Interview with Dan Flavin

This interview was conducted in Dan Flavin’s house on the south shore of Long Island in Wainscott, New York on July 13, 1982. It was intended for publication but was never printed previously because Flavin wanted to edit his comments to make them easier to read and never got around to it. With some editing I’ve tried to make the text readable while maintaining Flavin’s particular conversational style and humor — occasionally at the expense of complete clarity. [Tiffany Bell]

TB: I am curious to know if you would modify or clarify your statement of 1966 in which you suggest that there is no development in your system. This interests me because I think a statement such as this may have been misinterpreted causing conceptions of “closed” “limited” art, etc.

DF: Well, let’s see. I still think it’s governable. I don’t think the open and closed process that was described way back when is challenged now. In fact, I really was going to formalize it and intended to make a rodeo file to assist memory. I like the fact that the file is circular, without an end. In fact, before the director in Chicago in ’67, Van der Marck, came up with this printout of a catalogue, I wanted the catalogue to be a round file to which things could be added or taken away.1 Well, no, that’s wrong because nothing would be taken away. That was the point, whatever there was of input was to be left. I think that computer usage was, what can I say, pale, bland, unimportant.

TB: What I was trying to ask is, do you think you use the medium differently than the way you used to?

DF: I used to think somewhat about that which could be proposed with no specific end in sight and now I more and more depend upon a specific end. I just have other involvements than thinking art now. In the early sixties there was hardly anything else on my mind except the usual domestic things. But as to using the medium differently, no, I don’t think so.

There might be a slight shift in emphasis to things, to more retinal optics but it seems to me that’s part of this open and at the same time closed thinking. You shift inside of the process you already know a lot about. But if I keep the fluorescent light media mindedness then that’s what’s really going on. I’d have to forget it to lose that. It’s such a restrictive medium, as I’ve said before, that I’ve developed an appreciation that way for it. But then again, I may simply be lazy and conservative overall.

Also, I’ve talked about myself as being primitive, but sophistication comes inside what I’ve said. You get more involved with one understanding, let’s say, and less with another, both of which you’ve had contact with in the past. And, so?

TB: What sort of shifts?

DF: Well, just as I said, earlier on there was a decided interest in light rather dramatically, structurally proposed. Then in the late sixties, I think, exemplified by say the green room at Kornblee [1967], an optical shift and a retinal reaction made all available daylight pink as you accepted the green. The installational exposition at Dwan in ’68, in comparison, was rather factual in terms of light and by that I mean, the color didn’t really perform, let’s say, in an abusive way to the eye. So anyhow,
la sala de exhibición Hauserman en Los Ángeles?

DF: Soy bastante burilón. Para llegar al grano, diría que la conclusión a la que he llegado está contenida en un artículo mío sobre la educación del artista. Los artistas deben darse el ambiente universitario por lo que respecta al factor económico y los recursos educativos, y en parte por la sofisticación de las computadoras. Creo que eso es lo que estaba pensando. Así que me parece que veía al principio un arte científico que podía darse en este contexto con una extensión tecnológica. Y el artista científico, creo que sería una persona sofisticada, diferente de mí. Yo opero en un nivel empírico bastante bajo, y no tengo las agallas para alterar esa realidad.

TB: ¿Puesto que no investigas los aspectos tecnológicos y se limita a operar únicamente a partir de lo que veo?

DF: No. No, no.
contemporary art. I think that’s why you can have – even these days – late nineteenth century French academic revivals. It’s just trivial invention. Gérôme isn’t going to get any better and neither is Meissonier.

TB: The next question is about your working procedure.

DF: Work? Work? What’s that? Haven’t you ever read that one? I hate work.

TB: Can you predict the appearance of your work just by thinking through the drawings that you do? How much do you depend on your assistant and do you ever change or destroy pieces after seeing them?

DF: I’m not going to answer it all. You should really break that down. It’s just that it’s better to ask things singly because I digest very easily. Let’s see where we are? Before I change my mind.

TB: Can you predict the appearance of your work?

DF: The older I get, I swear, the more graphically lazy I become, which is maybe slightly sad. You don’t compile a record of possibilities of changes, as I said, fulfilling that open and closed system, because your memory isn’t as capable and my latitu de is, in a sense, destructive. Also, I’m just impatient. That’s the other thing which is strange to me. I just don’t hardly like to draw at all anymore. I just don’t take the time. I definitely operate from my quote history unquote – my residue. But whatever thinking there is, is not recorded accurately enough anymore.

I find myself not even dating the paper when I do put something down and I used to be fairly scrupulous about that for myself and for understanding others. I keep my papers reasonably well, all things considered. I remember going, to give two examples, to Larry Poons’ apartment and seeing the graph paper sheets under foot and under furniture. I remember getting Dick Bellamy to show them. Some of the best sheets were soiled but it didn’t matter because it’s the graphic information that was interesting and not the brown dirt. I think I’m the one who got him to importantly show those graphic records. I thought that they were of themselves some of the most interesting things that came along in the sixties. In fact, I found them in some ways more interesting than the paintings. But, I don’t want to be too unfair because the artist’s thinking sequence really ought to be honored if you are interested or dishonored if you are not.

Judd really treated his paper in a bit better fashion than Larry did but he was relatively careless about them. I think I am accurate in saying that he was amused by my interest in this Byzantine projection. I really thought they were very good the first time I saw them, and Larry’s too, which is sometimes a surprise when something is new to you.

TB: When did you first see Judd’s work?

DF: I think ’62. As I have said before, John Anderson, Don and I sort of very quickly put to rest a cooperative gallery in Brooklyn Heights. I was more interested in Don, but I liked John a lot personally and I liked the physical ambition of his work.

I had a lot of difficulty, relatively speaking, to the blunt nature of what Don seemed to be up to. It was difficult. I tried to write a letter in defense of him after O’Dougherty’s attack. It started off with “Oh no, Green Gallery, not this time...” but I didn’t think it was wholehearted enough, let’s say. And, I didn’t think that what I was writing would be honored well enough because of who wrote it. I don’t think it was ever sent.

