Disordering the Establishment

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Early in his career, Daniel Buren was explicit about wishing to distance his work from that of Op and kinetic artists. In a 1969 letter to Jacques Caumont and Raphaël Sorin, who were organizing an exhibition on “Art in the Street” at the National Center for Contemporary Art, Buren explained that he did not want his work included in the show because he did not want to be represented as one artist among others, and he particularly objected to being shown among the “kinetic thingamajigs” that he expected would garner greater attention due to the audiovisual techniques by which they would be transmitted.\(^1\) Caumont, perhaps, could have predicted Buren’s negative reaction since earlier that year, he had helped Buren produce a series of short films in which Op and kinetic art and the social ambitions of its artists came up for derision. In a series of dialogues, characters from everyday life liken the types of objects the GRAV and Victor Vasarely produced to faddish gadget commodities that were financially out of reach of the popular, “democratic” audience that the artists hoped to target. More pointedly, the film mocked the ambitions, such as those of the GRAV, to transform the vision of public housing residents. Rejecting the presumption that participation in art is an unequivocal good, one of Buren’s characters quips, “I am sure that it would be much more agreeable to be exploited.”\(^2\)

During this same period, however, Buren became well known for his brightly colored, high-contrast abstractions composed of geometric-stripe motifs, which he would display both in gallery exhibitions...
and in the streets in order to highlight the role that institutions play in making artworks meaningful. Despite these superficial formal similarities, Buren’s work cannot be understood as aligned with Op or kinetic art since its goal is not to create visual distortions in the eye of the viewer. Typically, Buren’s striped canvases are read (against his wishes) as a form of conceptual art meaningful less for their visual appearances than for their ability to point to the institutional structures of power in which they operate. Nevertheless, his ambitions and techniques resonate with those of the Op artists that preceded him, and particularly with the work of the GRAV, in the way that they combine an interest in destabilizing vision with a critique of the norms of arts institutions and restrictive cultural practices more broadly.

During the same period in which vision as a mode of acquiring knowledge about the world was coming under attack from phenomenologists in France, Buren reduced the visual elements in his work to the repetition of the simple 8.7-cm-wide stripe motif, a standard pattern for the awnings of bars and cafés in Europe. By adopting the visual language of his environment, the work took on a sort of camouflage that played between visibility and invisibility, and so articulated a distinction between the spaces in which the work emerged from its ground as art, and others in which it blended into its background as a form of decoration. Inserted into marginal architectural and urban spaces, this anonymous, commonplace pattern called attention to the structural and ideological features of institutional and urban spaces alike. Moreover, the in situ relationship of specificity between the artworks and the particular settings for which the artist conceived them demanded the direct experience of the viewer in order to undermine the cultural policy of the period. Censorship of popular music, the imposition of bourgeois cultural standards on the masses, and the technocratic selection of a class of official artists were distancing the public from a candid, thoughtful engagement with art during the period. By using advertising and ornament as decentralized display techniques, Buren sought to recenter the viewer in a contemplative and intentional relationship to artworks, and via those artworks, to become cognizant of the contingent ways in which institutions construct cultural experiences.

Unsticking: Influence and Rupture

In April 1968, Buren struck out onto the streets to begin pasting posters that he had commercially printed with his striped motif at two hundred locations across Paris in what he called affichages sauvages, or wild posterings. The posters were green and white striped, and he pasted them among others condemning the war in Vietnam and announcing meeting times for protests. Famously,
this included pasting over a handwritten poster announcing a meeting for a leftist group at the University of Paris Nanterre, the site of the planning for the strikes and protests that subsequently developed into the May Movement (see plate 3). They went up on palisades surrounding construction sites covered with advertisements, but also beneath the busts of Nicolas Poussin and Pierre Puget on the entry gate of the School of Fine Arts, as though inserting Buren into the noble history of the institution while also bringing it in line with street culture, as the art students themselves would do the following month when they went on strike and converted its facilities into the Atelier Populaire. The posters went on the walls in the gallery district of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and the following month he had sandwich men carry them on their backs throughout the city during the 1968 Salon de Mai. Normally conveyors of advertising, their commercial functionalism was replaced by an art form that resisted clear messaging and its own salability. The city spaces into which Buren slipped his stripes were those of messages written on walls permanent and temporary, in which citizens spoke urgently to each other and commodities trumpeted their merits.

This movement toward appropriation of the visual culture of the street is indebted to the innovations of Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villeglé, the décollagistes who, since the late 1940s, had been pulling torn posters from
walls and palisades, pasting them to canvas, and displaying the results in galleries. He praised works like Hains’s *Panneau d’affichage* (1960) that show multiple layers of colorful posters violently torn away from their metallic support as “sauvage,” using the same word that he applied to his own later project of affichage. Buren was struck by the décollagistes’ work when he discovered it in 1959 at the first Paris Biennial, and reflecting on it decades later, he contrasted it favorably against American pop art, arguing that while both groups took their inspiration from the streets, the latter stripped away all cultural references in order to produce a merely anecdotic work that, importantly, he considered deficient because it reproduced the efficiency of advertising. In contrast, he saw Hains and Villeglé as producing work that was profound in the way that it addressed pictorial issues in painting without using painting itself (see plate 6). The work of the décollagistes offered several models for Buren as they traversed boundaries between public and private spaces of street and arts institutions and used the discursive construction of painting against itself to push at the conventional understandings of what painting is and how it communicates.

Hains’s and Villeglé’s formal choices and sites of display, moreover, combined with the effect of highlighting the function of arts institutions in a way that resembles an incipient version of the institutional critique that Buren would later develop. Buren’s praise for the artists’ ability to address pictorial problems without using the tools of painting speaks to friction with institutional authorities that the artists encountered at the 1959 biennial. After being invited to exhibit, they were rejected because their work did not conform to the expectations of the preestablished exhibition category “painting”—a muddle that displayed surprising conservatism on the part of the organizers considering that décollage carried forward historical avant-garde techniques from Dada and Surrealism in its use of readymade advertising and the automatic tearing that gestured toward the unconscious of the public rebelling against political and commercial propaganda, not to mention that by 1959 the two artists had been making décollage for a decade already. The exhibition organizers resolved this conflict by establishing the more versatile and accommodating “salle des informels,” but this formalist confounding of disciplinary norms exposed the limits of art-institutional practices and presuppositions, and prefigured the antidisciplinary actions that Buren would undertake seven years later alongside his collaborators Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni.

In opposition to painting, what décollage presented was a fragment of the real displaced from the streets outside to the interior space of art exhibition—a
characteristic of their work that was emphasized by the fact that Hains proposed to show at the Paris Biennial not just torn posters, but the very wooden palisades to which the posters had been pasted. As Hannah Feldman points out, these temporary walls were part of a major transformation of Paris during the years following World War II, as the character of the city and people’s experiences of it were being demolished and reconstructed. More than merely blocking the construction sites that were to remain invisible, the palisades acted as screens, Feldman argues, that redirected attention to themselves, and presumably the content of the posters, which would imaginatively transport the viewer far from the reality of the demolitions themselves. The work, then, spoke directly to the ways that people perceived the space of the city, yet it did not embrace the political calls for change or the social utopianism that characterized movements of the historical avant-garde. Instead, its disruptive détournement of mass media reversed the propagandistic messages of Charles de Gaulle’s politics and highlighted an absence of democracy that reflected the interests of the people, especially in the face of the Algerian War of Independence. The work questioned the reality from which Hains stripped it and presented, as Feldman argues, a way of “questioning the assurance with which viewers trust the certainty that they know what they are being asked to look at, let alone to see.” Like the concealment of urban transformation behind the palisades, the political valence of décollage is in the way that it tears aporias of meaning through propagandistic legibility. Rather than presenting a clear political consciousness, décollage suggests that the public is itself unrepresentable—an idea at odds with the public that de Gaulle sought to manifest through his repeated referenda. Along with this rejection of political specificity, Hains shifted emphasis to the role of context in determining the visibility of an object that remained invisible trash in the streets, but within the gallery appeared as the expression of an underrepresented public. Moreover, as Feldman argues, Hains’s work highlights the gap between the public of the gallery public and the “silent, negative double of the anonymous public,” showing that the two were not only different, but “incompatible” with each other in their own legibility, and consequently in the expectations they could bring to the possibility of political representation.

