

DANIEL BUREN

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FROM PAINTING TO ARCHITECTURE

ANNE RORIMER

The art of Daniel Buren has been ever expanding upon the aesthetic possibilities arising from thematic attention to architectural visibility and institutional invisibility. His exhibition this summer at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, full of joie de vivre with its colorful vistas and effects, offered a multi-faceted and open-ended visual experience. Occurring in actual architectural space, “Le Musée qui n’existait pas” (The Museum Which Did Not Exist), as the exhibition was called, marked a culminating moment in a career devoted to extricating painting from its traditional confinement to a framed canvas.

Over a thirty-five year span, one can follow the course of Buren’s ongoing exploration of relationships between painting and architecture. Painting, as of 1967, in Buren’s oeuvre would situate itself with respect to existing architectural elements, but by the early eighties, would come to stand for—and as—architecture.

Buren’s work is rooted in the artist’s initial search for ways to strip painting of illusionistic and expressive reference as per his decision in 1965 to reduce

the pictorial content of his canvases to the repetition of mechanically printed, alternating white and colored vertical bands 8.7 cm in width painted white on its outer stripes. Commercially obtained, prefabricated material with vertical stripes has thus functioned as an anonymous, painted sign/design. Throughout much of Buren’s career this sign—which “remains immutable,” while being used to provide the “internal structure”¹⁾ of each and almost every work—has generated the hundreds of works in situ he has accomplished worldwide.

When Buren glued green and white striped material to the outside door of the Apollinaire Gallery in Milan in 1968 for his first solo exhibition, he effectively closed the door to the conventional exhibition area in order to open it up to questions. By covering the door with stripes, he substituted door frame for traditional frame while having replaced the traditional canvas surface area with the surface of the entry door.

From the late sixties and throughout the seventies, Buren further succeeded in the creation of works that self-critically embodied or drew attention to some aspect of their own institutional framework with reference to elements of their architectural surroundings. His 1969 exhibition, for example, at the Wide White Space in Antwerp, assumed its precise visual form in response to architectural reality. It linked together the interior exhibition space and the

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DANIEL BUREN, *photo-souvenir: (SANS TITRE)*, travail in situ (extérieur), Wide White Space Gallery, Anvers, January 1969, detail.
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DANIEL BUREN, photo-souvenir: À PARTIR DE LÀ..., travail in situ, Städtisches Museum, Mönchengladbach, November 1975, detail, see/siège CABANE NO. 0, 1975-1982, p./S. 68. (COPYRIGHT: DANIEL BUREN)



DANIEL BUREN, photo-souvenir: UP AND DOWN, IN AND OUT, STEP BY STEP, travail in situ (extérieur), Art Institute of Chicago, 1977, detail. (COPYRIGHT: DANIEL BUREN)

exterior of the building in which the gallery was located. In this instance, Buren applied striped paper, scaled to the show's invitational poster, to a flat plinth outside the building. The striped material extended from a hydrant at the side of the building to the doorway, and from the doorway into the gallery itself. Significantly, the work's formal properties and spatial allocation on the wall arose in direct association with existing conditions of architectural detailing.

Conceived in a totally different manner, *À PARTIR DE LÀ* (Starting from There, 1975) addressed conventions of exhibiting art. In doing so, it brought the walls of the entire exhibition area into active thematic service so that the painted surface of paintings inseparably merged with their mural surface. For this exhibition at the Städtisches Museum Mönchengladbach, Buren—having researched nearly ten years of the museum's installation history with its consistent approach to hanging paintings—covered the walls of all of its rooms with vertically striped fabric. Rectangular voids formed by cut-outs from the striped paper represented the spaces where paintings, selected from a cross-section of the museum's numerous exhibitions, had at one time been hung on the wall. Rhetorically asking "Is the wall a background for the picture or is the picture a decoration for the wall?" Buren observed that "in any case, the one does not exist without the other."²⁾ With its emphatically striped walls pierced by rectangular voids that represented absent paintings, *À PARTIR DE LÀ* could not be cut out from the encompassing framework of the museum as this is understood to be both a cultural construct and an architectural construction.

For his participation in "Europe in the Seventies: Aspects of Recent Art," held at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1977, Buren realized his unprecedented work titled *UP AND DOWN, IN AND OUT, STEP BY STEP, A SCULPTURE*. Now in the permanent collection of the museum, it demonstrates the complete coincidence of a work with its architectural and institutional setting. *UP AND DOWN...* utilizes the interior staircase (known as the Grand Staircase) that, leading from the museum's main entrance to the permanent collection on the second floor, provides access to galleries containing art from different centuries.