It’s been a long time now. I’m telling you, you get over 40 and memory is really strained all of a sudden. When I was in my 30s I could remember practically anything that I cared to. If I opened the record book and started reading it page after page after page, I’d be surprised by what I was. I hope not too much but maybe. A contemporary record really is important.

And so?

TB: Continuing with the other parts of the question, how much do you depend on your assistant and do you occasionally change or destroy a work?

DF: Sometimes you’ll find there is a technical adjustment to be made in an installation but it really doesn’t go far. I like to approach an installation in a dictatorial way. I swear I think that’s fulfilling my position. It’s unfair to contribute doubts to an installation. It just doesn’t work.

I’ve been pressed in situations – in St. Louis, for instance, where we found structural instability in the length of a barrier.4 It needed a change. Now, the crew on the floor, as intelligent as they were, were not the people to be called upon to do this. The design was my part. It took me twelve minutes and I had their change for them. And that’s the way it should be. It was a rather grand

DF: Cuanto más viejo soy, la jure, más pereza me da, gráficamente hablando, y tal vez esto sea un poquito triste. Uno no lleva constancia de las posibilidades de cambio, como dije anteriormente, cumpliendo con ese sistema abierto y cerrado, porque la memoria no es tan fuerte como mi lojidade es destructiva. Y es que también me falta la paciencia. Esa es otra cosa que me parece raro. Lo que pasa es que sencillamente yo no me gasto mucho dibujar. No me toma el tiempo para hacerlo. Definitivamente opero desde mi propia historia, entre comillas, más residuos. Pero mi pensamiento, si es que lo hay, yo no llevo cuenta preciso de él.

Encuentro que hasta las veces que escribo algo no anoto la fecha, y antes era bastante cuidadoso en ese aspecto, tanto para mí mismo como para la comprensión de los demás. Con todo, he manejado bastante bien mis papeles. Para citar dos ejemplos, recuerdo haber ido el apartamento de Larry Poons y haber visto allí las hojas quadri- culadas en el piso y debajo de las muebles. Me acuerdo que conseguí que los exhibiera Dick Bellamy. Algunas de las mejores hojas estaban sucias, pero no importaba porque la interesante era la información gráfica y no la mugre. Creo que yo fui quien conseguí que él exhibiera esos registros gráficos tan importantes. Creo que estaban entre lo mejor que se produjo durante los setenta. De hecho, en cierto forma las encontré más interesantes que las pinturas. Pero no quiero ser injusto, porque la secuencia del pensamiento del artista debe ser honrada, si uno se interesa, o deshonrada, si no.

Judd manejó sus papeles un poco mejor que Larry, pero también los descuidó. Creo que me asiste la razón si digo que le extrañaba mi interés en esa proyección bizantina. Personalmente me parecieron muy buenas la primera vez que los vi, y los de Larry también, lo que puede resultar sorprendente cuando uno está ante algo nuevo.

TB: ¿Cuándo vio por primera vez la obra de Judd?

DF: Crea que fue en 1962. Como ya he dicho, John Anderson, Dan Judd y yo pronto reencuentramos a la idea de una galería cooperativa en Brooklyn Heights. A mí me interesaba más Don. Personalmente me caía muy bien John y me gustaba la ambición física de su obra.

Me costó trabajar comprender lo que Don parecía estar haciendo. Era difícil. Quise escribir una carta en defensa de él después del ataque de O’Dougherty. Comencé por decir “Por curiosidad, Green Gallery, esto vez no…” pero no me pareció lo suficientemente sincero, diga-
piece of work that had to be executed. So, it's a command decision. I really take it upon myself—whatever is told to me—and work it out by myself. There is no other way.5

TB: I wonder if you would consider your work decorative?

DF: Well, that's like Pandora's box. Obviously, of course. But it's not something that I really care a whole lot to dwell on. In the past, you can read, I was against spiritual and psychological outlooks on art. And I guess I skirted symbolic usages from time to time. There's no need for it but I think I did it earlier on, with the icons, for instance, after the fact. The facts of these constructions were more important than any language that was attached to them. But you know I was young and isolated and somewhat romantic too. You do this. I'm not saying there wasn't symbolic reference there. That's what I am saying, there is. But sometimes the literature got to be a burden.

Given my age and everything—my privacy, my seclusion—this sort of thing can happen. It's like telling a story back to yourself. You have to do the thing—to make it shaped the way it is, make it the light work and the color work the way it does between elements. But then again, you sort of sit around waverin' and invent pieties, I swear. I swear it's all because I was on my own, pretty much.

But dedications I really liked. I think that's an honorable sentimental profession. And sometimes you can tease with them and sometimes you can play them straight; to Piet Mondrian, who lacked green—that tease the flower pot on the mule post.

TB: Are you concerned about the context of having your work in the Hauserman showroom in the Pacific Design Center?6

DF: For years I put forth the notion that I, as an artist of fluorescent light, didn’t require a museum context to grant validity or anything else. Whatever I did should be recognizable as, let's say, something no matter where. I maintain this to this day.

What's at Hauserman's been compromised by the circumstances, not by the fact that it's a showroom but by the material that surrounds it. I refer to the paneling itself perhaps and to the mirror. It doesn't support the light as well as it could. But, it didn't seem, in the collective thinking, important. I think overall and given the diverse interests involved we did well, collectively.

mos. Y pensé que lo que yo escribiera no serían tanos muy en serio, conside-

rando quién lo escribía. Nunca mandé la carta.

De eso hace ya mucho tiempo. Ya le di-

go, después de cumplir los cuatrota-

ños, a uno le falta de repente la me-

moría. Cuando yo tenía treinta y tantos

años me acordaba de lo que fue. Si

yo abriera un libro de arte y comenzara

lo leero, página tras página, me sor-

prendería enterarme de lo que era yo.

Espero que no demasiado, pero sí un poco. Un testimonio contemporáneo no tiene muchísimas importancia.

Y luego?

TB: Continuando con las otras partes de la pregunta larga, ¿cuánto depende de su asistente, y alguna vez ha cambiado o destruido una de sus obras?

DF: A veces encuentro que hay que ha-

cer ajustes técnicos en una instalación, pero son mínimos. Le juro que me agra-

bado acercarme a una instalación en for-

ma dictatorial. Creo que así realismo

mi posición. No es justo agregar dudas

a una instalación, eso no funciona.

