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The Ideal Museum, Which Shall Never Be

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On Daniel Buren

Marcel Duchamp once said that a great artist has something really important to say only once or twice in his life. The rest is filler, just something to pass the time, or – as Bruce Nauman once remarked – to keep oneself busy. In other words: rubbish. As a strategist, Duchamp realised that the power of such a work as his urinal would be difficult to equal, and that each new work would be measured against it. It is expected of artists that they continue to be creative and innovative. If they remain entrenched in the style or strategy with which they became well-known, before too long they are criticised for resting on their laurels or milking their artistic success formula. Daniel Buren is an artist about whom such things have been said for some years. Since reducing his artistic techniques in 1965 to the systematic use of a pattern of alternating white or coloured vertical strips, 8.7 cm in width, his work has been repeatedly found to be excessively monotonous and simple. It has been said of him that he simply does the same thing all the time. This criticism however misses the point of Buren's work. By reducing the painter's instrumentarium to a set of instructions, Buren demonstrates a desire to free art of the notion of the originality and uniqueness of the so-called 'masterpiece.' *L'outil visuel* is not used in order to ask questions on the nature of painting, but in order to analyse the discourse, institutions and conventions which give art its legitimacy. It is not reflexive – as it has been reduced to zero – but operative: it is active 'somewhere.' *L'outil visuel* has been interpreted as a proposal in outlined form – Buren himself refers to a proposition – of a 'version' suitable for use somewhere. The strip motif functions as a catalyst, as a stimulus which can be used to 'get a spot working.' Precisely because the strips are devoid of content and are always 'the same,' the context in which they appear starts to vary. Buren's works demonstrate that art is *always* and *everywhere* having its 'appearance' placed in position, that there is no *mise-en-vue* without a *mise-en-scène*, and, most importantly, that this is always architectural in nature.

Art, architecture and the museum

In the text *Fonction de l'architecture* from 1975, Buren asserts that the history of modern art has concentrated all too long on the 'internal' architecture of works of art, or the perspectival space 'in' a work. No attention was paid to the fact that art does not exist or become visible by virtue of itself, but needs a place – an 'inside' – in order to be 'made' public. According to Buren, the history of a work's relationship with its environment has yet to be written:

L'histoire qui reste à faire s'affiche

L'histoire qui reste à faire, c'est la prise en considération du lieu (l'architecture) dans lequel une oeuvre échoue (se fait) comme partie intégrale de l'oeuvre en question et de toutes les conséquences qu'une telle appartenance implique.¹

A work of art does not become public by virtue of itself, but is always 'made' public, somewhere. To that end, it

is inevitably 'framed' in any of a number of ways – removed from the world and thus restrained, in both time and space. It never exists 'autonomously' and can never claim to do this. In order to escape from the reflexive idealism of much modern art, Buren attempts, in his work, to take into account the different levels upon which art is 'carried,' as every 'cultural' spot influences the works made public there, be it on a formal, architectural, sociological or political level. The whole thing revolves, according to him, around a dialectical 'intertwining' of the work and the spot:

Tension-crise

Il s'agit bien plus, il me semble, de montrer ce qui dans un lieu donné va impliquer l'œuvre immédiatement et peut-être, grâce à l'œuvre impliquer ce lieu. De la tension ainsi créée apparaîtra dialectiquement la crise entre la fonction du Musée (architecture) et celle de l'Art (l'objet visuel).

In the above excerpts, Buren employs a bivalent notion of the concept architecture. On the one hand, he equates it with the idea of location or *lieu*, on the other, with that of (the function of) the museum. Although this may seem confusing at first, this dual reading points to the fundamentally architectural character of (the function of) the museum: the museum defines an artificial place in the world, where works of art are made public, or, to put it another way, where they can appear to a public. Architecture is the instrument par excellence for determining this separate place and placing an enclosure around it. The context of the museum is, thus, both institutional and architectural: it serves simultaneously as a place and a building. The building materialises the borders of the public place that is the institution, while the institutional place finds its concrete incarnation in the building which defines it. 'On the spot,' architecture gives form and meaning to the public condition of the art which the museum embodies.