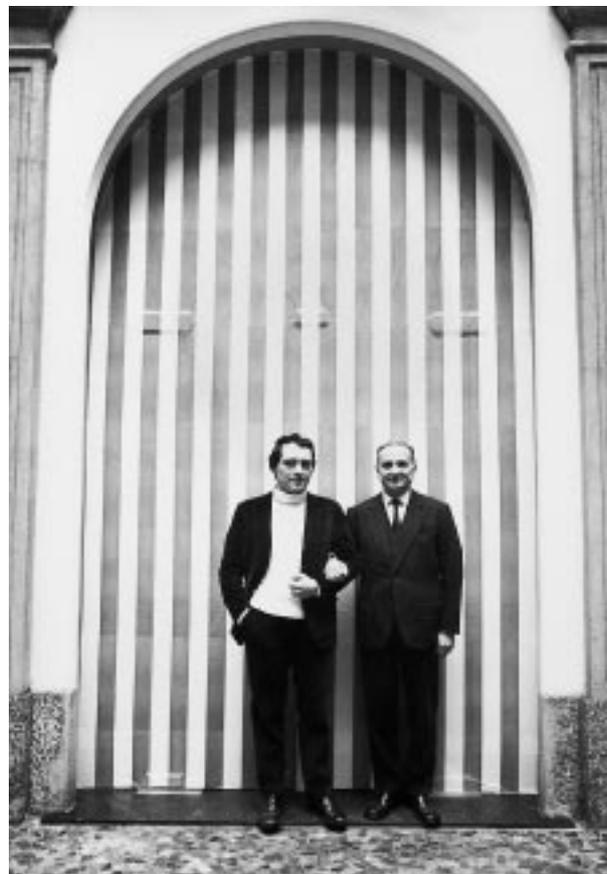


Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren & Guido Le Nocci in front of the / vor der Galerie Apollinaire, Milano, October 1968, detail.

When white and colored striped paper is cut and glued to the risers of its steps, the Art Institute's staircase becomes an object with a sculptural presence of its own. Of principle note, the steps retain their functional purpose as a staircase while simultaneously fusing painting, sculpture, and architecture.

In contrast to other works in the museum's collection, *UP AND DOWN...* is exempt from placement within rooms exclusively devoted to the permanent collection and interacts with the museum as an architectural and cultural whole by defining itself as its



DANIEL BUREN, *photo-souvenir*: *STALACTIC/STALAGMITIC: A DRAWING IN SITU AND THREE DIMENSIONS*, *travail in situ*, University Art Museum, Berkeley, California, 1979, detail.
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pedestal and core. While other works are subject to classification and relocation, generally in isolation from their original historical or cultural conditions, *UP AND DOWN...* cannot be considered apart from the architectural and institutional reality into which it is absorbed and with which it visibly coexists.

A work of two years later conceived at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, California for “Andre, Buren, Irwin, Nordman: Space as Support” marked

an important transition in Buren’s thinking about painting vis-à-vis architecture and vice versa. Rather than confining his work to the particularity of specific walls or architectural elements as in the *Wide White Space* exhibition of ten years before or in *UP AND DOWN...*, Buren chose to directly confront the entirety of the museum’s interior space. *STALACTIC/STALAGMITIC: A DRAWING IN SITU AND THREE DIMENSIONS* (1979) revealed the complexity of the museum’s architectural space in which domineering, multi-level planes of concrete, projecting into the interior, intersect one above another at emphatic angles. The exhibition areas of the museum, located on six different levels, are connected by ramps whose railings form low, concrete parapets that continue from the inside to the outside of the building. Buren adhered perpendicularly cut white- and blue-striped paper to the tops of all of the museum’s interior and exterior parapet walls. He also glued paper—cut parallel with its printed stripes and defined by the width of the wall section—from the top to the bottom of all wall surfaces. By means of these ribbon-like bands, he demarcated the juncture of the walls’ many intersecting axes. The vertically-cut stripes broke up the severity of the harsh, concrete space, while the repetition of the stripes as rectangles along the tops of all the parapets diagrammatically analyzed the nature of the fractured space and visually tied it together. The Berkeley installation thereby transformed the architectural barriers of the museum into unifying, rather than divisive, structures. As in his *Mönchengladbach* exhibition, Buren incorporated the walls of the exhibition space within the work instead of treating walls as passive backdrops or neutral elements of enclosure.