While building on their use of the public poster as artistic material, Buren’s own affichages sauvage would reverse Hains and Villeglé’s trajectory, moving from the gallery back out to the street. Frustrated by the political limitations of the supposedly radical painting of his own time, Buren decided to focus attention on the ideological limitations of the institutions that supported such work. In doing so, he would play with the visibility afforded by
the institutional frame. Whereas Hains’s palisades highlighted the distinction between looking at the surface of a thing and seeing the historical and social transformations it implies, Buren’s posters would court the general invisibility of urban décor to put pressure on the art audience as a group who is able to see institutional critique in the streets where it is otherwise functionally invisible to a general public.

More immediately, however, décollage appeared as a technique in Buren’s paintings in 1964 when he began to systematically experiment with layering, collage, and destruction. In the canvases that he submitted for the Third Prix Lefranc that year, he layered paper, paint, charcoal, and other materials on canvas, sometimes tearing the paper away in sections to expose the layers beneath the surface. Layered, warped, wrinkled, and torn, the textures of works like *Peinture et collage sur toile* (Painting and Collage on Canvas; 1964) resembled the temporal build-up and wearing away from damage sustained by posters exposed to the elements. Their gestural lines and smears of paint recalled the graffiti that had fascinated Surrealists like Brassaï as expressions of the urban unconscious, and in some instances they recalled the soaped-out windows that mask the interiors of businesses undergoing renovation—both signs of the city in transformation. Beyond these references to the city though, they recalled a spate of contemporary artists who transformed unconstrained expression into a painterly style, and, perhaps like the American pop artists, evacuated the contextual reference points key to their social critique. Breaking away from the local influence of the School of Paris and its tachiste expressionism, Buren’s work borrowed internationally from Cy Twombly’s lyrical scrawls, which were widely exhibited in Europe during the 1950s and 1960s, and CoBrA-style “naïve” paintings of vividly colored animals and other innocents. In his early paintings, the central expanses of color fields and marginalization of gestural elements that frequently run off the edge of the composition give the impression that these works have been excised from a larger context, much like the décollagistes’ works, with the difference that the latter were literally removed from public space. Rather than discovering readymade images in the street, Buren did the work of the laborers who glued the papers to the billboards and of the public who undid the laborers’ work by tearing those papers away. In this way, his collages were like easel painting studies that processed the form of décollage without adapting the social or cultural significance of the way that the form was constructed. He eventually abandoned this process. Unsatisfied with work that he considered to be nothing more than beautiful pictures, he instead turned toward the other significant element of the décollagistes’ work: the cultural specificity of its siting, which I discuss further on.\(^\text{12}\)
Buren’s other major influence in the early years before he discovered the striped canvas was the painter Simon Hantaï. In 1962 Michel Parmentier and Buren developed a friendship with Hantaï that led to long conversations about his work and the contemporary art world. During the period in which they met, Hantaï had just recently begun working on the technique of pliage, which made it possible for Buren to consider the striped awning fabric as a basis for his own painting. To make works like Mariale m.a.3 (1960), Hantaï folded then painted his canvas, resulting in jagged all-over networks of white and colored paint, the totality of which he would only see after unfolding the canvas. For Parmentier, the salient message in this work was that beauty disappeared as Hantaï reduced his palette, resulting in paintings that verged on monochromes. In process and aesthetic these works resembled the folding that Parmentier adopted to produce his own horizontally striped canvases, and the nearly monochromatic striped paintings on which both he and Buren would eventually settle. For his part, Buren described Hantaï’s influence in the way that he would “show things without pointing to them”—an observation that recalls Buren’s later strategy of making a feature of a place visible without the artwork itself making any declarative statements about its subject, which was a central feature of his institutional critique.

This absence of direct indication came through in the way that Hantaï’s process decentralized artistic intentionality. Buren has spoken admiringly of the older artist’s “blind” compositions in which the pictorial effect of the folding would not be visible until after the canvas had been painted—a practice that recalled the influence of André Breton and Surrealism on his work during the early 1950s after he moved from Budapest to Paris. These “blindly” produced pliages emboldened Buren to relinquish control over the composition of his stripes and, in some cases, their placement in urban environments. Like Hains and Villeglé, Hantaï was a transitional figure between two eras. On the one hand, he continued the techniques and procedures of the historical avant-garde in the oneiric, affective, and sublime effects that he could achieve with his richly saturated colors in compositions arrived at by chance procedures that resembled automatic writing. On the other, the coldness, automation, and repetition of his post-Surrealist work spoke of rationalist structural interrogations of material and the new consumer culture. Hantaï bridged the tachisme and existentialism of figures like Georges Mathieu and Bernard Dubuffet and the structuralist interrogations of process and context developed later by Parmentier and Buren, and eventually Supports/Surfaces.

As influences, Hantaï and the décollagistes may seem like an unlikely pair, given the differences between their artistic practices. Benjamin Buchloh
invited the comparison, however, in his essay “Hantaï/Villeglé and the Dialectics of Painting’s Dispersal,” proposing them as an example of post–World War II heterogeneity that defied existing formalist and social historical methodologies. Yet in their contemporaneity, the two shared a need to respond to cultural transformations toward spectacle and the postwar “culture of administrative rationality.” Both rejected the expressive and figurative styles associated with the heroic artist, and the pathos of misery and derangement that had justified the use of graffiti and carnal imagery a decade earlier. Instead, they each, in very different ways, worked toward a “sterilized” automatism that deployed seriality, chance, and a combination of artisanal and mechanical processes. In this way, they were in keeping with “every painter at that moment, Parisian or American,” who Buchloh argues, “seems to have sought the proper register in which to anchor the determining condition of a total dispersal of a centered Cartesian subjectivity and the discrediting of conscious individual control.” Painting became a “mere” thing, the action of whose composition can be street events, such as the “found gestures of vandalism.” What Buren took from Hantaï and the décollagistes was not the epistemological and methodological question that Buchloh later raised as to how one should write this history of art. His departure from each of his predecessor’s works could be said to mark a shift as significant as their departures had been from Dada and Surrealism, thereby reproducing the influence gap, and confirming the significance of the methodological question. Indeed, the heterogeneity of artistic processes and aesthetics addressed in this book affirms Buchloh’s quandary. Like the work of Hantaï and Villeglé, these processes are “neither mechanistically determined nor conceived of as arbitrarily autonomous,” and similarly, the only way to understand them is by “understanding the multiple mediations taking place within each artistic proposition and its historical context.”