Elsewhere

If a work wants to 'intertwine' itself with the spot where it appears, it must, according to Buren, take into account the 'architecture' of that spot. This does not necessarily result in architectural work, nor in an adapted environment for the work in question. Buren is by no means delivering a plea for a symbiosis between the work and its spot – art and architecture can clearly not be equated. And the autonomy of both must be respected. The conflicts to which they are at times subject must not be resolved, but, rather, be tested. The meeting point of the work and its spot is, after all, 'elsewhere':

Le point d'intersection – ou point de rupture avec l'art moderne – entre une oeuvre et son lieu (le lieu d'où elle est vue), se trouve quelque part 'ailleurs', en dehors de l'œuvre et plus tout à fait dans le lieu, point central continuellement décentré et point en marge, affirmant du même coup sa différence.³

The place where the work and its location meet is situated both outside the work and outside the location. It is a place characterised by *difference*. *Le point d'intersection* must be conceived of both in terms of time and place. *Le point d'intersection* encompasses both the *point* where work and location intersect and the moment when they are about to intersect. And it is precisely there that Buren situates the discursive practice of the exhibition. During the exhibition, the work and its spot are not one and the same; the difference between them is just barely articulated, since, for a work to become visible, it must differentiate itself from the spot where it appears; it must make a difference. For this reason, the context within which a work of art appears can never be ideal.

Architecture which acts as though it were made for art is, by definition, proof of what Buren calls 'deceptive architectural discretion and neutrality.' The ideal museum can and shall never be. Regardless of the architectural form of the context – empty or full, naked or clothed, flexible or determinate – the work shall never have it as its home. In any rate, it dwells 'elsewhere.' The present, or applied, context is never inherent or automatic; it only contributes to this 'elsewhere' being articulated each time in a new manner. Each viewing apparatus – be it a postcard, book, exhibition space or museum – possesses its own special architecture, to which art can be in a proportional relationship. And it is the relationship to that 'specialness' which Buren's works time and again address, expose, unmask, criticise or interrogate. A work by Buren never yields willingly to the situation in

which, or the context within which, it is put 'on view.' It comments on the visibility it enjoys there. Or, to use the motto of his first solo exhibition in the Centre Pompidou (2002): '*exposer dans un musée, c'est aussi exposer le musée.*'

Centre Pompidou x 2

With the title *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*, Buren was referring to the type of museum which did not exist before the so-called invention of the Centre Pompidou. With the completion of the Centre Pompidou in 1977, the concept of the museum of contemporary art was given a radical architectural translation. Through the stacking of the six open empty concrete blindings, both the phenomenon, museum, and the architectural discourse of flexibility attained their apotheosis. The building, which had to offer a spatial solution to the unpredictable developments of contemporary art, would immediately become the new symbol of the popular and iconoclastic museum. The 'museum which did not exist' however does not only refer to this new museum typology, but also to the activities connected to this typology. A museum of contemporary art is one which re-invents itself day after day, exhibition after exhibition. Tomorrow, current art will be different from what is was today. For this reason it requires a flexible context, both on the institutional and architectural levels. In two works from the exhibition, *Les Couleurs: Sculptures* (1977) and *Le Dispositif* (2002), Buren demonstrates to just what type of 'context' this ambition has led in the case of the Centre Pompidou: conditioned emptiness.

For *Les Couleurs: Sculptures*, created for the opening of the Musée National d'Art Moderne in 1977 and installed here once again for the solo exhibition, Buren positioned three telescopes on the terraces of the Centre's fifth floor. He attached fifteen striped pennants to roofs and flagpoles of buildings within their field of vision. By the telescopes, a placard was placed with a photographic panorama of the city on which the locations of the pennants was indicated. The focus of the work *Les Couleurs: Sculptures* is how the Centre Pompidou is constructed to enable it to be a public viewing and information apparatus. Although the fifteen pennants are located literally 'in the city,' they can only be experienced in their totality as a work of art via the apparatus of the museum. However, as the pennants are situated at such a distance from the museum that they are difficult to make out with the naked eye, thus necessitating the use of a 'supplementary' apparatus. In the Centre Pompidou, Buren encountered a museum context unequalled anywhere – on either the institutional or architectural level, a context tending toward a semantic vacuum. To exhibit a work in the Centre Pompidou, a 'second' context, on the scale of, or of the same size as the work, must be installed in the architectural envelope of the Centre. Buren refused to do this, opting to employ the entire envelope as exhibiting apparatus. The work did not lend itself to being put on view in the building itself, but, rather, utilised the building in its totality in order to present itself 'elsewhere': in the city.

