

month in review

Light: Object and Image by GORDON BROWN

In a perfect society there is no art because everything is already beautiful. The Constructivists were the first to conceive this charming idea, which ties in with the concept that art should be life, and also with the notion that machines are beautiful. Those who advance these ideas often appear to be anti-artists, but really they are idealists.

One artist in this category is Dan Flavin, now with the Dwan Gallery, who, with the other artists mentioned here, except Anastasi, will be strongly represented in "Light: Object and Image," an important exhibition at The Whitney Museum (July 23-September 29). For his material, Flavin buys the same fluorescent lights that we use everyday and installs them as bona fide exhibits in art galleries. Since he does not modify or re-design these products, he seems to be saying that they were quite all right in the first place.

Actually, fluorescent tubes are beautiful—but I seem to remember that Flavin's fixtures, as distinct from his lights, are not. I also have my doubts about industry ever establishing a golden age of design, but this scepticism is irrelevant in the sense that Flavin, if I am right about his intentions, has the right to aspire to a better society, according to his own lights (no pun intended). One of the functions of art has always been to champion some ideal.

From another point of view there is no doubt that Flavin, through his use of actual fluorescent lights, exhibits facts, including deficiencies as well as sufficiencies. An important branch of contemporary art concerns itself only with clever ways of pointing out facts. Thus, if Anastasi who last exhibited with the Dwan Gallery, hangs a photograph of part of a wall over the very spot depicted in the photograph, there is a difference of a fraction of an inch between the photo and the wall. If the photo is printed on transparent paper, the variations of the wall surface are stressed since they appear exactly underneath the reproduction of themselves. Anastasi remains an artist because his work is never quite the same as nature, even if the variation is small, and because he accentuates certain appearances. Likewise, in the case of Flavin, the posi-

tions in which he places his lights are not the same positions they would occupy in an office, laboratory or other place devoted to the business of ordinary life. Thus, neither the lights nor the shadows they cause are entirely factual. Nevertheless, one would have to call Flavin's works objects. They are not images because they are not representations or reproductions but the actual things, themselves.

Anastasi, on the other hand is dealing with images, but his reproductions, as in his photographic work, are exact. In Anastasi's works, the examination of images becomes an exciting new branch of aesthetic endeavor. Anyone could reproduce a Flavin but this is not the case with Anastasi. The apparatus that Anastasi hopes to set up at the Museum of Modern Art is quite complicated. But, in all cases, his ideas are beautifully simple.

One way of creating something factual is to deal only with pure forms, having no reference to anything outside of themselves. The work of Howard Jones and Preston McClanahan, both with Howard Wise, often falls into this category.

Jones' *Bronze Star* recalls a figure in geometry simply because it is symmetrical. It does not greatly resemble an ordinary star in the sky. Obviously it is a machine connoting only its own purpose: to produce 750 different light patterns, which are reflected many times over, in depth, on its polished surface. In other pieces by Jones, the interval and timing of combinations vary endlessly. Time and change are not suggested, but are actually part of these machines when they are working.

Spectator participation does not destroy the objectivity of Jones' work, but rather emphasizes its impersonality. Anyone can make *Sonic Two* work. People make shadows on a metal band and the shadows make percussive noises.

Spectator participation, and the appeal to hearing as well as to sight, humanizes Jones' constructions, however impersonal they may be. In a statement published in *Art in America* he said, "I would say this only if there is a difference between the two: let's explore the uncertain nature of life itself and forget about art."

Brown, Gordon. "Light: Object and Image." *Arts Magazine*, Summer 1963, pp 54.