Buren’s rationally crisp, uniform, and invariable stripes, nevertheless, fit with the strategic responses to the administered world that Buchloh lays out. He critiqued authorship via a rejection of expression and reaffirmed the graffiti of the previous generation as a display strategy appropriate to the cheery consumer culture that accompanied economic prosperity and lackluster political involvement. Buren’s dialectic of rationalism and vandalism reminded viewers that anonymous authorship was a characteristic of not just advanced artistic practice of the postwar era, but of advertising as well. In doing so, however, it did not so much appease the contradictions between these fields, as Buren’s later comments would accuse American pop artists of having done, as it created a critical mimicry in which his stripes appeared in spaces where they did not belong. The public hoardings of the commercial cityscape provided
the physical and semiotic support for his works, which alternatively stood out from, and blended into, the grounds on which they were situated, just as street signs and advertisements fill the backdrops against which city dwellers live their lives, while constantly attempting to emerge into the forefront of their awareness.

Buren discovered the stripe motif that would become his signature while searching for inexpensive material on which to paint at the Saint-Pierre market in Montmartre in 1965. He began purchasing it by the bolt, surrendering his choice in color scheme to the availability of the stock—a process that recalled earlier transformative stories of the avant-garde in which industrial fabrications became artistic objects. Like Duchamp’s use of the urinal to call attention to the internal contradictions of the Salon des Indépendents in 1917, Buren used his found materials to reveal the ideological limitations of arts institutions during the 1960s and 1970s. While in early texts Buren virulently rejected Duchamp for his dependence on the very arts institutions he critiqued, his own work ultimately depended on institutions for ideological support, a fact that he later would come to recognize and embrace.

In the early works that Buren made during this period, he experimented with dividing the canvas into quadrants by painting loosely lined frames around exposed sections, over time covering progressively less area with paint, and eventually reducing the painted surface to only white outermost vertical edges, which he would cover with a matching white paint, thereby effectively minimizing the visual impact that the acrylic paint would have on the composition as well as its ability to be effectively photographed. In this way, he arrived at what has uniformly come to be described as the “zero degree” of painting, a designation that follows from Roland Barthes’s 1953 book *Writing Degree Zero*, and coheres with the artist’s esteem for the semiologist. Barthes’s analysis of French literature describes the evolution of forms across historical periods from the uniform and universalizing presumptions of bourgeois writing at the first half of the nineteenth century to the diversified formal experimentation of its second half when, according to Barthes, authors ceased to believe that language transparently communicated its meanings and instead developed substantial rhetorical forms in which “literature was finally established as an object.” In describing the zero degree, however, Barthes considered the literary experiments of his own time, observing the purity and colorlessness of these works that he took to be a symptom of the disintegration of bourgeois consciousness. This new mode of writing attempted to escape from the formal devices of literature and create a neutrality that he likened to journalistic writing, or “writing in the indicative.” Absent of emotion, this
new style approached the functionality of “basic speech.” Famously, Barthes characterized it as possessing “a style of absence that is almost an absence of style,” a description that would double for Buren’s minimal, austere stripes.20

Barthes’s is not an absolute “zero,” a formal baseline, or modernist reduction to the raw materials of medium specificity. Instead, he intended the “zero” to be understood as the midway point on a sliding scale, a neutral between positive and negative extremes. This distinction is important for understanding a difference between Buren’s work and others’ efforts at formal reduction. His art does not aim for purity but seeks to highlight contexts that can be thought of as opposites: museum and public space, easel painting and advertising. In the context of literature, Barthes uses the distinction between content and form to describe writing as occupying a neutral point between language used as a social force, which he describes as “the undivided property of men,” and style as the “decorative voice” of the particular author. While language and style are both “blind forces,” he argues, writing is an act of “authorial solidarity” in which the individual intervenes and participates in historical shifts in consciousness.

In Buren’s visual work, achieving the degree zero meant making room for the viewer by creating visual situations that approached a sort of blankness. Developing a “style of absence” that was an “absence of style” was the first step in producing a critical art practice that would awaken viewers whom he saw as passively dependent on the artist and the institutions that validated their work. Like the GRAV, he aimed to make work that would not fit into a preexisting style or movement, which would allow viewers to apply a familiar set of prefabricated interpretations. At the same time, his work differed from the Op artists in the way that it responded to its environment, taking on the formal characteristics of advertising, or inserting itself into marginal architectural spaces. Its responsiveness and adaptability was made possible by the reduction in the force of a clearly imposed artistic vision. Attendant to this was the ephemerality of work that disappeared or degraded in the elements. Soon after arriving at the form of the degree zero in his canvases, he realized that he would need to extend his practice beyond the object itself in order to challenge institutional structures. The short-lived set of exhibitions that he undertook with Mosset, Parmentier, and Toroni continued the project of encouraging viewer reflection based on the frustration and disappearance of clearly marked visual information.
Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, and Toroni’s Anti-Exhibitions

In 1967, two years after Buren began making his awning-stripe canvases, he gained public notoriety for them with a show of contestation that defied institutional norms. That year, Buren and Parmentier were invited to exhibit at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture. Since 1950, the salon had been the annual meeting ground for communist and socialist painters who embraced didactic figuration in order to unambiguously communicate humanist values. The works that Buren and Parmentier produced were abstract and therefore already unlike the work that the salon normally exhibited, but the way in which they decided to participate fell even further afield of standard procedures. Nevertheless, they received permission from the organizers to perform their painting as a sort of manifesto against the art of the period. The first act of unconventional self-assertion was to “impose” the participation of Toroni and Mosset, whom the friends had recently met, and to request a larger-than-normal display space that the artists could use at their discretion. The stall that had been allotted to them remained empty, however, on the morning that the exhibition opened—a prescient display of the performance of refusal that was to follow. The four artists arrived that morning, not with completed paintings, but with their raw materials of facture: canvas, cans of paint, brushes, spray cans, staplers, as well as an audio recording, speakers, and a banner listing their names. They suspended the banner along the blank wall, turned on the tape, which repeated, in English, French, and Spanish, “Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, and Toroni invite you to use your intelligence,” and each artist set about their daylong process of producing identical square paintings that conformed to their individual styles. Buren cut lengths of gray striped awning fabric from the bolt and painted the outer edges white. Parmentier folded his canvases into horizontal pleats, sprayed them gray monochrome, then unfolded them to reveal stripes alternating with raw canvas. Mosset painted a single black circle 7.8 cm in diameter in the center of each of his canvases. Toroni used his size 50 brush to paint grids of blue off-set daubs.

This public performance built on the formal transparency of their compositions by evidencing techniques that resembled drastically de-skilled manual labor. This was amplified by the fact that they produced the works in serial, generating an accumulation that undercut the preciousness of the unique, considered, crafted work of art so that instead their canvases resembled the inexpensive multiples that were current among advanced artistic practices of the time, including those of the GRAY; Daniel Spoerri’s 1959 Multiplication d’Art Transformable project, in which he copied other artists’ sculptures; or
the editions of artists’ multiples produced by Claude Givaudan for the publishing house and gallery that he opened in Paris in 1966—all practices that claimed to democratize art by emulating manufactured commodities. Furthermore, the ad hoc display of the works, tacked up on the wall as they were finished, displaced the idea that presentation would be the event of an artwork, such as when a finished and framed work becomes visible to its public in a gallery, and particularly as suggested by the festive event of the exhibition opening. Instead, the artists performed display as a functional afterthought and made the event the labor of production itself.

