

Daniel Buren born 1938*Painting-Sculpture (Painting 1 and Painting 2) 1971*

2 pieces of cotton fabric and acrylic paint

20 x 10 metres, 1.5 x 10 metres

Breaking the Rules?

Daniel Buren's *Painting-Sculpture* 1971 was made specifically for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. The work consisted of two parts: a twenty-metre long and ten-metre wide striped cloth, intended to hang vertically in the museum's central rotunda (*Painting I*), and a smaller horizontal banner of the same cloth, which was designed to be hung in the street outside the museum (*Painting II*). Drawing attention to the museum's role in providing a physical and conceptual framework for art, the piece aimed to highlight and link the internal and exterior spaces of the famous landmark building, as well as point to the wider aesthetic, social, political and economic factors determining how art is displayed.

The only French artist to be invited to participate in the Sixth Guggenheim International group exhibition, Buren had cleared his plans with the organisers well in advance. However, when *Painting I* was installed the day before the opening of the show, some of the other artists in the group exhibition objected fiercely on the grounds that Buren's work obscured their own and had a disproportionate presence. The curators took the piece down that evening, without consulting Buren; *Painting II* was never installed. A major controversy ensued about what was seen by Buren and his supporters as an extraordinary act of censorship, one that revealed a great deal about the art world. Today, *Painting I* (known only through photographs taken when the work was briefly installed) and *Painting II* (never photographed) exist in storage, but have never been seen by the public.

Buren first came to prominence in Paris in the mid-1960s with his use of a highly restricted visual vocabulary consisting, at first glance, simply of stripes. This depersonalised vocabulary might have been seen as referencing abstraction and minimalism, but Buren used the stripes as signage rather than image: his works signified an elimination of traditional artistic concerns and a critique of the conventions and ideological interests governing art and its display. Taking as his reference point the striped awnings commonly found in France, particularly in government buildings, and their standard stripe width of c.8.7 cm, Buren sought to situate his art in relation to the buildings and spaces of everyday life, in part in order to test the boundaries of the notion of art itself. Although he used readymade materials (printed paper made to order, or commercially available striped canvas), Buren ensured that his canvas works qualified as paintings by adding a scarcely noticeable coat of white paint to the white stripe on the left and right hand sides of the works.

In 1969 he became widely known in Paris when he pasted striped posters over hundreds of billboards, and publicised where his works could be found in the left-wing

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journal *Les Lettres Françaises*. In late 1970 he reprised his 'affichages sauvages' (wild posters), and pasted striped posters around New York, announcing to the art world where his works could be seen using gallery mailing lists. Many of his pieces, however, were pasted over immediately or, if affixed to the sides of trucks, proved impossible to find. But a photograph of a poster pasted on a building in Bleecker Street was used as the cover of *Art News* in April 1971. Ironically, the same issue reported that, in the run-up to the Guggenheim International, Buren had been identified as the 'critics' choice' (hence his representation on the magazine's cover), and that his work had been removed from the exhibition before it opened.

Buren had been one of twenty-one artists who agreed to participate in the Guggenheim's Sixth International Exhibition. As the invitation letter from the Director made clear, the exhibition did not aim to provide a neutral survey of contemporary art across the world but rather to reflect the selectors' preferences and judgement about 'certain significant departures today'. Over half the artists who accepted the invitation were American, and included leading minimalist artists such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd, as well as land artist Walter de Maria and conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner. Consequently, American minimalism of the mid-1960s was presented as the forerunner of later trends both in America and around the world.

The invited artists were tasked with making site-specific works that responded to the Guggenheim's celebrated helical building. Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and opened in 1959, the Guggenheim was seen by many as itself a work of art. However, the building, with its unusual curved walls for the hanging of paintings and gentle spiral ramps, had not been without its critics: prior to its opening twenty-one artists, including Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell, protested against the showing of their works in a space they felt to be inimical to the proper display of art. Buren was similarly critical of the way in which the building dominated and made peripheral the art shown within it. His plan was to hang a huge banner in the central space which would simultaneously draw attention to and overcome the building's tendency to overshadow the works on its walls through focusing attention on the central (and typically art-free) rotunda space. The curators knew of his intentions and provided him with architectural plans of the building, allowing Buren to determine the size of the banner he wanted to hang in the central space. Whatever misgivings they may have had (and curator Diane Waldman later insisted that she had expressed concerns to Buren about his work interfering with that of other participants and had not given him a *carte blanche*), they did nothing to dissuade him from making his work in the weeks before the opening of the show.

Buren's blue and white striped banner *Painting I* was hung the day before the show. Quickly, other artists, including Dan Flavin and Walter de Maria, who happened to be present at the time complained vehemently that the work blocked views of their pieces; at least one artist threatened to withdraw his work. That evening Diane Waldman took Buren's work down without consulting him. Seeking to prevent a public escalation of

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the dispute, Waldman offered to continue to show the exterior banner (planned to be hung in 88th Street, between Fifth and Madison Avenues) and to display *Painting I* by itself for one week after the closure of the group exhibition. But Buren ultimately refused these compromises, which he saw as attempts to ‘buy his silence’:

Painting-Sculpture had been made in two parts for this particular group exhibition of site-specific works and any other presentation, he felt, would mutilate it.

