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 unrealized monuments, Flavin’s light reliefs remain a sincere tribute to Tatlin’s “situations,” an intent to combine art and engineering. “(Flavin, ‘monuments’ for V. Tatlin from Dan Flavin, 1984–1986, 1990)

Far from Flavin’s aim was the goal of Constructivists such as Tatlin to make aw ake of his or her ow n sense of perception and the world. Flavin’s light reliefs are broken down and played with by planting illusions of light defining space. (Dan Flavin, Dan Flavin Installation at Rich mond Hall, 2014)

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 rig‑

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 grasp‑

Regard the light and you are fascinated—inhibited from grasping its lim its 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.


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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 1975 and invited him to Houston two years later to contribute an original piece to an exhibition organised by the Institute for the Arts at Rice University. During the mid-1980s, Flavin worked owned by the de Menils were featured in important European exhibitions of their collection. In 1990, 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 1910—by Houston’s standard an old structure—the building was one of the early Wiegant’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 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 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 titled “monuments” for V. Tatlin.

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 silvery 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.

Thus far, I have made a considered attempt to poise silent electricity...in the box that is a room. This dramatic decimation has been founded in the young tradition of a plastic revolution which gripped Russian art forty years ago...“monument” in cool white fluorescent light memorializes Vladimir Tatlin, the great revolutionary, who dreamed of art as science. It stands, a stirringly aspiring order, in lieu of his last glider, which never left the ground. (Flavin, Dan Flavin: three installations in fluorescent light, 1975)