NEW YORK

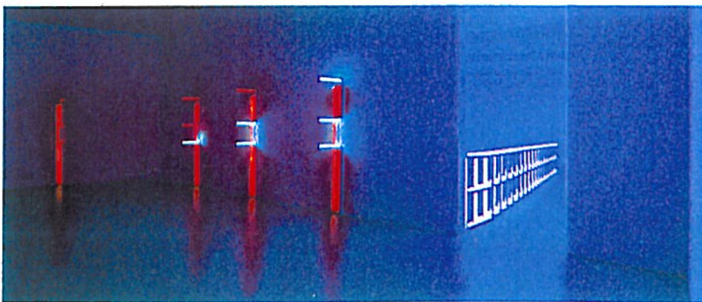
Dan Flavin

DAVID ZWIRNER

Somehow, no matter how many times I see Dan Flavin's work, I always seem to harbor the exact same misconceived expectation, namely that I'm going to encounter things of striking perceptual luxury—light mobilized within spatial scenarios à la James Turrell or Olafur Eliasson, say, in which the physical apparatus of the lamp is simply a vehicle for producing the radiant focus of the show, a non-physical (even metaphysical) form of illumination that envelops and swallows the viewer in its lyrical maw.

Of course, this is for the most part misremembered bunk: Flavin was no mystic and his work—as this recent exhibition, the first appearance of the late artist at David Zwirner since the gallery began representing his estate, clearly demonstrated—is in practice more correctly aligned with the unadorned, system-based Minimalist programs of Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, or Donald Judd than with any of the notionally transcendent impulses with which I reflexively associate it. Granted, this show, which was curated by Flavin scholar Tiffany Bell, was focused on the artist's "Series and Progressions," a central, if not the exclusive, organizing principle of his oeuvre, and one that suggested the exhibition would draw from a soberer side of his production. Nevertheless, the experience was a salutary reminder of the degree to which Flavin's work is actually as much about the lights as it is about the *light*; about what he himself called "a clearly, openly, plainly delivered . . . 'get-in-get-out' situation,'" conspicuously lacking "overwhelming spirituality" and purposefully refusing to extend any "invitation to meditate, to contemplate."

The plainly delivered "thingness" of Flavin's works was vivid across Zwirner's Nineteenth Street complex, where each of the suites on view had its own character, traits generally seeming to emerge less from ineffable emanations and a perturbation of surrounding conditions than from the individual sculptures' own physical structures—the simple one-two-three rhythm of 1963's white *the nominal three (to William of Ockham)*, for instance, or the sprawling, hall-size arrangement *alternating pink and gold* of 1967, with its sequences of eight-foot-high vertical bulbs ordered in series of eight, ten, and twelve units, respectively, each built as symmetrical wings flanking a single central pillared pair on their own wall. In between these two poles of scale lay a grouping titled "two primary series and one secondary," 1968, composed of three vertical two-four-six sequences, one each in red/yellow, red/blue, and red/green, each set of which was arrayed in its own room. Here, in smaller enclosed spaces, these works—which in fact represent a more portable, less strictly site-specific thread of Flavin's practice—did seem to engineer an ambience greater than the sum of their parts. Yet even soaking in the faint purple wash of the blue/red admixture, one was always mindful of its literal source: Flavin's choice of blandly commercial fixtures and bulbs as his sole material was a strategic one, a calculated decision to remove the hand arrived at after experiments with more gesturally explicit work. This engagement with the stuff of the world (like its related distancing of the artist from the processes of fabrication) works powerfully against whatever latent romanticism might seem to lurk in the pieces, their evocations of nocturnal spaces and liminal states between light and dark leavened by always-visible technical appurtenances typically constructed for the classroom or the office cubicle.



View of "Dan Flavin," 2009. From left: *untitled (for John Heartfield) 3a*, 1990; *untitled (for John Heartfield) 3b*, 1990; *untitled (for John Heartfield) 3c*, 1990; *untitled (for John Heartfield) 3d*, 1990; *untitled (to Helga and Carlo, with respect and affection)*, 1974.