Algunas veces he sentido presión: en San Luis, por ejemplo, donde encontraba

mos inestabilidad estructural porque una barrera era demasiado larga.7 Hac-

fa falta un cambio. Y el equipo técni-

co, por mucho que supieran, no era la gente indicada para realizarlo. El dise-

ño me tocaba a mí. Dentro de doce mi-

nutos resolvi el asunto. Y así es como

se debe ser. Era una pieza bastante impo-

nente, y así la decisión que tenía que tomarle le incumbía al comandante en jefe. Yo asumo la responsabilidad de solucionar lo que sea, hallar la res-

puesta yo solo. No hay otra manera.5

TB: ¿Considera usted que su obra es decorativa?

DF: Bueno, eso es como la coja de Pan-

dora. Después que se está. Pero no es un aspecto que me llame mucho la aten-

ción. Antes, como usted sabrá si ha lei-

do sobre mí, me oponía a las perspecti-

vas espiritual y sociológica del arte. Y

supongo que evitaba de vez en cuando los usos simbólicos. No es necesario, pero creo que lo hice al principio, con los íconos, por ejemplo, a postergar. El hecho de que las construcciones insertan-

ba más que cualquier lenguaje que se les atribuyera. Pero usted sabe, yo era

y me sentía aislado y además un tanto romántico. Así es la vida. Nadgo que no haya habido allí presencia sim-

bólica; más bien digo que sí la hubo. Pero a veces la literatura llegaba a agobiar.

Dada mi edad y lo demás—mi privaci-

dad, mi reclusión—este tipo de cosa

puede suceder. Es como si uno se contru-

ra a sí mismo su propia historia. Se tie-

ne que hacer la cosa, darle la forma

TB: You have said that you do not like the term “environment” applied to your installations because of the implication of setting up a “living condition” and “comfortable residence.” Yet you do want the viewer to have the chance to participate. I wonder on what terms you wish for the viewer’s participation.

DF: Respectable. It doesn’t work for someone who smashes tubes—for the P.L.O.

The corridors require rather mobile participation but this has been true since the first use. The end of the Art-

forum so-called auto-biographical sketch concludes with an architectu-

ral reference.8 So, it’s not contemplative and it’s not swift, but it’s usable. Early on, I used the term “situational” which was the most reasonable outlook. I’ve always tried to keep, as you know, furniture out because I don’t think it takes a long time to get involved or to understand what is standing.

TB: So you do not intend your work to be difficult?

DF: No, I’ve always thought it was rather simple—not simpliminded, but simple. As I remember my contacts with Meyer Schapiro, one of the more respectable things about his understandings in art history were that he could present things in an understandable and simple fashion. It seemed to me that simplicity came from comprehensive understanding. And das ist gut.

TB: Now for the public sculpture questions.

DF: No sculpture, public plan. I’m never confused about that.

TB: In 1967, you made the statement “I would not resist public service” meaning that you were willing to place your work in public spaces. After your many experiences now, both that have materialized and others that have not, would you now be more likely to resist it?

DF: One would resist for reasons of compromise. There’s just much too much of that but not circumstantially, situationally, not at all.

TB: What do you mean by compromise?

DF: The bad politics, I guess. It should be ethical—public art. It’s sad.

TB: Do you think there has been an improved attitude?

DF: I don’t know. I think the more private the public situation is the more likely an artist is to succeed. The more public the interest, the less likely. The more people participate, the more inhibiting and de-

que tiene, hacer que funcionen la luz y el color. Pero luego uno se distrae e in-

venta piedadillos. Todo se debe a que has-

cia los cosas por mis cuentos, lo juro.

Pero hacer dedicatorias me gustaba de

veras. Creo que ésa es una profesión sentimental honorable. A veces se pue-

de bromear con ellas y a veces hay que ser directo: “a Piet Mondrian, a quien le

faltaba el verde”. Ese le hace cosquillas a la galleta.

TB: ¿Le preocupa el contexto en que se ha exhibido su obra en la sala Hauser-

man del Pacific Design Center?

DF: Durante muchos años yo sostenia que, como artista de la luz fluorescen-

te, no me hacia falta el contexto de un muno para darme validez. Lo que yo

hiciera debía reconocerse como, diga-

mos, algo, sin importar el lugar donde se encontraría. Y hoy en día sigo pensa-

ndo lo mismo.

Lo exhibido en Hauserman ha sido afectado por las circunstancias, no por el hecho de ser una sala de exhibición, sino por lo que la rodea. Me refiero a los paneles de las paredes y al espejo, los cuales no apoyan la luz tan bien como debieran. Pero dentro del pensa-

miento colectivo esto no parecía muy importante. Creo que en general, y da-

dos los diversos intereses que entran en juego, el resultado es positivo, colecti-

vamente.

TB: Usted ha dicho que no le gusta que se aplique el término “ambiental” a sus obras porque implica establecer una “condición de vida” y una “residencia cómoda”. Sin embargo, si quiere que quien contemple la obra tenga la oppor-

tunidad de participar en ella. ¿De qué manera desea usted que participe el observador?

DF: Respectable. No funciona para al-

guien que destruya tubos—para el OLP. Los corredores requieren de una parti-

cipación bastante móvil, pero esto es cierto desde las primeras veces. El final de la llamada semblanza autobiográfica sobre mí que aparece en la revista Artforum termina con una referencia arquitectónica: “Así que no es contem-

plativo ni ideeòico, pero se puede usar. Hace mucho, yo empleaba el término “situacional”, o sea, la perspectiva más razonable. Como usted sabe, siempre he querido excluir los muelles porque creo que no tarda mucho tiempo en identificarse con una obra o en comprender una instalación.

TB: ¿Avec no quiere que su obra sea difícil?

DF: No, siempre he considerado que es bastante sencilla—no simpática, pero sí sencilla. Ahora que me acuerdo de Me-

y Schapiro y su dominio de la historia del arte, una de las ventajas que tenía era que podía presentar los conceptos
argumentarían a su vez que los artistas no integrarían su pensamiento con la arquitectura, lo cual puede ser cierto. Pero la generosidad, la invitación, casi siempre está ausente. Dentro de mi experiencia, los ingenieros con que he trabajado han sido más abiertos. Lo más conveniente es evitar a los políticos y los arquitectos.