At the same time, Buren unmasked the tautological promise that within the flexible 'context' of the Centre Pompidou, 'everything is possible everywhere and always.' He worked *in situ*, but made no use of the available flexibility. He did display the essence of flexibility itself: emptiness. His work placed neither the building nor the institution 'in the viewer,' but, rather, the structural emptiness of the Centre's plateaus and what appears with the emptiness: a panorama of the city. It demonstrated how, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, the Centre functions as '*une machine à faire le vide.*' 4

At the time when the work was purchased by the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Buren had it accompanied by a contract, incorporating a detailed manual and a series of playing rules. These include the stipulation that the pennants not be exhibited in the museum as artefacts or relics of the work; the same applies to photos, sketches or documents pertaining to the work. The contract also stipulates that the work can only 'exist' in a situation comparable to the original situation for which the work was conceived. Indeed, it inspires a degree of amazement that, in view of the transformations carried out in the Musée National d'Art Moderne by Bozo & Aulenti in 1985 and the general renovation of 2000, Buren nevertheless allowed the work to be installed again on the roofs of Paris. Following the renovation of 2000, the contemporary art department was also furnished in

conformity with the parcours of white cubes introduced by Aulenti in 1985 in the modern art collection. In addition, the escalators and ramps are now only accessible to visitors with a valid ticket for the museum, whereas thousands of visitors used to take the escalator just to be able to enjoy the magnificent panoramic view of the city from atop the Centre.

However, with the work *Le Dispositif* (2002), which Buren realised in connection with the exhibition *Le Musée qui n'existait pas* also on the fifth floor, he formulated an intelligent response to developments between 1977 and the present day. The fifth floor is the only one which today is still kept structurally 'empty,' as it functions as a platform for changing exhibitions. Artists and exhibition designers have free reign to give this floor whatever content they like. Just as in 1977, Buren refused to install here an 'apparatus' or 'context' in order to present his work, or, respectively, a retrospective of his œuvre, in an appropriate manner. He refused to fill in the emptiness of the scene with a *mise-en-scène* which 'fit' his work. He opted for a structure functioning simultaneously as both the work and its context, or as Buren put it: "une oeuvre à part entière, à la fois contenant et contenu." ⁵

Buren installed a grid structure comprising 61 cubes, each measuring approx. 3.5 by 3.5 m. This structure was not limited to the official space, but swelled to include the terraces, patio and passageways, resulting in approximately twice the space originally allotted to him for the exhibition. The corners of the cubes were open, creating a diagonal parcours; the walls, floors or ceiling were finished with an endless series of new colours and materials (from mirrors, rice paper and glass to rasters and the obligatory pattern of strips). Some of the spaces were approached as independent entities, while others served as platforms for works from Buren's series *Les Cabanes Eclatées*.

The end-result was a visually stimulating structure somewhere between a palace of mirrors and a coloured labyrinth. In the middle of all the mirroring and colourful surfaces, light effects and perspectives, the visitor wondered at first what was actually being exhibited here. Little or no 'work' could be detected in the grid structure; the whole thing functioned as a machine for spatial experience. However, once one forgot his irritation at so much spectacle one noticed that *Le Dispositif* reversed the strategy of *Les Couleurs: Sculptures* in an intriguing manner. While with *Les Couleurs: Sculptures* Buren employed the emptiness of the Centre Pompidou, in *Le Dispositif* he caused it totally to implode. Whereas an empty space draws one's attention to the space and one's own experience through the absence of works, in *Le Dispositif* this effect was obtained through the spatial all-encompassingness of the work. No one who visited the sixth floor could escape Buren's structure. Even the visitors of the elegant restaurant were confronted with it. Buren refused to fill in the emptiness with a context in which in turn to present his work. He let the context and the work become one at the moment of presentation and occupied, to that end, all available space. In this way, the vacuum of the Centre Pompidou was filled right up to the ceiling.