As a group, Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, and Toroni engaged in two primary activities. One was the manifestation, a form of anti-exhibition that negated audience and institutional expectations of what artworks should be and how they should be presented publicly. The second was the production of written tracts that they distributed at each of their events that anchored the meaning of what were often perplexing and abstract happenings (in Buren’s case, this writing would expand into a voluminous collection of manifestos, reflections, and interviews over the following decades). To explain this first
DANIEL BUREN’S INSTRUMENTAL INVISIBILITY

manifestation to their public, the group distributed their first tract, “Puisque peindre c’est . . .” (Since painting is . . .), which established their position with regard to the ongoing debate between autonomy and commitment that was central to the engagement of the salon. In it, they announced their opposition to painting, calling it “a game” that produced compositions according to established rules. According to the tract, traditional painting, such as that by the other artists on view at the salon, acted as a “trampoline for the imagination,” regardless of whether it launched the viewer in the direction of flowers, women, the war in Vietnam, Dada, the exteriority of the world, the interiority of subjective feeling, or the aestheticism of art itself. Because painting functioned to these deceptive ends, they declared, “WE ARE NOT PAINTERS.”

At 6 p.m., the artists stopped painting and unfurled a second banner that they appended to the first, thereby completing a sentence that read “Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni do not exhibit.” What had previously been a label, which might describe as much the inert objects on view as the people making them, was transformed into a statement of protest. The artists packed up their materials, distributed a second tract, and left the space nearly as empty as it had been when they arrived. The second tract, Manifestation 2, explained that the artists were removing the works that they had spent the day producing from the salon as a symbolic act of their dissent from all salons in principle. Salons, they explained, “aggravate the laziness of the public,” as they functioned as pilgrimage sites that annually attract viewers who would come to be comforted by, and swoon before, painting. They argued that this predictability produced “gadget-culture,” and they accused the salons of being “objectively reactionary” because they showed painting to be a vocation supplied with a social function. “For these reasons,” they said, “we definitively break with all Parisian Salons and with all of the Painters that show there.” Indicting contemporary salons (Salon de Mai, Salon de la Peinture à l’Eau, Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, Salon des Indépendants, etc.), they explained that the lack of vision displayed by these institutions came from the fact that they were “the heritage of the Salons of the 19th Century. (the true Salons of the 20th Century being in a pinch those of Arts Ménagers [homemaking exhibition], of the Automobile, etc . . .) [sic].”

Such a comparison of art and consumer products is a provocative categorical infelicity that ignores more appropriate references, such as to the national exhibitions and world fairs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where new technologies that would revolutionize everyday life were put on display for a mass audience. The comparison between art salons of the nineteenth century and consumer salons of the twentieth invites the reader of
the tract to consider the historical avant-garde as a generator of commercial products whose equivalent would be post–World War II decorative household gadgets—an analysis that recalls his assessment of American pop art’s integration of commodities into the realm of fine art, a model that Buren explicitly rejected as complicit with advertising. Buren and his collaborators’ critique of art salons echoed a sentiment common among artists at the time. It recalled the GRAV, who in 1960 critiqued the mystifying force of the salons and their perpetuation of homogeneous art, and who tried to undermine this mystification by engaging the general public through the very same genre of the questionnaire that had been used to determine consumer sentiment at the Salons des Arts Ménagers. Whereas the GRAV sought to make artwork that could cohabitate with this new world of consumer products while improving conditions in which people would actively engage with their environment rather than passively consume it, Buren and his collaborators rejected the equation of art with consumerism, as they rejected the idea that one would be remunerated for painting as a vocation. Like the GRAV, they mimicked the aesthetic of rationalized production in order to undermine authorial exceptionalism, but unlike them, they did not seek to create ingratiating objects that would
delight the eye. Rather than a ludic game of discovery, the process of looking at Buren’s, Mosset’s, Parmentier’s, and Toroni’s works would be just as much an act of labor as the production of the works themselves.

The Salon de la Jeune Peinture lasted another twenty-two days after the opening. Visitors during these remaining days would find at the group’s stall an installation of absence and refusal in which the significance of the large empty space leaned heavily on the textual support of the protest banners that remained. For *Le Figaro* critic Jeanine Warnod, the group’s presentation was an example of nihilism that “expresses an avowal of powerlessness.” In their protest she found resonances between their work and the politically functional figurative paintings on view, all of which she noted would correspond with the passions of visitors who look at the modern world with critical distance and “put everything in question in order to survive.”25 She did not recommend it though to lovers of painting, whom she advised not to visit the salon. Reflecting on this period of innovation years later, Buren contextualized their motivations within the political frustrations of the time:

On the economic side, there was the boom without precedent from which we would draw strictly no benefit, from another, an omnipresent moral and political censure due to the consequences of the war in Algeria after that of Indochina, which wore down a part of the youth, and the authoritarian character, for us at a time totally outdated and archaic, of general de Gaulle and his police. Let us remember Maurice Papon and his “racist attacks” or the Minister of the Interior Marcellin. Few people today seem to remember the censure that descended upon the newspapers, the censure and daily control of information on television as on the radio, the ban on songs that were not politically correct, from Boris Vian to Georges Brassens, etc. An atmosphere that left little place for poetry, for freedom, for enthusiasm or for the initiatives of the spirit. A suffocating atmosphere, with the appearance of being tidy and policed, where in style and avant-garde artists, from Vasarely to Martial Raysse, had an open table at prime minister Georges Pompidou’s place.26

The artists’ only effective response, as they saw it, would be to create their own context apart from this “deleterious atmosphere that demanded to be exploded.”27 The zero degree became then not just a strategy for producing individual works of art, but a model for producing an entire context in which that art would be significant, one that made the conventions of artistic display visible.

Five months later, in June 1967, the group carried out an exhibition in the
Experimental Theater Center of the Decorative Arts Museum that inverted the structure of frustration at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture. Whereas the previous exhibition gave the audience very little to look at and deemphasized painting in favor of performance and explanation, this one, which prepped the audience for performance, reduced performance and explanation in order to emphasize the paintings themselves. They distributed an exhibition announcement that reinforced their renegade personae by displaying the artists’ four faces in a grid that resembled mug shots, transforming Andy Warhol’s *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* (1964) into self-portraiture (a recursive instance of truth in advertising, they had pasted the posters in the neighborhood surrounding the Louvre illegally). It invited people to a 9 p.m. show with a 5-franc entrance fee. For an hour and fifteen minutes, around 160 spectators sat patiently in the theater where four canvases were suspended in a grid that was organized alphabetically by the artists’ last name, and “nothing happened.” At 10:15 the artists distributed their third tract, “Il ne s’agissait évidemment que de regarder des toiles de Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni” (It is a question of nothing other than looking at the canvases of Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni), which provided formulas for their four types of repetitive, expressionless canvases, by way of describing them with the appropriate measure of zeal, complete with officious footnotes. As though a demonstration of self-evidence, the text offered nothing but minimal, dry technical terms that, like the instruction-based art that Sol Lewitt began creating the following year, could have doubled as specifications for how to produce their work. Whereas previous tracts provided instructions for interpretation, here it turned out that interpretation would be unnecessary because meaning should be inherent in the objective qualities of the paintings themselves. Seeing should be understanding. Yet, as Marcel Duchamp, who was present in the audience that night, assessed at the time, “as frustrating happenings go, you can’t get better than that.” Indeed, as Michel Claura would later recall, the group’s early spectacular manifestations were intended to be “very humoristic,” but most people did not perceive this because they were so aggressive.

