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“There is no outside” Someplace else for Institutional Critique?

Daniel Buren at Modern Art Oxford

Introduction

This essay began life with a disappointment – my experience of Daniel Buren’s show at Modern Art Oxford¹. When I tried to describe the show I realized that my initial enthusiasm for the work had been tempered by an acknowledgment that it seemed meaningless and irrelevant in a wider context.

My initial conclusion was that the issues related to the methods of Institutional Critique that Buren played a major role in developing are now no longer seen as critical or important and Art has moved on.

As much as Institutional Critique was about revealing the unconscious or hidden systems the artwork works within, over time it has become accepted and emasculated. The audience and institutions are now inured to strategies of this type and it no longer holds the power it once did.

In the process of researching this essay I found a text that enabled me to review my assumptions. This article was a ‘conversation’ published in *Artforum* between Buren and Olafur Eliasson, the artist and curator, which took place in 2005 during Buren’s return show at the Guggenheim Museum (*Eye of the Storm*), and in which they discuss the challenges for artists who address the institution.

¹ Daniel Buren. Intervention II: works *in situ*. Modern Art Oxford. 4 November 2006 – 28 January 2007. Curated by Suzanne Cotter.

The introduction to the article contextualizes my own feelings after visiting the Buren show:

The previous decade's theoretical interrogations of the grand show and the increasing reach of the biennial circuit are lately overshadowed by other, almost practical, questions regarding the exploding scale and ubiquity of exhibition venues for contemporary art ... (Griffin, 2005, p. 209)

It goes on to specifically question the effectiveness and relevance of 'the historical avant-garde's models of resistance':

Considering the historical place of institutional critique and the radically changed art-world context for his critical work in situ, Buren asserted ... that "the total proliferation of the institution today is as important to artists now as the discovery of oil painting was in its day." (Griffin, 2005, p. 209)

In this essay I will review Daniel Buren's practice, with reference to three early pieces that illustrate his methods and reflect Institutional Critique's concerns. I'll highlight effective and ineffective aspects of the work and end by presenting Buren and Eliasson's views on the place of Institutional Critique in today's artworld.

Institutional Critique and the work of Daniel Buren

In the mid 60s Buren began to use alternating white and coloured stripes in his paintings to eliminate all illusionistic or expressive reference from his work. Subsequently he moved away from painting the stripes but retained them as a motif, using readymade fabrics and other materials to create the distinctive pattern. The stripes have since become a consistent feature of his works and are now considered to be his 'signature'.

The stripes are designed not to be representative *per se*, but to highlight their use within a particular site. By their repetition, the stripes become a ‘neutral sign’ (Parinaud, 1967, p.41–42) that divert attention away from themselves onto their surroundings with a view to highlighting and critiquing their placement.

Buren’s pieces all have this spread of meaning, attempting to ensure they are read not as objects or environments divorced from their setting, but intimately connected and dependant on them:

Having dispensed with the canvas as his arena of activity, Buren always seeks to involve the work’s total frame of reference, which necessarily must include the surrounding architecture. As he himself has stated, “Architecture of any sort is in fact the inevitable background, support and frame of any work”, having also noted that “when we say architecture, we include the social, political and economic context.” (Rorimer, 1989, p.14)

For Buren, the museum and gallery—the institutional settings of art—particularly embody this expanded notion of architecture, imbuing any object placed within it with its ideologies: ‘Every place radically imbues (formally, architecturally, sociologically, politically) with its meaning the object (work/creation) shown there. ... To reveal this limit (this role), the object presented and its place of display must dialectically imply one another’ (Buren, 1975, p.70).

