



MARCUS LEITH



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EXHIBITION

By Daniel Rosbottom

Dan Flavin:
A Retrospective
At the Hayward Gallery,
London SE1, until 2 April

In a 1966 *Artforum* article, Robert Smithson described Dan Flavin as making ‘instant monuments’, precisely summarising a dichotomy at the centre of his work and this exhibition.

Following his artistic ‘epiphany’, in placing an 8ft yellow fluorescent light on the wall of his studio, Flavin concentrated on pieces constructed through the interplay of these standardised fittings, right up to his death in 1996. But, despite their ephemeral and elementary nature, he was also concerned with contextual relationships, referring to his work as *situational* rather than installation art and describing pieces as structural proposals – a position affirmed in his permanent exhibit at Donald Judd’s Chinati Foundation.

Entering the first space of the Hayward, the leaden winter light is blasted away in an intense, green luminescence, which fades only slightly as your eyes adjust. The single work, *untitled (for you Heiner, with admiration and affection)*, is one of Flavin’s ‘barrier’ pieces. Overlaid 4 x 4ft modular units obliquely traverse the space, denying movement across it. This feels less a disruption than a recalibration. The lights capture the glass balustrade of the now inaccessible ramp beyond, their reflections measuring length and angle of inclination. The concrete shuttering of the staircase is thrown into shadowed relief, its rhythms and the diameters of its gridded boltholes echoing the forms and scales that the work establishes.

In subsequent areas, however, the pieces converse

less with the building. A room devoted to the early ‘icons’ is followed by spaces that reassemble elements of seminal exhibitions, and one devoted to Flavin’s most extensive series, ‘monuments’ for V Tatlin. The critic Tiffany Bell suggests that, although Flavin delegated fabrication to others, he never relinquished control over representation and relationship. The artist’s absence perhaps makes such historical retrospection inevitable.

The works themselves have lost none of their power. Moving from the starkly iconographic ‘monuments’ to the sublime effects of pieces such as *untitled (to Jamie Lee)*, their austerity and explicit manner of construction engage you at once, and are then transcended in delicate colour shifts and transformations.

Two views of the Hayward Gallery exhibition

But the control of the artist is occasionally missed. A display of drawings conveys Flavin’s concentrated relationship with the architecture he worked within. This graph-paper clarity is not always present in the exhibition. Unlike most contemporary galleries, the Hayward offers a strong formal presence in its materiality and also in the ever-present structure of its floors and ceilings, which one imagines Flavin fully appreciating. Without him, misalignments relative to these background ‘orderings’ occasionally appear.

This is particularly apparent in the placement of four crossed walls, from a 1972 exhibition at Rice University, Houston. The marginal offset of their symmetry, relative to the rhythms of floor and ceiling, becomes visually intrusive.



BOOK

The Mythic City:
Photographs of New York
by Samuel H Gottscho,
1925-1940
Princeton Architectural
Press, 2005. 224pp. £25

If this is an oversight, it nonetheless exposes a curatorial dilemma, between historical exactness and contextual adjustment. Flavin, perhaps, offers a judgement on this, in the variable heights and lengths of room-scale works. Fittingly, the final piece, *untitled (in memory of my father D Nicholas Flavin)*, reaffirms these situational characteristics in a series of 1ft-diameter circular tubes, which ‘measure’ the gallery wall.

Criticism aside, this is a joyful exhibition, which refutes Flavin’s description of ‘dim monuments of on-and-off art’. I re-emerged into the daylight of the South Bank with residual images on my retina and a smile on my face. *Daniel Rosbottom is a director of DRDH Architects and teaches at London Metropolitan University*

Neon signs and their reflections in the wet tarmac of Times Square, midtown skyscrapers becoming a honeycomb of lights. Samuel Gottscho loved to photograph New York at night and celebrate it as a 24-hour city, an electric paradise. And his interiors are real period pieces of chrome, glass brick and marble veneer.

Gottscho was close to Raymond Hood and kickstarted his career with photos of Hood’s American Radiator Building, but the dominant architectural presence in this book is the Rockefeller Centre. Gottscho shows it under construction and explores it in detail up to the 80th-floor Rainbow Room lounge, with its mirror ceiling, where all that’s missing is a very dry Martini. The 1939 World’s Fair is the book’s fitting close.

CRITIC’S CHOICE

By Andrew Mead

Having been drenched in the fluorescence of the Hayward’s Dan Flavin exhibition (*see opposite*), you could head east to Bloomberg SPACE, 50 Finsbury Square, London EC1, for *Backdrop* – another show of light works, this time by eight contemporary artists. The one whose pieces look to be most like Flavin’s is *Leo Villareal*, though the resemblance is superficial. In Villareal’s room you are surrounded by 51 neon tubes ranged vertically in groups of three, but while Flavin’s installations are static, the light unwavering, here all is hyperactive, as colours keep changing and dart from one tube to another. There’s a moment of calm as the space is flooded with red or green – and then the dizzying sequence continues.

But the star of the Bloomberg show is *David Batchelor*, whose mission to bring a little colour into our lives while recycling our cast-offs has now resulted in a huge elongated chandelier, made from 500 plastic bottles that he’s intercepted somewhere between the supermarket and the dustbin. Lit individually inside, then trussed together and suspended in the Bloomberg atrium, they form a vividly colourful interloper in these corporate surroundings, their presence multiplied by reflections in the glass balustrades (*see picture*). The show continues until 18 March (tel 0207330 7959).

One of last year’s best books was Elisabetta Andreoli and Adrian Forty’s *Brazil’s Modern Architecture* (24.02.05). A new exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, called *Open Space, Closed Space: Sites for Sculpture in Modern Brazil*, explores the sculpture that developed in tandem with the buildings of Niemeyer & Co, with the show’s flyer featuring a striking photo of Niemeyer’s pavilion for the São Paulo Bienal of 1957 (www.henry-moore-fdn.co.uk).

There are none of Brazil’s Modernist aspirations in the latest exhibition at The Lighthouse, Glasgow, running until 26 March. *Bungalow Blitz* looks at the impact of a 1971 publication by the Irish architect John Fitzsimon, *Bungalow Bliss*, which offered a number of self-build bungalow designs and proved very popular, expanding in size in subsequent editions. What’s happened to the landscape as a consequence? The show isn’t upbeat (www.thelighthouse.co.uk).

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