

REVIEWS

ST. MORITZ, SWITZERLAND

“Dan Flavin, to Lucie Rie and Hans Coper, master potters”

VITO SCHNABEL GALLERY

Handicraft is not something Dan Flavin valued in his own work, so it might seem a little odd that with his series “untitled (to Lucie Rie, master potter)” and “untitled (to Hans Coper, master potter),” both 1990, he paid homage to two ceramists. But Austrian-born Lucie Rie (1902–1995) and her German-born protégé Hans Coper (1920–1981) were not just two more figures among the eclectic group of artists, friends, and family to whom Flavin dedicated his works. In fact, he had collected their pots, which were included alongside his fluorescent light installations in this exhibition, framed as a group show of three key figures of the postwar avant-garde.

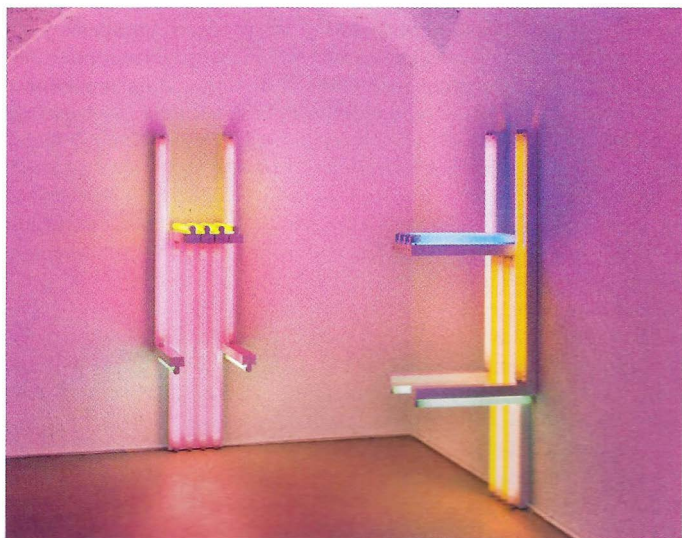
Refugees from Nazism who for a time shared a studio in London, Rie and Coper modernized British pottery with a pared-down style characterized by innovative forms and use of materials. The show featured fifteen vessels from Flavin’s collection, as well as nine pieces from each of the two series dedicated to them. All of the works for Rie had the same basic configuration: six long fluorescent light tubes vertically affixed to the wall and six shorter fluorescent tubes horizontally sticking out, like the arms and telescopic eyes of a humanoid. The colors, which included blue, green, pink, and yellow, altered randomly from

one work to the next and mixed beautifully on the walls and floor of the vaulted gallery basement where the series was installed. The series for Coper, which consisted entirely of white lights, drew attention to recognizable patterns of variation in shape and to subtle changes in color between cool white, warm white, and daylight, fitting with the snow-covered landscape visible through the ground-floor windows. Some works were taller or shorter than the ones for Rie, but except for two T-shaped configurations (*untitled [to Hans Coper, master potter] 24b* and *24a*), they too had fluorescent light tubes rotated outward like robotic arms.

Despite some of the striking differences in material, fabrication, scale, and relation to space, Rie’s and Coper’s ceramic vessels harmonized surprisingly well with the light installations made in their honor. Lined up in a vitrine were eleven stoneware and porcelain bowls, vases, and pots by Rie that bore different colors, experimental glazes, and the most delicate abstract decoration, as well as four stoneware pieces by Coper that, while limited to black, white, and earth tones, displayed a range of forms, from angular to goblet and spade, that drew out their sculptural qualities. Beyond being generally connected through their modernist styles and serial processes, the ceramics and the Minimalist light sculptures shared a simplicity and a rhythmic pattern of repetition and difference.

Seeing Flavin’s work alongside that of Rie and Coper not only let one better appreciate the ceramics, too, as more than just functional objects, but also made it possible to get a fuller sense of the former. The robotic shapes evident across both series seemed a humorous allusion to the American artist’s own rejection of the handmade, while each series was designed to resonate with Rie’s and Coper’s interests in color and sculptural form, respectively. The two series turned out to be highly responsive to their subjects while articulating the underlying principles of Flavin’s practice—the relation between medium and materiality, hand and machine—contributing to what above all emerged from this display of a relatively little-known part of his late work: a sense of both warmth and clarity.

—Elisa Schaar



View of “Dan Flavin, to Lucie Rie and Hans Coper, master potters,” 2017. From left: *untitled (to Lucie Rie, master potter) 1w*, 1990; *untitled (to Lucie Rie, master potter) 1fff*, 1990. Photo: Stefan Altenburger.