Ostensibly, the scene conformed to basic exhibition expectations. Unlike at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture, here paintings were present and visible, and the audience was positioned for relaxed contemplation. At the same time, the artists framed these features in confusion so that the relationship between the artworks and audience became unfamiliar. Within the context of the theater, the paintings were spectacle—a gesture that simultaneously evoked the show of live painting that the artists had put on six months earlier and the “spectacle” of contemporary consumer society that Guy Debord had been critiquing.
Figure 2.4. Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni, poster from *Manifestation 3: Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, June 2, 1967, Paris. © DB-ADAGP Paris.
since the 1950s, and which appeared as the focus of his book *The Society of the Spectacle* five months later. While the standard French use of “spectacle” refers to theater and performance, Debord distinctively defined it as “capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image.” This world of spectacle critiqued by Debord was the exact same one that Buren would later position as the political context that his own work refused. The “frustrating” that Duchamp felt in Buren’s work functioned as a technique for roughing up the smooth surface with which the advertising, television, and cinema of spectacle society dehistoricized war, politics, music, and visual art. In performing an explicit rejection of spectacle, the artists made paintings themselves disappear from the scene of the exhibition. Photographs from the event show the audience chatting with each other, milling about, and waiting. The paintings themselves do not appear to transfixed the audience; rather they appear as a backdrop, an effect that the artists seem to have anticipated, as evidenced by the tract that functions to refocus attention on the artworks whose precarious positions in the event made them effectively disappear from the visual priority of the audience that had come to see them. In this way, the exhibition functioned as an antispectacle that framed the “style of absence” employed in the individual paintings.
Such frustrating exhibitions and claims of anonymity were part of the group’s attempt to awaken the audience. A few months after the four last collaborated, Buren spoke with critic Georges Boudaille of the politically left weekly *Les lettres françaises* on the subject of anonymity, in which Barthes’s analysis about the political relevance of the zero degree transformed into a moral dictate against social repression. On the traditional fetishization of artistic authorship, Buren said, “To think and to say that ‘there was no haze in London before Turner’ is very pretty, it’s very poetic, but it’s monstrous.” Buren explained, “It’s an attack on the thought of the individual. It is to force him to have the same dream as you.” Such an assault, at base, was the result of a strategy by which representation forced itself on the viewer. Rather than seeing artistic intervention as a way of bringing out aspects of the material world or internal thought so as to present them to a viewer who might have otherwise remained oblivious, Buren used Situationist language to argue that all art is a form of hijacking—“l’art détourne des choses”—that absconds with objective reality and replaces it with artifice, thereby irrevocably undermining the viewer’s potential to see the world as it really is. The viewer could not be expected to exercise any resistance or independent thought in the face of artifice since artistic subjectivity would always hold sway over the viewer: on
the one side, the wily, plundering artist, and on the other, the negligent viewer bouncing up and down on the artistic trampoline. As long as an artist was expressing him- or herself through plastic means, whether in paint, readymade, or using the latest technology, the fundamental problem of creating “illusion” would remain because the work would impose the reassuring, and therefore overwhelming, will of an individual that one expects, indeed hopes, to find when taking in art. The myth of authorship, according to Buren, would inevitably be more persuasive than any attempt to claim that the author is simply a single mode for transmitting meaning.

Promoting the active participation of the viewer would require recognizing the ways in which art influences perception. To these ends, Buren sought to address perception in itself rather than taking it for granted as a tool that served cognition. Reducing the work to a phenomenological event, he promoted the idea that his painting isolated seeing as the only goal of the spectator before a work that has no greater purpose than to exist. In this way, he could confront the viewer by eliminating all attempts at communication through the art object that would become a thing “expressing itself for nothing.”

That is to say, he attempted to eliminate representation altogether in offering an object that was nothing more than a presentation of itself, and that moreover would escape all culturally determined aesthetic, moral, and commercial interests that might taint the art object’s purity. As Boudaille suggested to Buren, the effect would be to desacralize the art, thereby making it truly democratic. Buren responded that it was not his intention to force the viewer to do anything, but he did admit that such an ideal object would create a situation in which “the observer finds himself alone with himself, confronted with himself before an anonymous thing that gives him no solution.” Only when left to his own devices before the real of a fully anonymous form would the viewer “become intelligent,” become capable of dreaming his or her own dreams, of writing his or her own text. More than just displacing the subjectivity of the artist in order to make room for that of the viewer, Buren declared “the only thing that one maybe can do after having seen a canvas like one of ours is total revolution.”

**Affichages Sauvages**

A revolutionary art would have to draw attention away from itself to instead reflect on the entire context in which it was produced and existed. Moving away from the zero degree, which, unlike Barthes, Buren understood to be a stopping point, he began to consider the work that he made a “visual tool” that could be used as an indicator of its environment. The visual tool would indi-
cate the construction of the surrounding world without pointing to it directly. More than this though, his work as a visual tool was to transform the place in which it was sited as it responded to the physical, functional, or symbolic characteristics of its location. He referred to this genre of artwork, which responded to the specificity of its situation, as “in situ.”

In “Limites critiques” (“Critical Limits”; 1970), one of the many explanatory texts that Buren would write, he outlined the relationship between the physical use of space, materials, and their ideological implications. In particular, he provided a theoretical basis for his institutional critique by describing the way that ideology takes shape in art objects, and he argued for the transformative capacities of his own visual tools as they aimed to make the limits of institutions visible. Display conventions, he argued, highlighted the individual art object—whether painting, sculpture, readymade, land art, or other nontraditional practice—while the contingencies that made its creation and presentation possible dropped away into the background. The ideological conditions in which we experience art, he notes, are rooted in the objects themselves as they hide the material and structure of their facture, covering (in the case of painting) stretcher bars with canvas and paint, creating recto and verso, and promoting a single aspect of the ensemble, its painted subject matter, as the meaning of the work. Simultaneously, the museum or gallery disappears along with its administrative function in order to hold up the artwork as an example of free expression. He argues that it is generally, and incorrectly, understood that the museum and the culture that constructed it serve as the foundations that prop up and advance the works that they show, while in reality, culture and institution cover over and obscure the work in the same way that the paint obscures the canvas.

In an essay exploring the relationship between Buren’s work and the democratic ideology of public museums, Douglas Crimp addressed this problem of visibility and institutional ambition. Citing former Museum of Modern Art Painting and Sculpture director William Rubin, Crimp noted that museums “are compromises invented by bourgeois democracies to reconcile the large public with art conceived within the compass of elite private patronage.” The cultures for which these artworks were produced are rarely the same as the culture that consumes them because of differences in mores, practices, and expectations across historical periods and geographic distances. As a result, the significance a work of art would have in the culture that produced it can generally be expected to translate only approximately if at all. This act of translation presents a challenge to museums that take on the charge of making the works intelligible for audiences that are, for the most part, unequipped to
make sense of them. The culture of the museum, informed as it is by experts, risks seeming foreign to the general public, and that overlays an additional level of interpretive refraction, which distorts the “original” meaning of the artwork. In “Critical Limits,” Buren illustrated these relationships that Crimp would later describe in a succession of diagrams of nesting color-coded boxes and diagonal hatch bars that represent each of the elements in this schema and the ways that they obscure each other. In a diagram titled “what happens in fact (art such as it is situated),” a blue “museum” box frames and covers with blue hatch marks a yellow box representing the limitations of cultural expectation, as well as boxes representing painting, which covers over the canvas and chassis boxes. The diagrams create visual continuity between the elements that compose the artwork and the elements of the museum, so that the viewer understands the museum to be as much a composition of aesthetic choices as is the painting, and the painting to be as much informed by administrative expectations as is the museum. Both diagrams and art are striped geometric abstractions that reveal the structural relationships between art and institution. Additionally, the diagrams provide a map to understanding how Buren’s artworks function insofar as his process involved identifying and isolating each of these elements and making them visible.