The show's final rooms held what seemed like two intriguing outliers from its program. In a late work called *untitled (for John Heartfield)*, 1990, Flavin turned his bulbs away from the wall and strikingly into space as a series of three perpendicular tubes shift one at a time from red to blue over the course of the four-piece set, not simply implying a spatial reordering but effecting one. And the extraordinary 1974 barrier work *untitled (to Helga and Carlo, with respect and affection)*, originally created for (and only ever shown at) a 1975 exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel, fairly buzzed with blue-white energy. A fencelike series of seventeen four-by-four fluorescent squares dividing the large gallery, it represented by far the show's most dramatic intervention into real space, one that in fact did extend, amid the other more restrained "get-in-get-out" moments, a clear invitation to pause and contemplate, and produced the sort of overwhelming sensory experience that will no doubt be later remembered, rightly or wrongly, as awe.

—*Jeffrey Kastner*

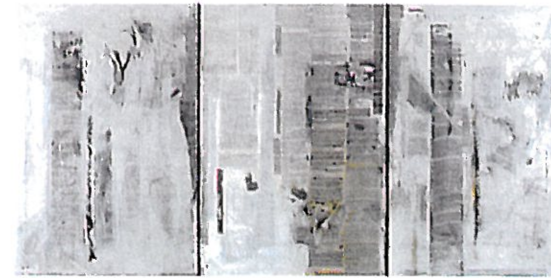
Peter Sacks

PAUL RODGERS/9W

Collage seems consigned to barely more than miniature. Its size would be a function of the width of newspaper columns, of the decorative patterns of wallpaper, of bus tickets and candy wrappers. Only *Guernica* broke with this scale of bits and scraps. It achieved mural dimensions by resorting to imitation: "newsprint" scattered over large planes through broken lines of black. Disdaining imitation, Peter Sacks achieves triptychs nearly fifteen feet wide by typing texts onto long rolls of linens of various kinds—winding sheets, shrouds, strips of prison shirts.

These textual scrolls overlie a mixture of fabrics and corrugated board, the whole given a luminous sheen by washes of white acrylic. Their surfaces radiate the character of monochromes steamrolling over the thickened oscillation of figure/ground. The texts in question vary from Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903) and Aby Warburg's 1923 "Lecture on Serpent Ritual," both composed in mental asylums, to Rilke's "Duino Elegies" of 1912–22 and the "Time Passes" section of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Forcing the viewer to linger over the surface, to which is attached various kinds of netting and lace, the columns of text produce something akin to Roland Barthes's description in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) of the reader's slowing down so as to experience the pleasure of the signifier against the pressure of racing toward narrative closure.

The open weave of the netting, meanwhile, brings to the surface the infrastructure of painting's tightly woven canvas—another avatar of the signifier. In *Necessity 8*, 2007–2009, the mesh of textures doubles Schreber's fantasy—typed on the work's fabric—of being impregnated by the rays of God as these filaments attach themselves to his nerve endings. Such "interweavings" both thicken and lighten Sacks's collages, which shimmer in their brave disdain for a mistaken identity as a form of Cubism. Just as Schreber's memoir is rhymed with the mesh of fabric, Warburg's example points to that massive collage of art-historical memory, his Mnemnosyne Atlas (1924–29). Memory is the infrastructure of Sacks's collage, differentiating his concatenations of material from Robert Rauschenberg's visual Combines.



Peter Sacks, *Necessity 8*, 2007–2009, mixed media, 6' 4¾" x 12' 9½".

The laces contrast with the corrugated surfaces as handcraft to industrial material. *Necessity 10* opens the corrugations to resemble the typesetter's "flatbed," once more summoning forth the visual language of the texts. Swipes of black paint tar the corrugations into tire tracks, bringing Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) into the mnemonic mix. Kerouac, famously, typed his book on a single roll of paper. His manuscript is itself a road of verbiage, the medium made recursive. He writes, "As a seaman I used to think of the waves rushing beneath the shell of the ship and the bottomless deeps thereunder—now I could feel the road some twenty inches beneath me, unfurling and flying and hissing at incredible speeds across the groaning continent with that mad Ahab at the wheel. When I closed my eyes all I could see was the road unwinding into me." Sacks's "road" of text likewise unwinds into its viewers, producing what Barthes calls "the culture of the signifier" or "the moment when by its very excess, verbal pleasure chokes and reels into bliss."