**SB:** ¿Le agradan los resultados de algunos de sus proyectos públicos?

**DF:** No hay mucho por ahí.

**SB:** Como Grand Central Station, por ejemplo.

**DF:** No sé. Eso lo veo otra vez como transigir, y en parte el que transigió fui yo. Es casi como si se tratara de una instalación para remplazar a lo que estaba abajo, y creo que no se debió haber concebido así. Pero en ese momento,

were ingenious, or more open. If you get around the architect and politicians, you’re best off.

**TB:** Are you pleased with some of the results of your public projects?

**DF:** There’s so little around. I think maybe it’s because the architects and the artists aren’t really thinking. And, I think they are often going to want to be involved in the understanding. But, the generosity is so rarely there — the invitation. In my experience, the engineers involved

now it’s being slowly destroyed — was the entrance to the Hudson River Museum. I really liked that a lot. I think it works well for them. I liked the Kunstmuseum Basel courtyard.

**TB:** Is there a difference between doing a public art work in Europe as opposed to in this country?

**DF:** Same.

**TB:** It’s the same?

**DF:** Yeah, bad news. The tunnels under the Maas in Rotterdam started in ’69 or something like that, and then finally was politically defeated in longevity. It’s sad. Everything I did there pleased me. I liked the system, I liked the invention of the replacement fixture. It was such a pleasure really to do it. To have it disappear or never permitted is sad.
TB: According to a reporter in The New Yorker, Serra has said, “It is not the business of art to deal with human needs” implying a belief that the artist is responsible primarily to his own work, not to the public. Would you agree?

DF: No. For instance, to follow his case, you don’t propose and establish collapsible art. I mean there are certain levels of responsibility that don’t have anything to do with your sense of art. Once you’re out in public there are going to be inhibitions—security, safety and so forth. They’re obvious ones. But there are others also. You can’t distract traffic, for instance. There are a lot of aspects like this that don’t meet the eye right away. There are good and useful codes to be observed. They’re often traditionally developed because they are useful and they have purpose.

I still get a feeling, if you want to use Richard as an example, that he represents the ego dumping sculptor. In his case, it’s a little less annoying than usual because some of the things he does I find myself interested in.

TB: Do you find Oldenburg more successful in his public sculpture?

DF: The photograph I saw lately looks pretty good in an old-fashioned, impeding sense.9 You know technically that it’s not going to drop on somebody’s skull but it has a threatening look. In that old-fashioned sense, a sculpture is sort of interesting. I think that art that doesn’t separate itself and is integrated or even can be taken for granted to a certain extent is the most interesting to me. This governs my own outlook. You don’t need museum labels or plaques. If people perceive that they have an enhanced circumstance, as opposed to what they had before, that’s alright with me.

For myself, I hold an interest in art — in the understanding. But I approach a situation with less trepidation than I did to begin with. The fact that what I think to put forth as art might not be so readily understandable, but in a separate fashion, might be absorbed contextually — I don’t look upon that with regret. If as artists we are to integrate what we think to do in our contemporary world then this is to be expected. We must proceed this way. I don’t want to make a cathedral. I really don’t. I think that’s the object of business now and commerce. Za... next case.

TB: What sort of conditions do you

cesarios de repuesto. Fue un placer hacerlo. Que desaparezca se malogre es muy triste.

Por una cosa yo era extranjero, y la in competencia política de los políticos cambiantes—usted sabe, no había continuidad, no había interés. Si yo fuera holandés, supongo que me habrían dado más oportunidad. Les hubieran gastado todo más gasto de su dinero en un holan
dés, y hasta cierto punto eso es justo. Si me hubieran hecho ver aquello, no habría perdido mi tiempo. Ese es uno de los proyectos que me gustaban más por la extensión del corredor.

TB: ¿Por qué no se hizo el proyecto de los Juegos Olímpicos? ¿Es la misma historia?

DF: Bueno, Heiner siempre me dice que no capta las cosas. Y no sé cómo corregirme. Senti que nunca hubo interés. Cuando los intereses nacionales se impusieron por fin, se olvidaron de los americanos.

TB: Según un reportero de la revista New Yorker, Serra ha dicho: “No la correspondía al arte ocuparse de las necesidades humanas”. Esto implica que el artista es responsable principalmente ante su propia obra y no al público. ¿Estaria usted de acuerdo?

DF: No. Existen ciertos niveles de responsabilidad que no tienen nada que ver con el sentido que tiene el artista de su obra. Una vez que sale al dominio público va a haber inhibiciones—entre ellas, la seguridad. Y hay otras. No se puede obstaculizar el tránsito, por ejemplo. Hay muchos aspectos de esta índole que no salen a la vista. Hay códigos tradicionales que son útiles y válidos y que deben observarse.

Todavía creo, tomando como ejemplo a Richard, que él representa al escultor que se deshace de su ego. En su caso, es un poco menos molesta porque algunas de las cosas que hace me interesan.

TB: ¿Considera usted que Oldenburg tiene más éxito en sus esculturas públicas?

DF: La fotografía que ví hace poco se ve bastante bien, en un sentido tradicional de lo inminente.10 Se da cuenta técnicamente de que eso no va a caer y romperle la cabeza a nadie, pero tiene un aspecto amenazante. En ese sentido tradicional, una escultura no carece de interés.

Creo que ahora, para mi, el arte más interesante es el que no se aísla, no se para a sí mismo, y se integra y hasta cierto punto puede darse por sentado. Esta forma de pensar rige mi propia perspectiva. No hacen falta placas ni rótulos de museo. Si lo gente percibe que tienen una circunstancia realzada, en contraste con lo que tenían antes, look for when presented with a choice of sites for public work?

DF: Si soy primero con mi principal tools of fluorescent light, then the contexts have to need it. They have to be able to fit it and that’s not always possible. There are circumstances you’re invited to inspect that are not receptive on almost any basis. I’ve seen circumstances that absolutely didn’t need it, and then you must walk away. I know people don’t like that message when they think they’re being so generous with a circumstance that they like so much, but you have to keep your own understanding of your possibilities and limitations.