Buren argued that any painting like his, which “revealed its contradictions” by exposing its construction, no longer found its proper place in the gallery or museum. By venturing beyond these spatial limitations, the affichage sauvage, he argued, “shatters or masters the limits of the museum” and the “unique point of view.” In important ways, however, this project was different from the grav’s A Day in the Street of two years earlier. While both used public space and explicitly or implicitly solicited the participation of the people who become the public in those spaces, the two projects diverged in their addresses to their audiences and in the ways that they envisioned the city. The grav created spectacular events that sought to attract the participation of the public by engaging them directly with explanatory material, such as maps that directed them to all of the day’s events and questionnaires that surveyed their responses to the event. Their use of public space demonstrated that they understood the city to be composed of flows of people who were susceptible to being reawakened to the ludic potentials of the everyday. Buren, in contrast, took a less invasive approach in his address to the public. Indeed, he was opposed to approaching an audience directly or asking people for their responses to artworks as Pierre Bourdieu proposed to do decades later at Buren’s 2002 retrospective at the Centre Pompidou. Instead, Buren’s public displays merged into the fabric of a city that functioned primarily as image.
Picking up on the increasing presence of advertising in the public sphere, the vast majority of surfaces on which he affixed his stripes were the hoardings from which commercial advertising addressed the city, that is, spaces in which life was reified into pictures. The choice of the poster as a support for artistic activity was particularly relevant in the French context. Since the nineteenth century, the public display of commercial and political posters in France and other francophone countries far outstripped the quantity displayed in the rest of Europe and North America. Although postering had dropped off during the Second World War, the twenty years that followed saw a dramatic increase in the amount of per-capita revenue that went toward poster advertising, and at the end of the 1950s, postering entered the realm of centralized technocratic study with the founding of the Center for the Study of Advertising Supports in 1957 and the Institute of Research and Advertising Studies in 1958, organizations whose objective was to provide reliable data on postering and its consumers in France. By moving his work out into the street, Buren was not escaping institutional limits but moving from one space of regulation to another. The presence of the poster in these spaces would highlight and negate its function through a play of visibility and invisibility.

Photographs by Bernard Boyer documenting the April 1968 Paris installation of Buren’s *affichages sauvages* show how the posters fit seamlessly into this world of representation. Buren’s papers overlap and cover advertisements for banks, vacuum cleaners, and tennis tournaments. The bold green of their industrially printed stripes complements the red, yellow, and black of the posters over which they are pasted, while their clean geometry parallels boundary edges, and the sharp contrasting white matches the graphic letters that stand out starkly against illustrations and photographs that dramatize the messages of the advertising. Although Buren reduced his own authorial judgment in this project by inviting the printer to select the color of the stripes that he eventually pasted all over the city, the harmonization of color is not the product of chance, but rather conforms to the visual logic of effective graphic design. It is bright, bold, attention-grabbing, and visible from a distance. At the same time, however, in standing out, the posters also blend in. A series of photographs of a single billboard at the corner of rue de Buci and rue Grégoire de Tours in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighborhood shows the daily life of schoolchildren, shop owners, elderly men, and women passing at this active intersection, as well as the bicycles and mopeds that have been parked against the wall where the posters are situated. Despite the fact that the billboard fills the background of the photograph as a bright pop of color in the otherwise gray and beige cityscape of stone and concrete, the pedestrians seem inured to
its charms. As much as Boyer’s photographs document the environment surrounding Buren’s work, they also capture the invisibility of commodity culture, and consequently the invisibility of Buren’s artworks, the optical effects of which mimic those of the billboards that are shocking in their banality.

Like the caterpillars, moths, and butterflies that Roger Caillois described in his 1935 essay “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” Buren’s wild posters participate in the sort of camouflaging that can be read as an adaptation to mass culture. If Buren’s stripes mimicked the advertising spaces into which he inserted them, it was, in part, because they were destined to do so by their very origin as mass-produced awning fabric. From the stripes’ source as three-dimensional exterior decoration for cafés and restaurants, the motif returned, transformed as a poster into an image of an original, able to cling to and blend with any surface in the urban media environment. Caillois, an interdisciplinary sociologist who collaborated with artists and writers of the Surrealist movement, found it suitable to explain insect camouflage in artistic terms, describing the process as “sculpture-photography” in which the animal body directly reproduces the textures and colors of its surroundings. This process of adaptive ornamentation, in which something—a color or texture—is added to the body, corrupts the insect’s autonomy and highlights its dependence on its environment. The result is a blurring of boundaries that undermines what Caillois considers a most fundamental distinction, that between the organism and its surroundings—a figure-ground relationship of the natural world, whose corruption he likens to schizophrenia. Beyond what camouflage revealed about the experience of insects, for Caillois, it took on a poetic function as it pointed to the importance of distinction, such as “between the real and the imaginary, waking and sleeping, ignorance and knowledge,” because in situations of camouflage, the insect replaces its own distinctiveness with that of its environment. This “temptation by space” was an assimilation of the organism to its environment that took place through visuality, in which the space was first perceived and then represented. In this space “the living creature, the organism, is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally no longer knows where to place itself.” Caillois likens this sense of loss and dislocation to the schizophrenic’s sense of being devoured by a space in which one cannot place oneself. Instead, one has a feeling of being “similar, not similar to something, but just similar.” This absence of a specific thing to which one feels similar is like an ambiance that manages to surround and fill in the backdrop of everyday life without conveying a strong sense of presence.

By moving into these spaces, Buren was attending to an everyday invisi-
bility that was nevertheless a new area of research and design. These walls had remained in the background for the GRAV, whose three-dimensional works formed the streets around them into a sort of main stage that they occupied with immediacy and presence. Buren’s posters, in contrast, adhered, if adversarially, to the new role that architects envisioned for advertising during the 1960s, when slick, modern architecture was replacing older, more ornate, buildings. Xavier Arsène-Henry, a modernist architect of grands ensembles residential constructions, wrote enthusiastically about the positive role that advertising might play in the new city. Referring to public postings generally, and advertising specifically, he observed that “words and images have a considerable influence on our comportment,” and argued that artists would be essential to their perfection. “Just like antique monuments,” he wrote,

we can admire the marvelous plastic usage that has been made of the “letter,” titles or inscriptions: we see clearly everything that artists can take from the street signs and signals, store signage and windows, advertising panels, etc. It is without doubt, in our days a “material” with which urban architects can obtain effects that are not negligible, and that can accompany, underline, valorize the living, attractive, colorful, moving character of certain façades, of pedestrian passages or urban perspectives. One need only see the effect of gaiety of decked-out streets on the occasion of a festival, or the attractiveness of the street in the days leading up to Christmas. Far from reproaching contemporary architecture for its rigor, its reasoned and balanced character, we agree that, in the framework of the simple rules that define the expropriation and the surfaces of advertising, the addition of colorful decorations, whose aspect remains always light and occasional, will bring a multicolored and mobile note that will not destroy the harmony of the volumes and façades.45

Far from having a deleterious or corrupting effect on the purity of modernist architecture, advertising would become a festive decoration that would amplify the spectacular presentation of the city. Yet he argued that it would be preferable to regulate their usage and not give “free reign to regrettable installations”: “Letters, signs, figures, slogans, panels, fixed and mobile effects, we say yes . . . but not anywhere, and not however.”46 Their locations would need to be regulated for aesthetic reasons that, inferring from his logic, would have social consequences. As Arsène-Henry imagined them, the ads would not just disappear into the backdrop of the city, but would play an important role in shaping its residents.