The Berkeley installation anticipated ensuing works of the early eighties in which painting would be set on a par with architecture rather than being dictated by or coterminous with existing architectural elements or elevations. A work of 1982, *PLAN CONTRE-PLAN*, shown at the Haus Esters Museum in Krefeld as part of a joint exhibition with Michael Asher (whose work was on view in the adjoining Haus Lange Museum), issued in Buren’s subsequent construction of vertically striped partitions that would function actively in their own right to articulate the

pre-existing exhibition area. Signaling a major shift in approach, *PLAN CONTRE-PLAN*—which was based on the floor plan from Haus Lange where Asher's work was on view—reproduced this house's mural partitions in full scale in white- and red-striped material. By superimposing the walls of one of the two early, neighboring houses of Mies van der Rohe on the other, Buren staged a visible interaction between the layouts of closely related houses. At the same time he juxtaposed "real" walls with walls fabricated from vertically-striped material. The white- and red-striped walls of canvas determined by Haus Lange's layout overlapped with and projected beyond House Esters' walls to form walled partitions on its exterior.

At Krefeld, vertically-striped fabric for the first time functioned autonomously as both mural surface and architectural divider. *À PARTIR DE LÀ* (1982), following immediately after Buren's Krefeld exhibition, reinforced the idea that painting could support an architectural dimension. A free-standing work made of striped fabric, wood supports, and Plexiglas, it replicated in full scale all of the ground floor wall elevations of the Mönchengladbach Museum (including its doors and windows) as it had appeared during the display of *À PARTIR DE LÀ* in 1975. A three-dimensional work, also from 1975, but shown in 1982, injected volumetric form into a previously enterable, yet undetachable, installation. It would lead shortly thereafter to the *CABANES ÉCLATÉES* (Exploded Cabins) in 1984 that, in their many different variations, furthered Buren's redefinition of painting in the terms of enterable pavilions. Built first out of stretched fabric, they subsequently would become more elaborate and would consist of other materials such as wood or Plexiglas.

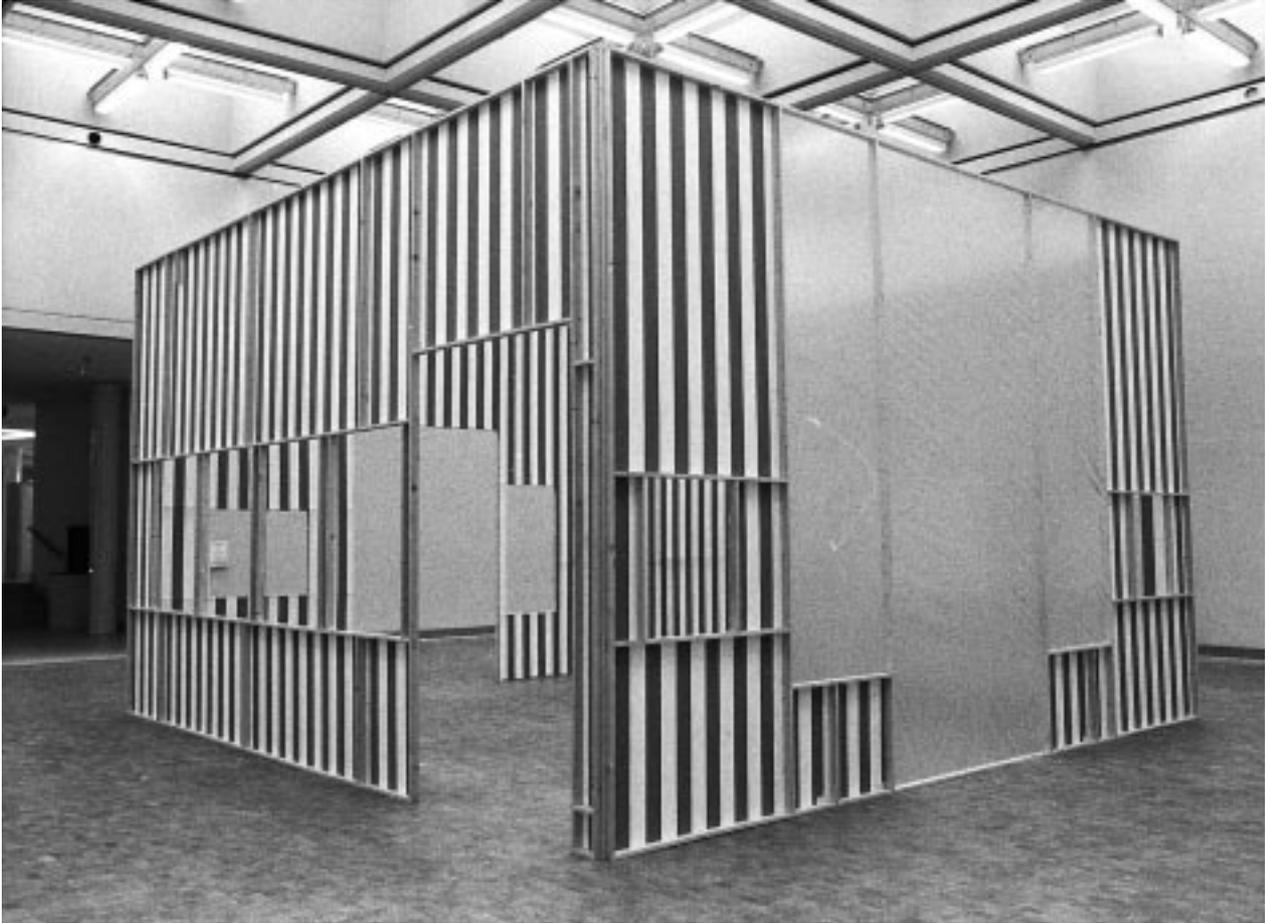
A pivotal work of 1983, *POINTS DE VUE OU LE CORRIDORSCOPE*, presented at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, definitively established the self-sufficiency of fabric-cum-wall. Black and white fabric held taut and upright by wooden supports formed a walled, covered corridor that, available to passage, zigzagged through the museum. Instead of looking at one or more paintings attached to a wall, therefore, visitors were able to walk through a work that transformed painted—and static—planarity into architectural reality. While they moved

