

Pop Pack to pop art

David Morgan casts a luminaire designer's eye over the Hayward Gallery's recent retrospective of Dan Flavin's fluorescent-tube-centric art

The fluorescent batten fixture complete with tube – marketed in the UK by Thorn as the Pop Pack – has come a long way since it was introduced in the late 1950s.

They have become the near invisible workhorse of the lighting world – but lighting professionals must look afresh at these products when they are the building block of art installations such as those by Dan Flavin.

Luminaire design has a visual and tactile quality derived from sculpture and architecture. But in Dan Flavin's world of light, a standard off-the-shelf functional strip-light did the job just as well or maybe better.

Flavin's art is about light and colour but it exists in the particular form of these batten fixtures and T12 lamps. Apparently he was keen that only standard off-the-shelf luminaires should be used in his light artworks.

Light as art or the luminaire as sculpture; is there a meeting point or do they occupy completely separate dimensions?

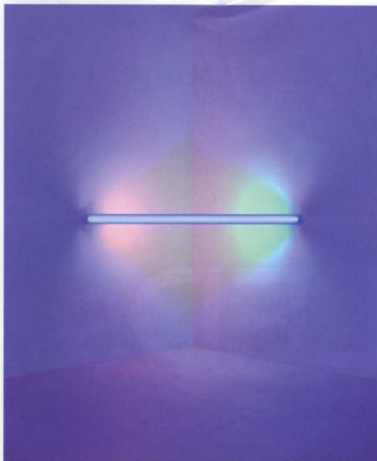
Retro feel

Perhaps only when they come together in a designed space – architectural or interior designed – do both the luminaire design and the lighting design need to relate to the demands of the building and space. Otherwise, the two seem to work well quite independently.

But for me, one of the attractions of Dan Flavin's pieces is the retro feel of the lamp size and the metalwork detailing. There are no accidents in art – every detail becomes part of the overall impression. Perhaps that is why they work so much better as art when seen as photographs where all extraneous details is removed.

Was I the only visitor to the show to spend time investigating the quality of the American-made luminaires?

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I noted that many of them were made by LaMar Lighting from Farmingdale, New Jersey where I frequently visit one of my US clients, and I wondered if they are still making these fixtures or sourcing them from China.

Ironically, to keep these light installations going, the coloured T12 lamps now need to be specially produced. So, despite Flavin's off-the shelf ethos, the works are gradually becoming hand-crafted, sculptural pieces.

Is this a case of art imitating life – or perhaps ordinary life transforming into art as has been the case over the centuries with so many once-ordinary artefacts? ■

Flavin: retro feel and period details add to the attraction