

unrealized *Monument to the Third International*, 1919. Intended for the center of Moscow, Tatlin's monument as planned would have stood over 1,300 feet tall and comprised three revolving chambers dedicated to legislative and academic purposes. Though never realized, the project came to symbolize revolutionary modernism as well as the earnest, romantic, but ultimately unfulfilled ideologies that informed it.

Flavin appreciated the aesthetic of the Constructivists but did not share their utopian vision. By placing the titles of his monuments in quotation marks, the artist emphasized that he intended them to be understood ironically. Built of mass-produced fluorescent tubes that can be switched on and off, they are temporary memorials only as timeless as the light fixtures themselves. Though this tongue-in-cheek treatment refutes the idealism of the Constructivist's utterly serious endeavor, Flavin's light reliefs remain a sincere tribute to Tatlin's "frustrated, insistent attitude to attempt to combine artistry and engineering." (Flavin, "monuments" for V. Tatlin from *Dan Flavin, 1964–1982*, 1989)



Exterior of Richmond Hall

Photo: George Hixon, Houston

# THE MENIL COLLECTION

## Dan Flavin Installation at Richmond Hall



Cover photo: Haley Robertson, Houston

### THE MENIL COLLECTION

1533 Sul Ross Street  
Houston, Texas 77006  
713-525-9400  
[menil.org](http://menil.org)

### Museum Hours:

Wednesday–Sunday, 11:00 a.m.–7:00 p.m.

### Free admission

Free parking at 1515 West Alabama Street and adjacent to Richmond Hall

### Dan Flavin Installation

at Richmond Hall  
1500 Richmond Avenue

Cover: Dan Flavin, *untitled*, 1996 (detail). Pink, yellow, green, blue, and filtered UV fluorescent light and metal fixtures

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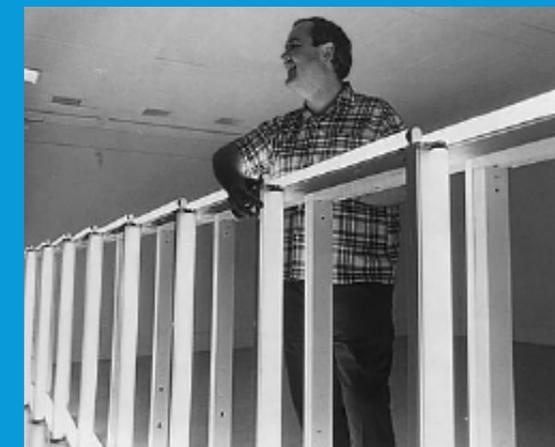
### Dan Flavin

What has art been for me? . . . I have known it (basically) as a sequence of implicit decisions to combine traditions of painting and sculpture in architecture with acts of electric light defining space. (Dan Flavin, *Artforum*, 1965)

Dan Flavin, one of the founders of Minimalism, revolutionized art in the 1960s, using light as a sculptural medium and transforming the very experience of space. Richmond Hall at the Menil Collection houses one of the artist's final works and one of his few permanent installations in the United States. Born in 1933 in New York City, Flavin became one of the most influential and innovative artists of his generation. Although he studied art history and took drawing classes at the New School for Social Research and Columbia University in New York, Flavin received little formal training as an artist. The early works that remain from the 1950s—darkened drawings that emphasize contrasts in light and shadow—suggest that these differentiations informed his earliest artistic experiments. At the end of the decade, he began incorporating found objects into small constructions, or assemblages, in the manner of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. It was not long before his concern with light entered these experiments.

In the spring of 1961, Flavin created a series of eight works, which he called "icons," containing elements of electric light playing off painted surfaces. Two years later he attached a single eight-foot, yellow fluorescent light fixture to his studio wall, calling the work *the diagonal of personal ecstasy*. One year later, he renamed the work *the diagonal of May 25, 1963*. Fluorescent light thereafter became Flavin's signature medium, in which he discovered the unexpected sensuousness and beauty of a seemingly sterile and ubiquitous material.

While it is tempting to read spiritual or symbolic meaning into light, Flavin insisted that the medium appealed to him solely because of its physical qualities. Fluorescent lamps particularly interested him, because unlike neon lighting, for example, which is customized for individual purposes, fluorescent lamps are available in a limited, preset range of lengths and colors. Flavin's decision to restrict his formal vocabulary to these few elements resulted in a rigorously simplified style predicated on the accumulation and reconfiguration of nearly identical units. By relying exclusively on an industrially produced, commercially available product as his medium, altering neither the lamps themselves nor the metal fixtures that hold them in place, Flavin eliminated any sense of content or narrative from his sculptures, along with the personal, expressive elements intrinsic



Dan Flavin, *National Gallery of Canada*, Ottawa, 1969

to the work of the Abstract Expressionists. The unadorned, impersonal qualities characteristic of work by Flavin and other artists of his generation, most notably Carl Andre and Donald Judd, defined the movement that critics named Minimalism.

Flavin, along with Andre and Judd, ardently resisted this designation. Despite their pared-down appearance, Minimalist works like Flavin's are far from simple; rather they embody a complex theoretical approach to art. Quickly grasping the potential of his medium to transform the apprehension of interior space, he wrote in *Artforum* in 1965:

Regard the light and you are fascinated—inhibited from grasping its limits at each end. While the tube itself has an actual length of eight feet, its shadow, cast by the supporting pan, has none but an illusion dissolving at its ends. . . . Realizing this, I knew that the actual space of a room could be broken down and played with by planting illusions of real light (electric light) at crucial junctures in the room's composition.

