In the 1960s, American artist Dan Flavin (1933–1996) was one of the pioneers of minimal art—along with Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt, and Carl Andre. In different ways these artists used industrially produced and regular trade materials to create simple serial forms. Their aim was not just to destroy the illusion of the image, but also any symbolic and expressive content in the work of art. From the early 1960s Dan Flavin worked with commercial fluorescent tubes in normed dimensions and colors, creating an unmistakeably unique oeuvre that clearly distinguishes him from the other proponents of minimal art. In his work, Flavin combines their demand for simplicity and analytical precision with his own sensual charisma. By selecting light tubes as his material and using titles that mostly included dedications of his works to real people, Flavin signals that art comes closer to the everyday and consumer worlds. The forms of presentation for his works with light do follow the principles of minimalistic sobriety, but they also shine through and over it in their use of color.

Dan Flavin – Lights is the first representative overview of Flavin’s work to be shown in Austria. Beginning with the early icons, created between 1961 and 1964, this exhibition traces how Flavin moved beyond traditional art genres and forms. Designs and studies for the artworks on show help to better demonstrate the analytical clarity of Flavin’s work processes. The major works with fluorescent tubes and the later large serial installations present the artistic diversity of Flavin’s oeuvre, and also the artistic development that he was able to pursue with remarkable consistency within his use of commercially available neon tubes.

Level 4

The exhibition begins with the diagonal of May 25 (to Constantin Brancusi), a work of 1963, in which Flavin for the first time uses nothing other than a commercially available yellow neon tube, mounting it onto the wall of his studio. Its strong light blurs the boundaries between work, space, and viewer, and also confuses the dividing line between rational form and poetic appearance. Flavin: “There was no need to compose this lamp in place; it implanted itself directly, dynamically, dramatically in my workroom wall—a buoyant and relentless gaseous image which, through brilliance, betrayed presence into approximate invisibility.” Here Flavin attributes to the light of the fluorescent tube an effect similar to the aura of a Christian icon, with its interplay of material presence and immaterial golden light. In the title Flavin dedicates the golden diagonal to the Romanian artist Constantin Brâncuși (1876–1957). The latter’s major works include the nearly thirty-meter-high Endless Column (1937), a work that is seen as a model for minimalist object art because of its repetitive structure made of geometrical and symmetrical parts. For Flavin this was a decisive bridge to the modernist avantgarde: “That artificial ‘column’ was disposed as a regular formal consequence of numerous similar wood wedge-cut segments extended vertically […]. The ‘diagonal’ in its overt formal simplicity was only the installation of a dimensional or distended luminous line of a standard industrial device.” Flavin updated Brâncuși’s repetitive gesture by means
of the fluorescent tube. Together with his allusions to religious painting, he thus made use of both very rational and very emotional lines of tradition. In contrast to the demands of minimal art to avoid all symbolic content, this light work opens up a complex tension between sober clarity and a broad emotional potential—he also called this piece the diagonal of personal ecstasy. The simple fluorescent tube here also became a private “illumination” and a turning point in his oeuvre.

Even before Flavin began in 1963 to work exclusively with commercial fluorescent tubes, electric light and real lamps had played a large role in his work. For the _icons_ series he combined square image-bearing objects that were painted in monochrome and partly rubbed away on the corners with lamp bulbs and light tubes. In the _icons_ Flavin alludes to his interest in icon painting: “[This] icon had that magical preceding presence which I have tried to realize in my own icons. But my icons differ from a Byzantine Christ held in majesty; they are dumb—anonymous and inglorious.” With an almost derisive undertone, he invites his works to compete with the effect of a Christian image. He replaces the sacred significance of light with a profane illumination that reminds us of illuminated advertising and room lamps. The ironic refraction of religious light symbolism in this series of works also mirrors the artist’s self-liberation from his religious background and upbringing.

In the _icons_ Flavin refers to the reception of Christian painting in the radical abstraction of early modernism—in the 1960s, Kasimir Malevich’s _Black Square_ was seen as an “icon of modernism.” In _icon VII (via crucis)_ (1962–1964), Flavin combines a comparably strict black-and-white contrast with the Christian metaphor of the passion. The pink glow that is emitted by _icon I (the heart) (to the light of Sean McGovern which blesses everyone)_ is much softer. It is a curious personal piece devoted to a colleague of Flavin’s from the time when he worked as a museum attendant at the American Museum of Natural History. _icon II (the mystery) (to John Reeves)_ is dedicated to another friend. With the reference to a “mystery” and the yellow color, Flavin here too takes recourse to the reflecting gold backgrounds of medieval painting, which there indicate the presence of the divine. With all of these allusions he unfolds an ironic and playful approach to the power of the image in the twentieth century, in which he reveals how contemporary art and exhibitions create bestow an aura on the profane.