The success of Buren’s work depends on a working through of the logic of a given situation to reveal its unacknowledged or masked systems. Buren does not work against the site, to do so would compromise his relationship with it, potentially leading to a rejection of the artwork. It is a question of ‘indicating as precisely as possible the way the work belongs in the place and vice versa ...’ (Buren, 1975, p.69)

It is fundamental to Buren's work that it function in complicity with those very institutions it seeks to make visible as the necessary condition if the artwork's intelligibility. (Crimp, 1993, p.87)

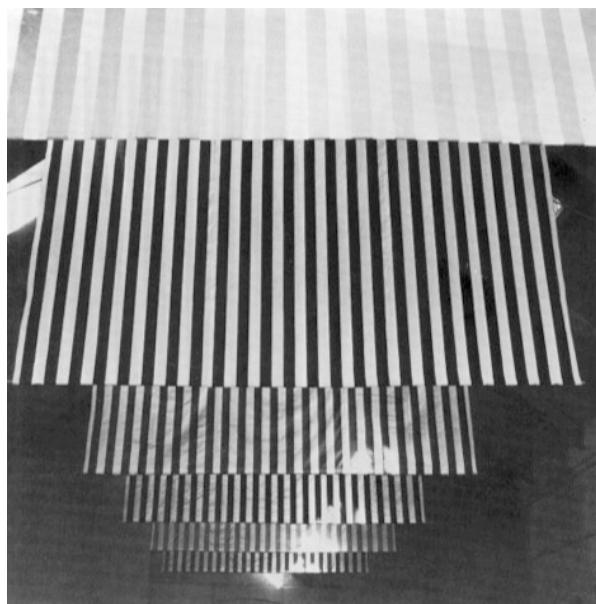
Colour and form

Because the works interact with their settings so closely, critics have often concentrated on the formal aspects of the works, while questioning the possibility of further meanings:

It is a gorgeous spectacle, this interplay of colour and light, bright as a summer's day even in winter. But is there anything more to the optical thrill? (Cumming,2006)

These formal aspects of the pieces have proven a constant distraction from the critiques inherent in the pieces.

Sanction of the Museum, Oxford, 1976



The piece *Sanction of the Museum* was created on Buren's first visit to Oxford in 1973. This piece was noteworthy because it "marked another stage in Buren's oeuvre in that it was the first time the artist introduced more than one colour into a single work." (Cotter,2006)

Even in 1967 when he began using the coloured stripes, he was aware of the issues that would prove stumbling blocks for critics:

The colour is decided by what they offer me when I buy the cloth. ...
This is to avoid always making the same canvas ... finding myself after ten years with a magnificent arch-classic oeuvre of a Buren who will have made the same canvas for ten years, and finally, my canvas will have become "Buren." ... I am not saying pink is neutral, or gray is neutral, but a grey striped canvas then a blue striped one then another in green, and so on, infinitely, hinders by successive and equal repetition any significance for any of them. (Parinaud,1967)

However, Buren recognizes that his pieces must work with the available setting for which a formally overpowering response may be appropriate:

... if I agree to make a work in a place that's a priori spectacular, my work has to have at least an aspect of that; and if I try to escape it, I'll show something that has nothing to do with the space. (Buren in Griffin, 2005, p.211)

In my view Buren has never been able to satisfactorily avoid these formal readings distracting from the meanings of the works, and indeed his was not an isolated struggle contemporary with Buren – other Conceptual artists, such as Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner – were also addressing this issue in their works.

But I believe a more pervasive problem is manifested through implicit attitudes to art in general by the 'art-world'.

Seven Ballets in Manhattan, 1975

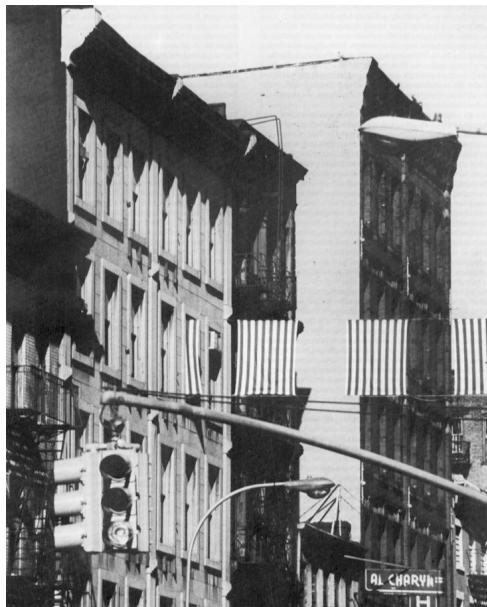


The piece *Seven Ballets in Manhattan* (1975), in which five 'dancers' carried picket signs covered with the stripes around various parts of New York City, is a demonstration of how architecture (understood as the settings of the work) is absolutely critical to their reception and can easily lead to misconceptions of the work:

... the fact that the five signs were carried around SoHo on Saturday afternoon reassured everyone seeing them that they were some sort of art, and the questioning stopped abruptly at that point. That the art context, even broadly considered as a neighborhood, has become a shield against perception, against critical questioning, was made

apparent by the very blandness of the SoHo reaction. (Crimp, 1976, p.77)

Within and Beyond the Frame, 1973



Douglas Crimp also points to a similar failing in the piece *Within and Beyond the Frame* (1973): ‘The nine-and-one-half banners that extended out of the gallery “beyond the frame” did not, in fact, escape a protective art context, that of SoHo.’ (Crimp, 1976, p.76)

This ‘anything goes’ atmosphere in the contemporary art world is something Buren has been at pains to expose throughout his entire career. (Crimp, 1976, p.77)

The Guggenheim International Exhibition 1971



In February 1971, Buren was invited to create two pieces for the Guggenheim International Exhibition, a survey of new tendencies in Minimal and post-Minimal art, held at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Buren's installation included a large blue and white striped banner positioned within the iconic spiral space and hanging from just below the museum's skylight to a point several metres above the atrium floor. But before the show opened this work was removed following complaints by other artists in the show that it blocked the view of some of the other pieces.

Crimp points out that it 'might be considered a success inasmuch as it forcefully pointed to various problems and contradictions in the type of exhibition mounted and the individual works it contained' (Crimp, 1976, p.75). Buren however traced the problems back to the architecture itself although he regards this as in some ways a good thing, perhaps because it gives something tangible to measure the art against:

The Guggenheim Museum is a perfect example of architecture which although enveloping and welcoming, in fact excludes what is

exhibited there (normally) for the benefit of its own exhibition. ... This architecture is damaging to art as it is, and by the same token very clearly reveals the limits of the so-called art. This architecture is heartening. (Buren, 1975, p.73)

Conclusion

Buren works in a point of provocation between tolerance and rejection, which could lead to, on the one hand, ejection (as in the Guggenheim) and, on the other, irrelevance (as in *Within and Beyond* and *Seven Ballets*).

Beyond Buren's own practice, the institution does not stand still either. Partly in reaction to Institutional Critique but mainly through economic necessities it has redefined itself and expanded, looking for new audiences and arenas, which in its turn is essentially obsolescing those critiques which cannot react to meet these changed conditions.

And here I will return to the 'conversation' between Buren and Eliasson that I mentioned in the introduction. Eliasson acknowledges that:

There is no outside. ... Really, it's useless to try to pinpoint what's inside or outside of the system, because drawing that line doesn't take our thinking any further. It just doesn't matter anymore. (Griffin, 2005, p.212)

Essentially, my initial belief that Daniel Buren's work at Modern Art Oxford was pretty to look at but lacked any substance has been mitigated somewhat through this recognition of the changing context for the artwork. However this does not save Buren's work from potentially only having historical significance.

I believe that Institutional Critique is in a transitional phase – from its nascence, to where it is now working within a revised environment partly of its own making,

and I would suggest Buren's 'tools'—the stripes in particular—have become ineffective in this context.

Any systemic changes effected by his works seem to have neutralized the artworks in the process. Originally, it could be said that through its 'failures', its butting up against the limits of the institution, Buren's work highlighted these limits as problems where before they were overlooked. However it is difficult to see how the works have progressed in order to continue to be effective.

As Buren says 'the institution has spread itself so widely as to lose its power and authority, so the critique has to go someplace else' (Griffin, 2005, p. 210). It may be practitioners like Eliasson rather than Buren who go there.

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Images

p. 6 (left): Buren, D. (1971) *Untitled*. From Alberro, A. (1997). The Turn of the Screw: Daniel Buren, Dan Flavin and the Sixth Guggenheim International Exhibition. In *October* Vol.80 (Spring). pp.57–84.

All other images from Fuchs, R. ed. *Discordance/Cohérence*. Eindhoven: Von Abbemuseum.