In May 1969, Buren pasted over an entire billboard that was situated ad-
adjacent to one of the most significant new constructions of the post–World War II period. Jacques Caumont took a series of photographs of Buren as he pasted over one of three billboards overlooking a parking lot at the corner of the avenue du Maine and the rue du Commandant René Mouchotte. In several of these images, the angle captures in the background the older buildings with their masonry exposed where adjacent buildings had been demolished and in the far distance the gridded expanse of the façade of the Mouchotte, a seventeen-story, 88,000-square-meter bar-style construction project designed by Jean Dubuisson in 1966 as part of the Fifth Republic’s urban renovation program. Situated in central Paris on the platform above the Maine-Montparnasse train station, the building was designed to be multifunctional—a mix of business offices, stores, services, and 752 upscale residential units. It was to be the largest apartment building within Paris and operate as a “grand ensemble in the city,” yet socially it was the antithesis of the anomie for which the new cities beyond the periphery came to be known. Its façade conformed perfectly to Arsène-Henry’s vision of urban animation as the exterior curtain-wall of the building formed a grid that would come alive with luminous animation once the sun set and residents turned on their lights. The building became famous the year before Buren’s intervention, when in May all of its residents reportedly used their floor-to-ceiling windows to hang flags in support of the movement, thereby hijacking the building’s iconic façade and transforming it, as architect Pascal Perris has put it, into a “geopolitical map.” The “village Mouchotte,” as the complex came to be known, was inhabited by a homogeneous mix of executives, functionaries, company bosses, and other professionals, who were young, cultivated, wealthy, well connected, informed by contemporary thinking on urbanism (notably Henri Lefebvre’s “Right to the City”), and had “the means necessary to manifest this critical thought on a large scale in reality.” Their proximity to the Latin Quarter meant that many of the residents participated actively in the centralized demonstrations throughout the movement, while, back at the building, activists established an association that distributed a newsletter and also developed a daycare, a tutoring program for students, and dance and tennis clubs. Making this intersection the site of his urban intervention, Buren, like the Mouchotte residents, transformed one form of urban decoration into another—the building itself manifesting his intentions while its cultured residents likely would have provided a knowing and supportive audience.

Caumont’s photographs reveal the labor of installing the posters as Buren stands high up on what appears to be a somewhat rickety wooden ladder, poster in one hand and broom in the other, a bucket of wheat paste hanging
from one of the rungs. The work appears not artistic, but workmanlike. It is possibly dangerous, not in a daredevilish way, but in the everyday way that blue-collar workers put their bodies at risk as a matter of course. As photographs of artistic process, Caumont’s are the opposite of those that would highlight the individuality of the artist and the particularity of his gesture, such as those published in *Art News* during the 1950s. They reject dramatic performances of live painting, such as Georges Mathieu enacted beginning in the 1950s, or Buren’s own performance with Mosset, Parmentier, and Toroni. Buren blends in so effectively as the figure of the anonymous worker that there is no suspicious indicator that would alert a passerby to the fact that he is committing an illegal act of graffiti that is at the same time an act of stealing, since the work involved appropriating a private parcel of city space that was owned by the corporation Dauphin, which otherwise would have cost hundreds of francs to rent, and for which Honda had already paid. Rather than searching for meaning in a fantasy world of beauty, happiness, and speed, Buren’s posters pointed only to themselves and to the space that they occupied—that is, they indicated the other media that invariably surrounded them. In so doing they highlighted the everydayness of the urban space and its potential for transformation, effectively opposing the way that advertising was being imagined by modern architects and urbanists like Arsène-Henry for the new, affluent city of the 1960s. By making work that integrated into the background, Buren evoked the present absence of overlooked advertising while simultaneously pervading public spaces by adopting their techniques of display. In their scattered dispersal across the city, the posters did not proclaim a privileged site that would allow them to stand out as a singular clear figure, or point of origin, against the ground of a city that disappears from view once the viewer becomes absorbed in contemplating the significance of the artwork. Instead, the form and significance of the work take meaning from the ground into which they are woven as they are layered atop and beneath the other posters that welcome them in their formal and procedural logics.

Buren made the rules for displaying these posters explicit in September 1969, when he showed them remotely as part of Lucy Lippard’s exhibitions *557,987* and *955,000*, which took place in Seattle and Vancouver, respectively. Because he could not travel to install the posters himself, he sent an example of one in the mail and told Lippard to reproduce it as many times as she liked in colors chosen by those who volunteered to paste them around the cities. Giving the volunteers the freedom to hang whatever color posters wherever, and crediting them in the catalogue, Buren wished to communicate that the labor of the artist and that of the volunteers were equal, as were the theory and
practice that each metonymically represented. At the same time, he provided two limitations: the stripes were to be oriented vertically, and they were to avoid “optical games so that they [could] retain their anonymity.” The games to which Buren refers would have caused the posters to stand out as artistic objects in public space, rather than conforming to the instrumentalized display conventions of advertising as it acts as a vehicle for clear communication. The *affichages sauvages* nevertheless played on visibility as they made use of optics to the extent that the posters blended with their environments while making use of the visual semantics of social spaces. In order for Buren’s posters to work in the way he intended, they would have to masquerade as functional. This would mean standing out like all other advertising, and therefore hiding in plain sight. At the same time, their multiplicity functions differently from that of advertising and other posters. While the intended message of an advertisement is designed to be gleaned from its target audience in a single viewing, Buren’s *affichages sauvages* would likely have been unintelligible if only one of the posters were seen. Because of their siting and blank abstraction, they depended on their multiplicity in order to be legible at all. Seen once, the posters would conceivably be meaningless, but seen multiple times they become recognizable as intentional interventions into, and disruptions of, the visual field.

Buren’s hostility toward the total corruption of culture was revealed by the catalyzing force of the critiques on society, politics, and education that arose during the student and worker strikes in the spring of 1968. Publishing a response to the movement in the following October’s issue of *Galerie des arts*, Buren sketched out some of the main points that would need to be addressed in order to formulate a revolutionary art. He argued that characterizing the breakthroughs of Paul Cézanne, Duchamp, or Jackson Pollock as revolution constituted an “abuse of language.” Insofar as they begat new versions of what they struggled against, that is, new styles, traditions, schools, and ultimately academicism, such artists’ works could only be said to be reformist, producing one generation after the next in a slow process of aesthetic evolution. Attending only to aesthetic concerns served to cover over the relationship between art, politics, and society. In line with contemporary leftist cultural and social thought, Buren argued that escapist art that pretended to be independent of the “reality” of institutional structures functioned as “the security valve of our repressive systems” and participated in the “generally alienating quality of culture.” This would have included the politically engaged works on display at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture and those that artists had introduced into the Renault factory in 1968 as part of an effort to break down the barrier between
the autonomous realm of art and that of the worker. Commitment only furthered cultural alienation according to Buren, because it presented “political and intellectual virtue” as distractions from the underlying networks of social and cultural control. A revolutionary art would need to address itself to the base rather than the epiphenomenal aesthetic concerns that wove together the opaque netting of the superstructure. Buren concluded his response to May by posing the question, “How can the artist contest society, while his art, art in general, objectively ‘belongs’ to that society?”

The same month he opened his first official personal exhibition at Guido Le Noci’s Galerie Apollinaire in Milan. For the exhibition, *Il s’agit de voir. . .*, he adapted his *affichage sauvage* to the context of an arts institution. Gluing green and white striped paper completely over the glass doors to the gallery, he barred visitors and passersby from entering the empty space for the duration of the exhibition, but he also thereby made the work more visible than it otherwise would be, by removing the work from the gallery’s interior and placing it in view of the atrium onto which the gallery opened. The goal of making the work maximally visible was reinforced by the title, *Il s’agit de voir* (It is a matter of seeing)—a simplification on the earlier double negative “il ne s’agissait que de regarder.” Simply looking at the stripes should be sufficient to understand the work of the artists, and moreover, this should be true over and above the apparatus of spectacle that constituted the negative situation of their display. If the former instance of looking, and looking alone, attempted to enforce the autonomy of the artworks, *Il s’agit de voir* similarly positioned the stripes in a privileged and highly visible position that both stood on the shoulders of and conspicuously negated the mores of the institution that made it visible.