There are so many different ways of examination of the usefulness of a site. And what’s up is down and what’s black is white, and what’s next?

TB: I wonder why you stopped writing?

DF: I guess I felt I wasn’t coming across adequately. Another thing that disappointed me greatly is that I felt I was starting almost to write art criticism which I find dreadful and useless. It sort of smashed of that outlook. Definitely I didn’t want to be an art critic.

Also simply, I was tired because writing unedited is really hard work. Since I wouldn’t submit to editing it was a little harder. It could have, in retrospect, used some editing particular in terms of grammar. Particularly if one is going to be relatively nasty, one should be grammatical, I think. There’s a responsibility there all the way around.

TB: Do you think of your writing as nasty?

DF: Oh, yeah, it was hostile with a purpose. One time someone asked me how I could come on that way. I said I did it with vicarious pleasure. But that was to be glib. No, I felt there was a certain responsibility in writing. I really wanted to address things that were important to artists with their lack of a responsible forum. Critics were allowed to print, artists weren’t and I somehow got a role.

I suppose that someone would say my result was largely self-serving but then again that’s where it all starts. The interest in what I wrote was sufficient enough to show me that my responses were shared by a lot of the disadvantaged — we the people of art.

The last thing I was going to write, which never came off, was the artist and his economics. I never did write eso me parece perfectamente bien. En cuanto a mí, me interesa el arte, me interesa entenderlo. Pero ahora me aproximó a las situaciones con menos temor que al principio. El hecho de que yo lo proponga como arte pueda no ser tan fácilmente comprensible, pero de otra forma puede ser absorbido dentro de su contexto — eso no me pesa. Si como artistas hemos de integrar lo que pensamos que hacemos con nuestro mundo contemporáneo, pues este es el resultado que hoy que espe
rar. Tenemos que actuar así. No quiero hacer una catedral, de veras no quiero. Creo que eso es más bien el propósito ahora de la industria y el comercio. Así que, ¿qué más?

TB: Cuando usted puede escoger entre varios lugares para hacer una instalación pública, ¿en qué se fija para tomar su decisión?

DF: Si se trata de mis obras esenciales con luz fluorescente, entonces los lugares tienen que necesitar la obra. Las instalaciones tienen que encarjar bien, y eso no es siempre posible. Hay sitios que no aparecen receptivos bajo ningún criterio. Cuando al lugar no le hace falta la instalación, hay que abandonarlo.

Yo sé que a mucha gente no le agrada ese rechazo, cuando están siendo tan generosos con sus circunstancias que tanto les encantan, pero uno debe permanecer fiel a su propio conocimiento de lo que puede o no puede hacer. Hay tantas diferentes maneras de examinar la utilidad de un sitio. Y lo que está arriba está abajo, y lo que es blan
ceno es negro, y ¿qué más?

TB: Me preguntan por qué usted dejó de escribir.

DF: Supongo que porque me parecía que no me comunicaba muy bien. Otro factor que entra aquí es que me sentí que empezaba a escribir crítico de arte, cosa que encontré horrible e inútil. Así me parecía. Definitivamente no quiero ser crítico del arte. También sinceramente porque me cansé, porque el escribir sin quien te revise los textos es difícil. Como no quise permir que nadie me ayudara a preparar mis textos, todo resultaba más proble
mático. Retrospectivamente, probablemente hubiera hecho falta la revisión, especialmente en cuanto a la gramática. Sobre todo si uno se propone ser antipático, hay que insistir en la corrección gramatical. Es una grave responsabili
dad.

TB: ¿Qué cree que es lo que escribe resulta antipático?

DF: Ah, sí. Una hostilidad intencionada.

En una ocasión alguien me preguntó por qué me expresaba de tal forma. Le respondía que indirectamente me producía un placer. Pero esa respuesta
that, which I felt would have been an important thing. Maybe I wasn’t up to it. That’s why it didn’t turn out. It may just have been a lack of willingness to keep going. I’ve never thought of myself as a professional writer because I didn’t have a sufficient response to language. I always regarded myself as a kind of playful, lyrical amateur but with something that had to be pointed out.

I had a kind of ultimate confrontation with Phil Leider as to whether my name should go on the masthead of Artforum. I would have it only as a writer on art and he drew the line so that I would have to accept the role of a critic and I wouldn’t. That was the end of that and that’s why the next article came out in Studio International. Barbara Reise wanted it. There are things in there that I really didn’t like at all. And that seemed to me to be the end of it. Except to write an occasional something.

TB: You mean in your article there were things you didn’t like?

DF: Yeah, I can tell you what I don’t like about it: the Castelli warehouse review—review in quotes. I really didn’t like that at all. Also, I stepped into matters I didn’t really have much authority on—historical matters. In fact, in the period since 1969, I’ve turned down invitations to write on historical matters because I didn’t feel that I had enough information. Boy, then you see what gets written and you wonder that you could have been part of the group that should have refused.

I wrote a sort of snappy little defense of Judd and his retrospecting which I sort of liked. But no, I haven’t done much. There are some little things on drawing that I liked—like a need in elaboration. But, again, it’s a personal response.

TB: Has there been anything written by someone other than yourself about your work that you liked?

DF: I find that difficult to respond to. But I’ll never let it stop there. I haven’t read so many things that I probably should have and so I find it hard to say anything about it. I always expect hard writing of Don when he chooses to put out. But I don’t know where else to look for it. Emily Pulitizer has nice comments—sufficient comments—in that St. Louis catalogue.

One time Laslo Glazer wrote a lengthy article for Süddeutsche Zeitung which I haven’t read. I tried to get it translated a few times through the German contingent in the German contingent. Laslo is a funny character so it might be an interesting article. He’s serious and commits himself with emotion.

TB: Possibly the longest ongoing series you have worked on is the Tatlin “monuments.” I wonder if there are aspects about these works, different in some ways from other pieces, which particularly interest you and have made you continue to make them?

DF: The ones from say ’64 or ’65 in there up to ’69, when I was getting things together for Ottawa, are, as Don said, my Gothic Art. They’re relatively conservative in a structural way. But that was what was put in public. There are others in the early sixties sketches that are rather loose. Those loosely structured ones could have been elaborated upon but it meant exposing wire between elements and I was a little reluctant to do that. Also, I certainly needed to keep them away from gallery marketing because of the obvious misreadings that would have occurred in the angles of the structural elements for instance. So, I held back on that aspect of it.