In addition to the collage series, the show included the monochromatic triptychs *Necessity 9* and *Necessity 4* (both 2003–2009). In each, a layer of acrylic covers the entire surface, not only obscuring the typed texts but burying its detail, except for remnants of the edges of fabrics. As with most monochromes (Robert Ryman's heavy brushstrokes come to mind), there is in these "Necessities" a vis-à-vis between the surface of the paintings (the linens, the paintwork) and their canvas supports. This layering of two textures is what, in "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger calls *hypokeimenon* (or "the ground of the thing, something always already there"), and Derrida's "Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing [*Pointure*]" renders as "the underneath of the underneath," as when, in the infamous example of van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes, Heidegger focuses on the sole of the shoe as the shoe's support, in turn supported by the earth, just as the represented sole is also supported by the canvas ground. The monochrome insists—and Sacks adheres to this pictorial structure—that the primary underneath rise to the surface in all its newly won unity, which Heidegger describes as "this closed, unitary repose of self-support."

—*Rosalind Krauss*

Gerhard Richter

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

Gerhard Richter's indebtedness to a range of photographic practices has been the taproot of his intensely admired achievements. The incipient force of this approach first emerged in the painter's adaptations of Andy Warhol in the early 1960s (modifications he worked out concurrently with Sigmar Polke). As Richter's work developed, its representational and abstract polarities became ever more marked—distinctly separate but equal options. After all, the aesthetic equivalence between abstraction and representation is hardly an abstruse notion; postmodern sensibility cherishes stylistic discontinuity and incongruity rather than pictorial consistency.

This recent exhibition featured forty-seven works, most resembling Richter's familiar multicolored abstract paintings but also including five remarkable canvases that might be called "white abstractions." There is also a freak work, a huge square mirror that seemingly argues for the putative parity of perceived reality and the reflected world, "art as a mirror of nature," here literalized as a cunning conceit—or did Michelangelo Pistoletto just streak by? *Fence*, 2008, the "other" representational work in this show—that is, if the mirror was intended to remind us of Richter's exquisite representational gifts—is slim pickings indeed when one thinks of the painter's canonical candles, landscapes, portraits, and adaptations of domestic *Hitlerzeit* snapshots.

Sinbad, 2008, is a suite of paintings in lacquer behind glass. These patchy diptychs rather seminarishly conjure Wassily Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter's *Hinterglasmalerei*, Blue Rider works painted behind glass in the manner of Bavarian peasant ex-votos, folkloric saints enlivened by the double refraction of the paint itself when seen through a glass surface.

But the white abstractions are the heart of the show; anything but white, they flirt with lavender casts and green tints. By instants these works are somewhat blurred—the photographic blur generative of whole ranges of Richter's painting—their surfaces squeegeed and, at times, impacted with captured and dragged air bubbles. These small surface ruptures are akin to the occasional lines that appear to be scratched into the surface with the pointed end of a brush (or any styluslike implement that may come to hand); or the lines caused by a grain of congealed paint dragged, as it were, through the ointment; or the lines that result from the shifts in pressure when the painter, using a spatula-like instrument, trowels the pigment about during the ferule's swipe. At times, powdery trails of color read like lesions, or the marks one might find on a soiled bandage. Still another source of these variegated surfaces may result from the lifting away of slick counterproofed laminates from one another with a resultant orange-peel-like skin.

Gerhard Richter, *912-1 Abstract Painting*, 2009, oil on canvas, 110¼ x 110¼".

But striving for verbal equivalents to the subtle variations available even to Richter's rather Calvinist taste is not the point. Rather, it is that the abstractions, when met in so large a group, tend to discourage faith in them, quite as one has little faith in the myriad studies by Polke. As with the latter works, Richter's abstractions are best encountered individually: When seen independent of one another, they possess an authority that is vitiated en masse. As a group they strike me as too easy, too formulaic, too churned-out—a reservation, in an art world whose seisms are registered on the Richter scale, that admittedly runs against the consensus that everywhere surrounds this *monstre sacré*.