By engaging the architecture in this way, Flavin's work signaled a major shift in emphasis from the art object to the space surrounding it, and ultimately, to the viewer, who is made aware of his or her own sense of perception and participation in the act of looking. In the many room-sized installations (or "situations," as he chose to call them) created over the course of his career, Flavin pursued an ongoing meditation on the phenomenological effects of space and light. Exploring the complex relationships between the work, the site, and the viewer became the philosophical basis for not only his art but much of the installation and conceptual art of the late 1960s and 1970s.



Photo: Schlueter, Houston



Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston

Weingarten's Grocery #9,  
Richmond Avenue,  
Houston, ca. 1934

Richmond Hall exterior  
with Dan Flavin's  
*untitled*, 1996

John and Dominique de Menil were profoundly moved by Flavin's ability to create artwork of great beauty out of material available in any hardware store. They began collecting his work in 1970 and invited him to Houston two years later to contribute an original piece to an exhibition organized by the Institute for the Arts at Rice University. During the mid 1980s, Flavin works owned by the de Menils were featured in important European exhibitions of their collection. In 1996 Dominique de Menil commissioned Flavin to create a permanent, site-specific installation at Richmond Hall, the annex exhibition space on the south side of the Menil Collection campus. In November of that year, shortly before he died, Flavin completed a design for the space consisting of three separate pieces. The construction was completed posthumously by the artist's studio, and the installation stands as de Menil's final commission (Dominique de Menil died in 1997).

Built in 1930—by Houston's standards an old structure—the building was one of the early Weingarten's grocery stores in the city and later housed a series of bars including, in its last incarnation, a country-and-western dance hall. Dominique de Menil appreciated the building for its simple structure as well as its history in the life of the neighborhood. Knowing that it would likely be demolished if purchased by a

developer, the Menil Foundation acquired the property in 1985, using it initially as a storage and alternate exhibition space for the museum.

When approached to design an installation for the site, Flavin was given complete creative control over the project. Choosing not to alter the original structure, he designed three distinct pieces. On the exterior, a frieze of green fluorescent lights articulates the building's top edges along its east and west sides. Flavin used green lamps because they create the strongest and farthest-reaching light. At night, this piece illuminates the neighborhood, tying Richmond Hall to the commercial buildings surrounding it by mimicking their neon signage. The building's lobby contains a second work consisting of two sets of daylight lamps. (There are several shades of white fluorescent lamps commercially available; among them are warm white, cool white, daylight, soft white, and deluxe white.) Mounted diagonally on the foyer walls, this work relates to the angles of the walls themselves and also recalls Flavin's seminal fluorescent light sculpture *the diagonal of May 25, 1963*.

The largest and most complex of the three installations occupies the building's main interior space, an unbroken rectangular room measuring approximately 128 feet long by 50 feet wide. A dark purple line of filtered ultraviolet lamps (commonly known as blacklights) horizontally bisects each of the hall's long sides. Above and below that line, offset slightly from one another, a sequence of vertically oriented fixtures progresses the length of the building. In the two vertical rows, top and bottom, the colored tubes face opposite directions so that the light reflects off of the lamps' metal bases, incorporating the fixtures into the design. The colors

alternate in a repeating pattern of pink, yellow, green, and blue. Flavin included the blacklight as a means to blend the light from the colored lamps to create a brightness in the surrounding environment that approximates the natural light entering from the skylight above. Flavin made use of this feature, original to the building, by allowing the Texas sun to interact with the electric light of the installation. He anticipated that the effects would vary according to the season, the weather, and the time of day, introducing an element of randomness and mutability to his otherwise carefully controlled system.

Dan Flavin, *untitled*, 1996  
(detail, foreground).  
Daylight fluorescent light  
and metal fixtures



Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston



Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston

Dan Flavin, *untitled*, 1996.  
Pink, yellow, green, blue,  
and filtered UV fluorescent  
light and metal fixtures

Dan Flavin, *untitled*, 1996  
(detail, southwest corner,  
exterior of Richmond Hall).  
Green fluorescent light and  
metal fixtures with  
weatherproof housings



Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston

Dan Flavin, "monument" 1  
for V. Tatlin, 1964. Cool white  
fluorescent light and metal  
fixtures



Photo: George Hixon, Houston

## "monuments" for V. Tatlin

Thus far, I have made a considered attempt to poise silent electric light . . . in the box that is a room. This dramatic decoration has been founded in the young tradition of a plastic revolution which gripped Russian art only forty years ago. . . . "monument" 7 in cool white fluorescent light 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. (Flavin, *Dan Flavin three installations in fluorescent light*, 1973)

In the summer of 2003, the Menil converted a storage room in Richmond Hall into an exhibition space to house four earlier works by Flavin, the "monuments" for V. Tatlin, 1964–69, acquired by the Menil Foundation in 1970. Over the course of his career, Flavin made nearly fifty "monuments" dedicated to Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), one of the leaders of the Russian avant-garde art movement known as Constructivism, which briefly flourished in Moscow and St. Petersburg following the revolution of 1917. Constructivism advanced a radical Marxist philosophy that art, like science and engineering, would eventually evolve to express the needs of the working class, thereby improving the condition of society as a whole. Tatlin, like Flavin, attempted to collapse distinctions between art, design, and architecture by constructing totally abstract sculptural reliefs out of untreated, commonly available materials. The pyramidal shape and the title of Flavin's series recall Tatlin's most famous work, the