It could have been a dual system; one aspect, this simple elaborated structure—using so many fixtures and spreading them in an equal number left to right or right to left; or the other, a lot of dangling wires, stretched wires. I would have looked awfully hip if I had done that because it would have proceeded the whole Castelli warehouse generation with the neon this, a dangling wire here, there. It would have looked somewhat casual too. The “fetlock” as someone gibbly put it. The Tatlin “monuments” are really quite conservative work for me, with the whites and very conservative structural approach. I must have needed it. And that’s why it came about.

The first one was used in Furness Hall at University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia because of the tall wall available. It was brought back to New York, I remember, and put in the Green Gallery in a kind of memorial exhibition dedicated to David Smith. I also had a leaning diagonal eight foot strip that came off the wall at a forty-five degree angle—the angle may have been variable—dedicated directly to him. It was nothing like what Smith did, no figurative memorabilia. It’s the triumph of Judd: no hierarchies, no welding, no prancing geometry, just the fact. So...
TB: I am curious about your interest in American nineteenth century landscape drawings and American crafts in general. And I was wondering how long it had been an interest?

DF: Oh God, there are so many things that go into that sort of thing. It’s the leisure time of an aging artist that makes it possible. I have really fairly strong romantic art historical sentiments and they come out in various ways. I have an interest in print making of my own, to Rembrandt, to Robert Swan Gifford, who was a damn decent printer.

So, to begin with it’s a general interest in that old art. But aspects like the exactitude or the precision of record and the accuracy of the light in Kensett and Church, I can identify with. Though Church’s theatrics are sometimes bothersome to me. I like Kensett because he’s so underdone. He’s a sneak as an artist.

I get interested in art of the localities where I am, such as Danoeho here, and also because the prices are reasonable. I think Mary Nimmo Moran is a wonderful etcher — just about the equal of her husband.

I wish I had a bank roll so as to have more of it around. I think a lot of people draw conclusions from what you have and never realize the fact that some people can make the great financial input and have what they want and then there are we who have more guile than money. I always wanted to have a Gifford. I really think he’s a great man.

TB: A drawing or a painting?

DF: I’d take anything. Well, I think in Gifford’s case that the painting better represents him. Kensett is communicable in oil and pencil though I’m not knocking Gifford’s drawings. I’ve seen wonderful ones. They’re scarce. The Constantinople panorama that the Foundation has is very nice. I love that kind of drawing and it seems to be a somewhat typical type of drawing for that period in America.

I have a wonderful Kensett — the top of the Gorge of Hudson Highland, on blue paper. Boy, it’s a beautiful drawing. Love it — that so stingly but generous little touch of his — awesome. Not afraid of a straight line either.

I really do like little and least art. It has nothing to do with “minimal” at all. That’s at the bottom of the garbage can. That’s why I’ve liked drawing. I have on etching that I want to show you over there that I did while waiting for dinner with ocho pies de largo que se desprendía de la pared haciendo un ángulo de 45 grados — el ángulo era variable — dedicado directamente a él. No tenía nada que ver con lo que hacia Smith, nada de recuerdos figurativos. Es el triunfo de Judd: sin jarrerías, sin soldaduras, sin geometrías impresionantes, sólo el hecho puro y desnudo.

TB: Me da curiosidad saber algo acerca de su interés en los dibujos del paisaje norteamericano del siglo XIX y las artesanías en general. ¿Durante cuánto tiempo lo ha interesado estos géneros?

DF: Dios mío, hay muchos factores. Lo que me permite tener esos intereses es el tiempo libre de que dispongo porque soy un artista que está envejeciendo. Tengo en verdad sentimientos románticos por la historia del arte que se manifiestan en varias formas. Me interesa también en hacer grabados, en Rembrandt, en Robert Swan Gifford, quien hacía muy buenos grabados.

Así que para empezar es un interés en ese arte viejo. Pero me puedo identificar con otros aspectos, como la exactitud y precisión del registro y la nitidez de la luz en Kensett y Church. Aunque el dramatismo exagerado de Church a veces me malesta. Me agrade Kensett porque no exagera, porque es sencillo como artista.

Me empezo a interesarme el arte de la localidad donde me encuentre, como aquí en Danoeho, y también porque los precios son razonables. Creo que Mary Nimmo Moran es muy buena para grabar el agua fuerte; llega casi a la altura de su esposa.

Quisiera tener mucho dinero para adquirir más. Creo que mucha gente llega a sacar ciertas conclusiones acerca de uno juzgando por lo que esa persona tiene: la gente rico puede tener lo que quiere, y luego estamos nosotros, que somos más tramposos que adinerados.

Siempre quisiera poseer un Gifford. Creo que de veras es un gran hombre.

TB: ¿Un dibujo o una pintura?

DF: Me encantaba cualquiera de los dos. Pero creo que en caso de Gifford, su pintura es más representativa. Kensett se comunica bien en óleo y lápiz, aunque no estoy despreciando los dibujos de Gifford. He visto muchos que son maravillosos. Son escasos. El panorama de Constantinople que tiene la Fundación es muy bueno. Me encanta ese tipo de dibujo, que parece típico de ese período en Estados Unidos.

Tengo un magnífico Kensett: la parte oleada de la Barranca de la Meseta del Hudson, en papel azul. Ese si que es un dibujo hermoso. Me fascina. Ese toque tan parco que tiene es el mismo tiempo generosidad. Increíble. Y no le da miedo lo línea recta.

Heiner’s ex-wife and his children and one of the children’s friends. The friend’s name was Henrietta Kaiser and she’s a daughter of a fairly well-known musicologist and a critic in Munich. I had one copper plate left and she was sitting there reading and she has this sweet but difficult early teenage face. I think it’s in the drawing — very quick and very elegant — perhaps one of the best prints I ever did dry point. I just picked up the copper and put the tool to it very quickly before she could become self-conscious. It’s very slight but very good — a face that’s almost not there in rather elegantly stroked lines. It printed fairly well.