through the work, visitors caught glimpses of other works of art on view from windows cut out from the fabric.

The walls of *POINTS DE VUE...* engendered a dynamic dialogue between painting, as indicated by its striped fabric, and architecture released from its usual background role in the mere service of display. Of particular note, *POINTS DE VUE...* masked its existing architectural container. Also, because of its winding shape, visitors were able to see the outer walls of the corridor in which they were being contained and which, itself, was contained by the museum's architecture. By instating an alternative architecture to that of the building, moreover, this work paradoxically revealed the virtual invisibility of the museum while proposing the idea of its own, self-supporting reality.

A work of 1983, *INTERSECTING AXES: A WORK IN SITU*, presented at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, definitively established the self-sufficiency of fabric-cum-wall. Two bisecting corridors of vertical white and orange stripes, extending from the four corner bays of the gallery's perimeter, engendered a dialogue between the ad hoc striped partitions and the given wall partitions. The walls of striped fabric and the existing walls intersected with one another to establish a dynamic dialogue between painting, as indicated by striped fabric, and architecture brought forward from its usual background role in the service of display.

Buren's most recent achievement at the Pompidou Centre may be understood with regard to the logical evolution of thinking that, over the years, has led the artist away from the illusionistic space of traditional painting via architecture toward direct engagement with the concrete reality of the world. From the mid-eighties to the present, this engagement has further occasioned works far too numerous and varied to discuss here. These works hark back to works as famous (and infamous because it was removed before the opening of the exhibition) as *PEINTURE-SCULPTURE* (Painting-Sculpture, 1971), a two-sided painting suspended from the sky-lit ceiling that cut a gigantic swath through the open cavity of the Guggenheim Museum, New York. From among copious examples of later works, however, *UNE EN-*



DANIEL BUREN, *photo-souvenir: À PARTIR DE LÀ... CABANE NO. 0, 1975/82, travail in situ, Städtisches Museum, Mönchengladbach, September 1982, detail, see/vgl. A PARTIR DE LÀ..., p./S. 64. (COPYRIGHT: DANIEL BUREN)*

VELOPPE PEUT EN CACHER UNE AUTRE (1989) might be singled out for the way it set up a dialectic not only between painting and architecture but also between the idea of the museum as container and the objects it contains. During the course of Buren's exhibition in Geneva, the Musée Rath housed ten CABANES ÉCLATÉES in its lower level gallery at the same time as the entire museum building itself was treated as an object of display.

In the interest of rejecting singular or static points of view, the art of Buren has embraced the notion of expressing the multiple, almost endless, facets of vi-

sual possibility. Grounding his works in the real without espousing the grandiose or impositional, he has constantly sought to express the idea of the unfettered nature of aesthetic experience that (as he has demonstrated) may be proffered to spectators in relation to the temporal and spatial reality of architecture and its institutional affiliations.

1) Daniel Buren, "Beware" in *Five Texts* (New York: The John Weber Gallery/London: The Jack Wendler Gallery, 1973), p. 15.

2) Buren, "On Saturday" in *Daniel Buren: Around "Ponctuations"* (Lyon: Le Nouveau Musée, 1980), n.p.