Deeply shocked by the humiliating removal of his work on the eve of the opening of a major exhibition in one of America’s most important museums, Buren polled the other artists in the show. Fourteen signed a petition saying that they believed Buren’s work should remain. Carl Andre would have signed, too, but he was away. When Andre heard what had happened, he withdrew his own piece. Although fifteen out of the twenty-one artists did not want Buren’s work to be withdrawn, the museum would not go back on its decision.

In the weeks and months that followed recriminations flew, and the different factions quickly became polarised. Dan Flavin had sought the removal of Buren’s work but, rather than being sympathetic to the French artist or simply content that his views had prevailed, he wrote a letter complaining to Buren about his conduct and denigrating his art in trenchant terms, describing it as ‘intrusive-obstrusive drapery’. (‘I have never before encountered such miserable nonsense as yours. When are you going to begin to act responsibly-responsively towards other nearby human beings, if not fellow artists in your obscure estimation ... be assured that somehow, I simply don’t want to spare the effort to dislike you.’) Some months later Flavin wrote a letter in similar vein for publication in *Studio International* as the controversy as to the rights and wrongs of the decision, and the role Flavin himself had played, continued to be debated in front of an international art world audience.

Arguably, Buren’s *Painting-Sculpture* became more famous for not having been seen by the public than it would have been had it remained part of the exhibition. But to what extent did it impinge on other works in the exhibition, as its detractors claimed? Hanging in the central void of the Guggenheim, Buren’s banner occupied the part of the building that normally dominated visitors’ experience of the museum. It challenged the architect’s vision for the building (and implicitly made it evident that the other works in the exhibition had simply and, from a certain perspective, rather tamely, accepted the visual dominance of the building). Although always in view from all seven levels of the Guggenheim’s spiral walkways, the banner did not actually interfere with the sight lines of most of the pieces in the exhibition, as had been asserted and was felt at the time. The majority of the works, with perhaps the exception of Flavin’s large light installation that occupied the entire sixth level, did not need to be visible from across the rotunda to be viewed and appreciated. Some have argued that Buren’s work did not so much hide the art on view as spotlight the real show – the visual effect of the building itself. Buren himself later wrote:

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One of the paradoxical things about the Guggenheim as a museum is that it actually conceals from view the works that are shown there. From the bottom nothing can be seen, except the proud shape of the museum itself ... [Painting I] irreversibly laid bare the building's secret function of subordinating everything to its architecture.

He noted, too, that, for him, 'after the painting was taken away, the museum no longer appeared as a gigantic sculpture, unfurling its triumphant spiral, but as an enormous hole, senseless and uninhabited.'

Perhaps it was the sheer theatrical scale of the work that most annoyed and personally threatened Buren's detractors. They claimed that he had broken the tacit ground rules of group exhibitions, which required a degree of awareness of the expectations of each artist to have an autonomous space for his or her work. Flavin, in particular, seems to have interpreted the scale of the piece as indicative of an unseemly and unacceptable wish by the young French artist to upstage the others. While acknowledging that the attempt may or may not have been deliberate, the director of the Guggenheim Thomas Messer shared this view and said at the time that, 'if only to protect the balance of freedom among all participants, the tacitly existing rules had to be re-invoked'. Diane Waldman also later affirmed that the issue was simply one of 'incompatibility': 'there was simply no way of reconciling Buren's project with the other work in the exhibition.'

However, the notion that artworks need to exist in a neutral space of their own was precisely one of the elements of the functioning of the museum that Buren wanted to highlight with *Painting-Sculpture*. According to Buren, most contemporary art was made for a neutral museum-type space and derived its validation from the museum. In his eyes, such art was in essence dependent on, and subservient to, the prevailing ideology governing such institutions and culture in general.

The exclusion of Buren's *Painting-Sculpture* from the Sixth International was not taken up in the popular press. Most American art critics responded negatively to the avant-garde nature of the show, and did not explore the issues of curatorial responsibilities and independence underlying the museum's decision to remove the work of an invited artist. However, the bitterness of the controversy within artistic circles, combined with the negative press for the show as a whole, played a role in the Guggenheim's subsequent cancellation of the series of international exhibitions.

In the 1990s, however, the Guggenheim commissioned a series of solo exhibitions by artists to address explicitly the architecture of its building. Offered a solo exhibition in 2005, Buren considered whether he should reinstall his original work, but he felt that to do so after such an elapse of time would 'result in censoring (by altering) its meaning a second time ... because of too much visibility and institutional endorsement'. Keeping the spiral ramps free of artworks, he instead built a huge mirrored tower – or rather, a corner of a tower – in the rotunda space. Almost a building within a building, *Around the Corner*, like the 1971 banner, focused attention on the central void, and reflected the museum back to itself.

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The canvas elements of *Painting-Sculpture* survive today, folded up and preserved in storage, and Buren has not entirely ruled out the possibility that the work might one day be shown in public: 'if they [the Guggenheim] wanted to show it again in the middle of a group show for example it's technically possible (if the context makes sense) to hang it up again exactly as it was in January 1971'. But, for him, it would be essential that the conditions of its original conception be met, and for the moment, at least, this seems unlikely.

Text—

Jennifer Mundy