By 1963 Flavin was now working only with his repertory of industrially prefabricated fluorescent tubes, and thus with their predetermined colors and uniform measurements. In _the nominal three (to William of Ockham)_ (1963) he mounted six white tubes in a one-two-three rhythm, rising from the floor in the corners and the center of the wall. This three-part series of white shining tubes is restricted by the measurements of the room and its parameters. Flavin dedicated this work to the Franciscan monk William of Ockham (1288–1347). Ockham was a proponent of a nominalist critique of universalism and of faith, and he adhered to a philosophy in which questions of divinity were strictly separated from scientific knowledge. The liberation of philosophy and science from theology marks the beginning of modern thinking. In his artwork in light, Flavin seems to have used modern lamp units to
transfer Ockham’s rationalist critique of religion into a pictorial interpretation, placing the tubes in a row of progressively increasing numbers that could be continued forever. In its dedication to the medieval cleric, this work in light explores tensions between the emotions and the intellect, and the religious and the secular. The relationship of the artwork to built space thereafter became ever more important in Flavin’s works. a primary picture (1964) is an analysis of the traditional parameters of the image. This work in lateral format consists of tubes in the primary colors of yellow, red, and blue, set at right angles to each other and forming a frame placed on the edge of the wall. The colored light both spreads over the wall and extends into the room. Work, viewer, and the borders of the room all reflect each other, while the identification of the rectangular shape as a “picture” is somehow disconcerting. We notice the unusual arrangement and also the fact that this colored frame is empty inside. The primary colors overlap within the frame, but in the center all these colors cancel each other out and thereby metaphorically rule out all the possibilities of pictorial representation.

Working with the limited repertory of fluorescent tubes, Flavin created works in which the reality of a sober commercial product often leads to astonishing pictorial levels of reference and allusion. monument 4 for those who have been killed in ambush (to P.K. who reminded me about death) (1966) shows how title and work refer to each other and expand the field of significance. The work consists of four fluorescent tubes, two mounted along the walls in the corner of the room, and two extending in an aggressive gesture into the room. Like a crossbow bolt about to be shot, or a death ray pointed at an enemy, these tubes point at the viewers of the artwork. This work in light, with its radiating red, is expressive and aggressive, while the title of the work directs this energy toward an allusion to world history. It was made in 1966, and the title could indicate that as a monument for those who were killed in ambush it in fact refers very politically to contemporary deaths of soldiers in the Vietnam War. Flavin presented this work in the same year in the Primary Structures exhibition in the Jewish Museum in New York, which was the first comprehensive show of minimal art. There he added “for the Jewish Museum” to the title, thus dedicating the work to a concrete place and its historical context, so that it can also be read as a monument in memory of the fate of the Jews.

Flavin’s works were initially mounted on walls, but later they began to become more and more independent and to penetrate into the exhibition space in complex formations. an artificial barrier of blue, red and blue fluorescent light (to Flavin Starbuck Judd) (1968) runs diagonally across the room and makes part of it inaccessible. The arrangement of horizontal blue tubes that emit their light upward and red tubes set vertically creates a row of evenly spread squares. Warm red and cold blue are emitted with differing intensity on all sides, mixing as violet, falling on the walls and the visitors, and reflecting in the floor. The exhibition space becomes a frame in which the artwork runs through the space like a bridge of light and thus directs the paths visitors may take. This piece is dedicated to Donald Judd’s son, who was born the year it was made. Flavin is not only speaking to Judd as an artist friend here, but also referring to his intensive and often critical interest in the
principles of minimal art. In contrast to Judd and other proponents of minimal art, Flavin does not place objects in a space without them altering that space. His works in light rather transform our perception of space by coloring it and deliberately confusing its architectural parameters.

Set out on two opposite sides, the radiant white of the two-part work _untitled to a man (to George McGovern)_ (1972) places the viewers in the center of the artwork. The circular fluorescent tubes Flavin uses do not point at anything directly, and they offer him new opportunities for design. Stacked to form a triangle, they reach their maximum height in the corners of the room, which are thereby especially highlighted, altering our impression of the proportions and breadth of the space and making the static architecture more dynamic. Flavin dedicated this work to the liberal American politician George McGovern, supporting his opposition to the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War.

