 1970, red, yellow, and blue fluorescent light, National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Barnett & Annalee Newman Foundation, in honor of Annalee G. Newman, and the Nancy Lee and Perry Bass Fund (photo: Billy Jim), Courtesy Dia Art Foundation © Stephen Flavin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Flavin dedicated this work to his friend and mentor, abstract artist Barnett Newman. He dedicated much of his work to friends, his beloved golden retriever Airily, and earlier artists he admired, such as Henri Matisse, Piet Mondrian, and Vladimir Tatlin.

# 3

## It's Situational!

Flavin liked to create his art for unlikely locations—in corners, on the floor, between walls, across rooms, and around windows and doors.

Created for the corner of a room, *untitled (to Barnett Newman to commemorate his simple problem, red, yellow, and blue)* is made of six fixtures, each eight feet in length, with lamps facing different directions. Two yellow lights turn outward and form intense horizontal lines of color. Vertical blue and red lights are directed away from the viewer, creating a soft glow of color around the lights' metal pans. The corner of the room seems to disappear due to the reflected light and shadows on the walls, ceiling, and floor.

For Flavin, light was like paint. In his work, the colors of light blend in the air. As a result, the light transforms the surrounding space and architecture. That's why Flavin called his art "situational."

# 4

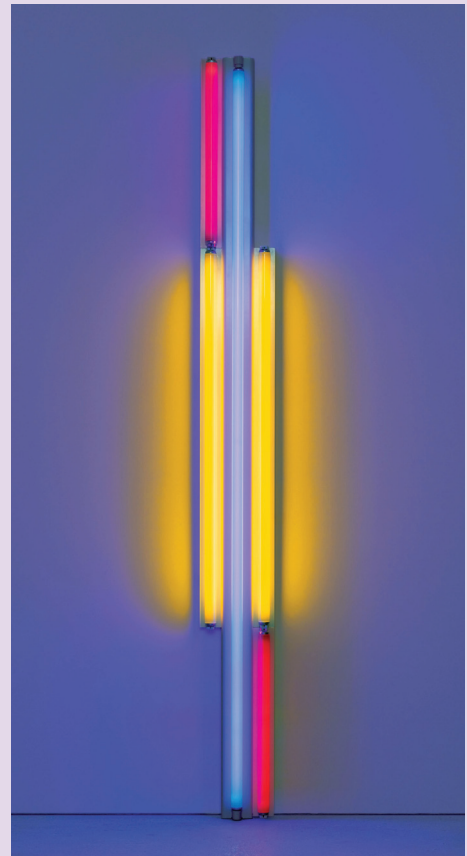
## On and Off Art

What happens if a work stops working? The thought of burnt-out bulbs did not bother Flavin. He didn't consider his work to be permanent. Flavin made diagrams of his light sculptures to serve as certificates of ownership and to document the sizes, types, and colors of his light fixtures. At the National Gallery, the museum staff turns off the lights at night to conserve the bulbs.



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## Light Poetry

Flavin wrote the poem above in 1961. Does it look like his art? You can almost imagine it as a vibrant pole of light. It's an example of a concrete poem, one that assumes the shape of its subject. A concrete poem about Halloween might be written in the shape of a pumpkin, or a poem about love could be written in the shape of a heart.

Poem by Dan Flavin, *untitled*, 10-2-1961

top right: Dan Flavin, *untitled (to Piet Mondrian)*, 1985, red, yellow, and blue fluorescent light, Collection Stephen Flavin (photo: Billy Jim), Courtesy Dia Art Foundation © Stephen Flavin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

left: Dan Flavin, *"monument" for V. Tatlin*, 1969-1970, cool white fluorescent light, National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Collectors Committee

### Create a poem about a work of art

Start by writing down words that come to mind when you look at the work. They can be descriptive, such as the colors of light and the shapes you see, or they can express your feelings about the art. Include verbs, adverbs, nouns, and adjectives in your list. Use these words to get you started:



Next, organize the words into phrases. Finally, arrange the phrases on a sheet of paper to form the shape of the work of art you selected.