TB: When did you move away from New York City?

DF: In desperate poverty in 1965. I was too poor to suffer the poor. The Puerto Rican neighbors had decided to come down upon our heads. So I had to get out and the strange thing is, I ran right into country suspicion and hostility.

TB: How did you pick the area of Cold Spring?

DF: Did what I hear a lot of people do: made a compass circle around New York according to time — hour, hour and a half, two hours — and searched it. Just follow the arc. I finally found a town within around an hour. In those days you could travel faster and you could make Manhattan in 3/4 of an hour. The speed limit was not so closely observed.

It seemed to me that the streets of the village addressed the river. Everything you did there had to do with either coming down to the river or up from it. I really liked that a lot.

I made a “being around water” comment one time for one of the magazines which Judj thought was pretty funny. But curiously, on one side of the family I come from sailors — from fishermen and commercial sea-faring people from Wexford and Cork. The Cullens were in Wexford and Flavins in Cork. My father was the first male who didn’t go to sea. The family moved from Cork to New York in 1890 and he was born in ‘91. He worked on the piers with his father as he was about to go to the seminary and so I guess they thought that was an honorable thing, I guess he worked in the summertimes. I remember him talking about the B & O piers where he was a stevedore. That’s the cut-off but it must be in the Flavin collective memory because here I am by the ocean Con toda sinceridad, me gusta estar en el arte lo poco, lo menos. Y no tiene nada que ver con el “minimalismo”. Eso está al fondo del bote de la basura. Por eso me ha gustado el dibujo.

Tengo un grabado al agua fuerte aquí que quiero mostrarle y que hice mientras esperaba para cenar con la ex esposa de Heiner y los hijos de él y una amiga de éstos. La amiga se llama Henrietta Kaiser, hija de un musicólogo y crítico bastante bien conocido en Munich. Me quedaba una placa de cobre, y ello estaba sentado leyendo y tenía un rostro dulce pero difícil, de la primera adolescencia. Creo que lo capté en el dibujo, elegante pero hecho con rapidez, tal vez uno de los mejores que he hecho con punta seca.LEVante el cobre y comencé a aplicarlo la herramienta antes de que ella pudiera sentirse incómoda. Es muy poco pero de buena calidad — una cura trazada a líneas elegantes, que casi no está allí. Al imprimirla salió bastante bien.

TB: ¿Cuándo se fue de Nueva York?

DF: En la desesperación de la pobreza, en 1965. Yo era demasiado pobre incluso para aguantar a los pobres. Pero la extraña es que me trasladé al campo y encontré allí la misma suspicacia, la misma hostilidad.

TB: ¿Cómo escogió el área de Cold Spring?

DF: Hice lo que tengo entendido que hacen muchas: con un compás tracé círculos concéntricos alrededor de la ciudad de Nueva York — un día, hora y media, dos horas de distancia — y lo investigué. Me limité a seguir los arcos. Por fin con un pueblito a una hora de distancia. En aquel tiempo se podía viajar más rápidamente y llegar en tres cuartos de hora a Nueva York. Las velocidades máximas en carretera no se observaban tan estrictamente.

Me parecía que las calles de ese pueblo se dirigían hacia el río. Todo lo que se hacía allí tenía que ver con bajar hacia el río o subir desde él. Eso me gustaba sobrenaturalmente.

En una ocasión hice un comentario sobre lo cercano de agua que se publicó en una revista y que a Don Judj le pareció divertido. Pero curiosamente, de un lado de mi familia descendía de marineros, los pescadores y gentes del mar de Wexford y Cork. Los Cullen eran de Wexford y los Flavin de Cork. Mi padre fue el primer varón que no hizo vida mar. La familia se vino desde Cork a Nueva York en 1890 y él nació al año siguiente. Trabajó en los muelles con su padre y luego estaba a punto de ingresar en el seminario. Por lo visto eso se consideraba cosa honorable. Creo que trabajaba durante los veranos. Recuerdo que hablaba de los
and I have the barn with riparian rights to the river – the Hudson River. Can’t get far away.

Water is awesome, straight ahead awesome. It’s not like flying, which puts you in a situation of awe – you’re transported. You just have to stand here and look at an ocean. It’s always there. Hear it? I don’t. I never felt I really wanted to be on the beach but I always liked to be close to it. I’ve got pretty much the ideal circumstance. But there are other values involved here, such as defending the house in terms of storms. That’s why this position was chosen. I don’t know whether it was wise, not sure at all.佐...

TB: Do you feel isolated? Do you miss a kind of discourse with other artists?

DF: Never had it. Can’t miss ‘em on that basis. I miss an understandable society sometimes but if I was in the Cedar Bar, I was a loner. I guess I took some comfort from being around people who are also artists but I didn’t talk. Helene said to me the other day that if I was around Don more I’d probably like him less.¹² I think she may likely be right. He’s a strong person and a socially resistant person too, which he’ll admit.

I think he thinks I’m funny. I’ve always enjoyed the idea of being a kind of relief, to be a clown escaped from the seminary and the sea, right? I think that one time Emily wrote about the troubador as an honest breed. Then I was traveling more; you bring your statement and then you vanish with it – perfect. I believe in temporary art wholeheartedly. Whatever you think to do should not be a future burden. It should be destructible. It shouldn’t be taking up space. It should be ashes or whatever the reducible material is and gotten rid of.

TB: How did your involvement with the Dia Art Foundation begin?

DF: By request of the Diatives themselves. Why one is elected or not is hard to figure out.

Well, what do I think? The organization is stupendous and therefore unfulfillable I would kind of guess. There’s a fantastic artistic sentiment involved here. I really appreciate very much what they think to say they want to do. But, I think that the support mechanism probably can’t be developed even for the several artists only who are involved. I wish there was more realization of the projects where proposed. And therefore, I wish the muelles de B & O, donde era estibador. Ahí es donde se cortó la casa, pero debe haber permanecido dentro de la memoria colectiva de los Flavin, porque heme aquí junto al mar y tengo mi parcela con derechos de propietario riberreño sobre el río Hudson. No me puedo alejar mucho.