Dan Flavin’s fascination for the art of icons also included an interest in early Russian constructivism. Kasimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin are among those artists who wanted to express a vision of a new social order in their works while at the same time respecting the tradition of the icons. Flavin dedicated his series _monuments for V. Tatlin_, begun in 1964 and continued to 1990, to Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953). The form of the first works in the series was based on Tatlin’s _Monument to the Third International_ (1919/1920), but culminated as the series progressed in a very varied set of combinations of the tube elements utilized. At the 1925 World’s Fair in Paris, Tatlin had shown the model of a tower that was to include three conference rooms or offices that rotated around their own axes and were held by a dynamically rising 400-meter-high metal frame. A building of this absurd size was of course never realized.

With light as a fragile and ephemeral medium and with the fluorescent tube as an object with a limited life, Flavin undermines the notion of a timeless and eternal monument. His criticism of megalomania and inflated self-images is also expressed in the use of lower case in the title of his work. That the _monuments for V. Tatlin_ are all more or less rocket shaped but also remain tied to the ground led Flavin to compare them with Tatlin’s flying machine, the _Letatlin_ (1929–1931), whose attempts to fly failed just like the Russian avantgarde’s highflying plans for a new democratic society. Flavin, who was rather skeptical about the contemporary technology hype of the 1960s, uses his reference to Vladimir Tatlin to conjure up an almost poetic vision of failure: “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.”

**Level 2**

For minimal art the radiant color of light was an irritant in its original aim to present the pure material without distorting it by color. Donald Judd tried to argue Flavin’s case. He testified that because the fluorescent tubes were an industrial mass product there was nothing arbitrary or individually appended about their colors: “Since the tubes are sources of light their colours seem given and unchangeable.
[...] There isn’t any difference between the light and the colour; it’s one phenomenon.” For Judd, color was basically legitimate whenever it was not added but was part of the material, as in colored Plexiglas or in the form of fluorescent tubes. With *untitled (to Don Judd, colorist)* (1987) Flavin dedicated a large multi-part work to his friend, with an almost mocking subtext on the problem of color. This full-wall installation uses all commercially available standard colors, with obvious pleasure in exaggeration. Arranged in letter T shapes, the individual parts are presented as a repetitive row that confronts the viewer like outsized toys, and are also reminiscent of Judd’s architecture-like objects of the 1980s.

Using the idiom of industrially produced lamps, Flavin again and again transported key themes from the works of other artists into his own pictorial imagery. He dedicated *untitled (to Henri Matisse)* (1964), for example, to a painter whose late work was characterized by the effects of simple color tones on monochrome surfaces, and he did so with a simple mounting of four vertical tubes in pink, yellow, blue, and green. In sharp contrast to this space illuminated in pastel tones, *daylight and cool white fluorescent light (to Sol LeWitt)* (1964) shines out starkly. This larger-than-life work is dedicated to the leading theorist of minimal and conceptual art. Its severity and puritanism seem already to reflect some of the dogmatism that would color LeWitt’s manifesto-like work “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1967) some years later.

**Level 0**

Between 1966 and 1971 Dan Flavin produced a series that became known under the title *European Couples*. The artist dedicated each of them to a couple among his friends and acquaintances. In these installations the works are all placed in corners, some of which are created by adding temporary wall segments in the exhibition rooms. Depending on where the viewer stands, several works can be seen at the same time, with various combinations and points of view. In these works Flavin uses all the commercially available standard colors of fluorescent tubes: daylight, cool white, warm white, yellow, pink, blue, green, red, and soft white. In each work tubes of the same length and color are put together to form squares, with the horizontal tubes facing the viewer and the vertical ones turned so as to shine on the walls. The light spreads atmospherically into the exhibition space, while also brightly illuminating the corners and thereby blurring the architecture and built structures.

The square shape of these works is reminiscent of framed pictorial spaces, but instead of containing images they expansively take possession of the whole space. The sensitization of perception in this experiential space of immaterial light is both suggestive and ironic. Even before he began to work with fluorescent tubes, Flavin noted: “I can take the ordinary lamp out of use and into a magic that touches ancient mysteries. And yet it is still a lamp that burns to death like any other of its kind. In time the whole electrical system will pass into inactive history. My lamps will no longer be operative; but it must be remembered that they once gave light.”