The exhibition of emptiness in *Les Couleurs: Sculptures* gave place in *Le Dispositif* to a tautological viewing of a 'work as a context as a work.' Together, the two works illustrated the two extremes of the ideology of flexibility: an isotropic space offers art only two possibilities: to leave it empty or fill it entirely – to do nothing, or to install a special context together with the work. Both works, however, reveal not only the false promise which lurks behind emptiness, but most importantly, where this promise originates.

As the exhibition's title, *Le Musée qui n'existait pas*, indicates, Buren's original thought was the museum which needs just that vacuum in order to celebrate the cycle of its perpetual death and rebirth. Museums of contemporary art have an inherent wish to begin each day with a clean slate. They want, each time anew, to present the artist a virginal space in order to afford him the freedom he needs to install the ideal conditions for his work. Nevertheless, Buren unmasked the pledge that, in the emptiness dished-up for purposes of the exhibition, 'everything is possible everywhere always.' He demonstrated, in the spirit of his predecessor Baudrillard, that the opposite is true: "Nul n'y peut rien." ⁶

With *Les Couleurs: Sculptures and Le Dispositif*, Buren demonstrates masterfully that the emptiness of the Centre Pompidou is not merely of the scale of one of its rooms, but of that of the institution in general. By employing the building in its totality as an apparatus – by leaving it empty or filling the resulting space to the ceiling – Buren reveals the museum as an institution which, in its urgent need to be current, finds it necessary to empty or clean itself on a regular basis.

Although *Les Couleurs: Sculptures and Le Dispositif* were both created *in situ*, neither work could be viewed there ‘in its entirety.’ And in neither case was it possible to state precisely where the work was *situated*: in the city or in the museum on the one hand, or in the total grid structure and/or in the individual cubes on the other. Both works give form to Buren’s thesis that the point of intersection of the work and its location is always located ‘elsewhere.’ The works did not fully adapt to the building in which they appeared – their ‘true location’ was that of the exhibition. If they were located anywhere, than it was the spatio-temporal universe of the exhibition. Both works were characterised by a disjointed placement. The pennants of *Les Couleurs: Sculptures* flap in the skyline of the city, but are simultaneously situated ‘in the collection’ of the museum. They need the museum in order to be seen, but oblige the viewer located on one of the museum’s ramps to turn his back on the physical context of the institution and turn his gaze *elsewhere*.

Master negotiator

It is often said of Buren’s œuvre, which, together with that of such artists as Michael Asher or Hans Haacke is normally classified as institutional criticism, that it has in recent years undergone ‘critical inflation.’ However, from the start, Buren has had an ambiguous relationship to institutions. It is, in fact, his ambition to study how it is possible for work to be done within the institutional context in spite of the unacceptable conditions sometimes found there. Buren’s critical strategy is not about rejecting the institutional condition in a lecturing manner, but, rather, to wallow in it, at once eagerly and carefully. It is impossible to escape the institutional context, and yet, it is a context which can never be considered automatic or inherent. If, through this critical identification with the institution, Buren sometimes finds himself walking on thin ice, it is a risk he is happy to take. *Mot à Mot*, published in connection with the exhibition, itself provides all the necessary proof of this. With an exhaustive collection of works, documents and texts Buren demonstrates that art is about more than just the supplying of masterpieces, but above all involves negotiation. Duchamp would have been happy to affix his signature to it.

Notes

1. Daniel Buren, ‘Notes sur le travail par rapport aux lieux où il s’inscrit, prises entre 1967 et 1975 et dont certaines sont spécialement récapitulées ici (1975)’. In: Daniel Buren & Jean-Marc Poinot (Eds.), *Daniel Buren. Les Ecrits* (1965-1990). Tome I: 1965-1976, Bordeaux, CAPC Musée d’art contemporain de Bordeaux, 1991, pp. 427-428.
2. *ibid.*, p. 429.
3. *ibid.*, p. 431.
4. Jean Baudrillard, *L’effet Beaubourg. Implosion et dissuasion*, Paris, 1977, Éditions Galilée, p. 18.
5. Daniel Buren, exhibition leaflet *Le Musée qui n’existait pas*, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée National d’Art Moderne, 2002.
6. Baudrillard, *L’effet Beaubourg. Implosion et dissuasion*, p. 18.

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