El agua es maravillosa, simplemente maravillosa. No es como volar, que produce una sensación de temor reverencial, pero si se transporta a uno. Sólo hace falta plantarse ante el océano y mirar. Está siempre allí. ¿Lo escucha? Yo no. Nunca sentí la necesidad de estar en la playa, pero siempre me gustaba estar cerca de ello. Así, mi circunstancia es casi ideal. Pero hay otros quehaceres, como defender mi casa contra la tempestad. Por eso escogí esta posición.

projects were more reasonable so they could be so served. Across the board I wish this was the case. I wish the Foundation was better administered to fulfillment. But, it has such heroic aspects in Heiner’s mind and that’s awfully nice.

TB: When did you first meet Heiner?

DF: I first met Heiner at my opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in the end of 1967. It was the first time I had ever been involved with Museum exhibition. He was with a German woman art historian who had done a Berlin exhibition of historic Russian Art – the First World War and so forth – and he was with his former partner, Franz Joseph Dahlheim, who was about to become curator for the Ströher collection.

Desaparece con él – perfecto. Creo de todo corazón en el arte temporal. Lo que uno se proponga hacer no debe convertirse a futuro en una carga, un deber agobiante. Debe ser destructible. No debe ocupar espacio. Debe ser ceniza, una materia reducible, y luego desechar.

TB: ¿Cómo empezó a relacionarse con la Fundación de Arte Día?

DF: A petición de las deseadas del Día. Es difícil esclarecer por qué a uno le toca ser o no ser el agraciado.

La filosofía de la organización es estupenda y por ende imprescindible, diría yo. Hay un sentido prodigioso de lo artístico aquí. Aprecio mucho los planes que formulan y la manera en que los hacen saber. Pero pienso que probablemente el mecanismo de opayo no puede sostenerse, aún para los pocos artistas participantes. Opinó que hubiera más realización de los proyectos propuestos. Y por eso quisiera que los proyectos fueran más razonables, para que pudieran fructificar. ¿Qué bueno si fuera así en general. Opinó que la Fundación tuviera una mejor administración para cumplir sus objetivos. Pero tiene aspectos tan heroicos en manos de Heiner, y eso está muy bien.

TB: ¿Cuando conociste por primera vez a Heiner?

DF: Lo conocí durante la apertura de mi exhibición en el Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Chicago, a finales de 1967. Fue mi primera exhibición en un museo. Lo acompañaba una alemana, una historiadora del arte quien había montado una exhibición de arte ruso de la Primera Guerra Mundial y demás. Venía acompañado también por su ex socio, Franz Joseph Dahlheim, que estaba a punto de asumir la dirección de la colección Ströher en Darmstadt. Heiner estaba haciendo cargo exclusivo de la galería en Munich y quería conocerme a mí y a Don Judd, que también estaba presente.

TB: ¿Y luego usted tuvo su primera exhibición en la Galería Heiner Friedrich al año siguiente, verdad?


TB: ¿Le interesó obtener una especie de permanencia para su obra a través de Día?
obtaining a kind of permanence for your work through Dia?

DF: Well, you know what I think of that already. I mean one has no choice but to accept the fact of temporary art. Permanence just defies everything. There's no such thing. I have no hope for that. I used to say that I did my certificates on a pulp paper because therefore I knew they would disintegrate. I would like to leave a will and testament to declare everything void at my death. And, it's not unrealistic. I mean it, because only I think to know it as it ought to be. All posthumous interpretations are less. I know this. So I would rather see it all disappear into the wind. Take it all away.

It's electric current with a switch - dubious. Did you ever read that little poem I tried to write years ago about on and off art or off and on art? [See page 47.] I go with that. And rust and broken glass. I mean you really have no choice.

Paper work I don't mind letting stick around. It doesn't take up so much room and all that. And, it might offer some information and some speculation which is always interesting, I suppose. It's a deduction and reduction and maybe better, I don't know.

TB: Are there contemporary artists whose work you especially admire?

DF: As little as possible. No, actually I thought that was an awfully arrogant outlook of Don's - I'm working on outlook today - but it bothered me all those years ago. But it seems to me in a sense unavoidable. You can't lend your appreciation to too much because it's false. It's also difficult to appreciate other art in a considerable way. So you have sentiments about art history and people that are history and most of it you come to because, and I think Don would agree, there are aspects of the thinking and the working results that seem to coincide with your own. I mean sometimes you can so identify, say for me, with Rembrandt's etchings and drawings that you can almost feel 'em from eye to head to fingertips. No, I could make Rembrandt-like lines, I understand those lines. But this is a long discussion as to how available one can be to other art. I think really not so available as even one might like to be. I would say in Don's case I've lent myself more than I would expect to be able to do. I think the return is good but I just don't think you could do it with very many people.

So what else is there?

TB: That's it.

NOTES


2 Fluorescent light, etc. from Dan Flavin, exh. cat., National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1969. Essays by Mel Bavon, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, and Bryceon Smith. In English and French.

3 Dan Flavin, "...on an American Artist's Education...," Artforum (New York) 6, no. 7, March 1968, pp. 28-32.


5 Throughout this interview Flavin humorously mimicked a German accent as a friendly reference to Heiner Friedrich, the director of the Dia Art Foundation at the time.

6 Flavin worked with Lelia and Massimo Vignelli on the E.F. Huisman Showrooms in the Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles. The Huisman wall treatments were used to make three corridors lit with Flavin's lights. See "The Walls: A Showroom clothed in light," Architectural Record (New York) 170, no. 6, July 1982, pp. 120-123.

7 Dan Flavin, "...in daylight or coal white, on autobiographical sketch," Artforum (Los Angeles) 4, no. 4, December, 1965, pp. 21-24.

8 Heiner Friedrich was a major supporter of Dan Flavin's art throughout his career, first as an art dealer in Germany and then as one of the founders, along with Philippa de Menil and Helen Winkler, of the Dia Art Foundation.


10 Dan Flavin, "several more remarks..." Studio International (London) 177, no. 910, April, 1969, pp. 173-175.

11 Flavin first lived in Cold Spring and then purchased a renovated barn in Garrison, New York, the town next to Cold Spring. He maintained this house overlooking the Hudson River until the end of his life.

12 Helene Geary McQuade was a companion and assistant to the artist at this time.