And yet, like the paintings on view at the Museum of Decorative Arts, here again the stripes threatened to become invisible to anyone unfamiliar with Buren’s work. In this play of visibility and invisibility, *Il s’agit de voir* continued the camouflaging effect of the *affichages sauvages*. In part, this visual ambiguity would arise from the placement and technique that Buren used, which, he noted, was the standard used by workers for sealing glass doors shut. Similarly, he described the door to the gallery as “condamné,” as if it were in ruins, a word choice that suggests that there is a reconstruction in progress—if not a literal physical renovation on the interior that visitors could not see, then an ideological overhaul due to Buren’s intervention. In emptying the gallery and blocking out the windows, the project recalls Yves Klein’s *Le vide* (1960), in which the empty space of the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris was presented to the public, framed by the pomp and paraphernalia of gallery openings and
Figure 2.9. Daniel Buren, photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren and Guido Le Noci in front of the Galerie Apollinaire, October 1968, Milan. Detail. © DB-ADAGP Paris.
official state affairs; in creating an exhibition that made it impossible to enter
the gallery, it resembled Arman’s *Full Up* (1960), although the material of the
former artist’s conspicuous trash heap was more incongruous in its setting;
and in barring off a space and operating in the street, it echoes Christo and
for which the artists built a barricade of oil drums that completely halted the
passage of all traffic. Buren’s work participated in the tradition of negation
advanced by these preceding French artists, but with the important difference
that his work took aim precisely at norms of gallery display. Whereas Klein
celebrated the legitimacy of the gallery as a space that could support the ges-
ture of showing nothing to his public except a space that was “impregnated”
with his artistic will, and Christo and Jeanne-Claude abandoned the gallery
altogether to frustrate the public by making Cold War and petrol politics an
impediment to their daily lives, Buren’s work was more subtle, barely notice-
able even, and it used public space to invite its audience to think about how
arts institutions make work visible. Even so, he reports that seeing the gallery
closed enraged people, and that one went so far as to spit on him in response.33

While Buren’s initial forays into working with the striped motif allowed
the weave of the source canvas to remain visible, and he removed the stretcher
bars in order to dismantle the ideological presuppositions embedded in the
fabric of the artwork, his adaptation of this method to arts institutions would
perform a similar process of isolating and highlighting the physical structures
of the spaces that composed them. The architectural settings of the institu-
tions would then be submitted to a similar set of procedures. As with the *affi-
chages sauvages*, this institutional critique frequently involved installing works
in unexpected places. Doorways and windows, in particular, became frequent
supports for his stripes. These elements highlighted transition points by pass-
ing from the interior of a gallery space to the street, thereby demonstrating
continuity between the institution and the cultural/urban context in which it
was situated, much like his striped canvases highlighted both the painted sur-
face and its dependence on its support. These doors, windows, and sometimes
administrative offices, ceiling tiles, stair risers, and exterior scaffoldings, while
essential aspects of architectural design, were marginal spaces and elements of
architecture, rather than the central space to which one typically looks when
searching for the art in an exhibition. These spaces were like architectural
paratexts that themselves frame, support, and tie the main subject, the work,
to the institution and culture on which it depends for its display, its intelligi-
bility, and, consequently, its existence.

As Buren’s works demonstrated, these structures of the museum were im-
mediately before the visitor, yet hiding in plain sight, obscured by the fact that the system had been so naturalized that it became invisible. “Only the knowledge of these successive frames/limits and their importance,” he wrote, “can permit the work/product such as we conceive it to be situated in relation to these limits and thereby to unveil them.” The consequences of making them visible, according to Crimp (and to Boudaille before him), would be to enhance the democratic mandate of those institutions that sought to represent them. If we can understand Buren’s Galerie Apollinaire work as deconstructing the exhibition in order to propose a response to the question he had been pondering a few months earlier in the midst of May, the installation suggests that in order to contest society, one must denaturalize the terms in which it proposed to function. Relevant to these concerns, this work rejects a limited understanding of the gallery as a democracy-supporting public sphere by closing it off and forcing the art object into the popular space of the street. Buren’s approach to the general public was not as solicitous as that of the GRAV with their mobility, questionnaires, and invitations to destroy the work by touching. Instead, his work of the 1960s focused back on the institutions whose practices resulted in distinctions between inside/outside, public/private, art world/everyday life. Buren’s austere abstraction might not have been intelligible to the GRAV’s audience, but it signaled to those habituated to the European postwar avant-garde artworks that the Galerie Apollinaire typically showed, that the subject of Buren’s work was the fact of the gallery as privileged cultural space. In this way, his work spoke to the bourgeois public sphere of its contingencies while inviting its members to experience a moment of exclusion and being pushed back out to the public space of the street.

During the period in which Buren was developing his theories, the relationship between democracy and art institutions took explicit shape in the clash between artists and the government at the exhibition 72-72: Douze ans d’art contemporain en France (Twelve Years of Contemporary Art in France). The exhibition was conceived by then-president Georges Pompidou, and organized by François Mathey, as a way to highlight French art production between 1960 and 1972. It drew strong criticism from artists and critics alike, however, who saw it as an inaccurate and deadening revision of recent art history, as well as an effort to use artists to endorse Pompidou’s government in the wake of May 1968. According to its critics, this exhibition exceeded the typical, unintentional influence that exhibitions would have on the signification of artworks by simple virtue of functioning as translators of cultural information by actively shaping the meaning of the works against the wishes of the living artists who made them. In response, protestors showed up, riot police
beaten them, and artists removed their works from the halls of the Grand Palais. In response to the organizers’ efforts to control the narrative of the conflict that sprung up around the exhibition, Buren published an article in *Flash Art* titled “Une exposition exemplaire,” in which he shows how the ground game in the competition for lofty ideals takes place rhetorically at the level of petty offense. A third of the invited artists refused the invitation to participate in the exhibition, so, in response, Mathey called them “sourpusses” and claimed that he truly only regretted the absence of two or three—a comment that, Buren noted, put in doubt the quality of the exhibition he was organizing in the first place. Journalists contributed to discrediting the artists by dividing them among those who were at fault for choosing to participate in the contested exhibition, and the outsiders who were caricatured as “excited leftists” producing art of dubious quality while playing into the hands of the “hardest elements of Power” by protesting.\(^{56}\)
Buren’s own analysis, in contrast, took the side of the protestors by articulating a critique that was of a piece with his artistic project. Addressing the organizers and artists who chose to participate in the exhibition, he wrote, “You are not the naïve toys of power, but one of the wheels of this very power, an ideological wheel that is indispensable to the proper functioning of the repression that is more and more present every day.” From what was essentially an Althusserian perspective, anyone associated with the exhibition was being manipulated by those with more power. Not just representations of that power structure, they themselves constituted the power that controlled them. To illustrate the effective function of the exhibition, he cited a Marie-Claire article bidding its bourgeois readers to go out and buy art from the galleries representing the artists in the exhibition as a way to guarantee the well-being of their grandchildren, whose fortunes would be enhanced by their speculation. This complicity between art and the economy was echoed by Minister of Cultural Affairs Jacques Duhamel, who stated that the exhibition aimed at establishing a future harmonious collaboration of artists and power. The market potential and “power” of this artwork, however, would have to be defended by
police intervention. Raymond Marcellin, the minister of the interior who had deported Julio Le Parc in June 1968, called on the riot police to violently put down the opposition to the exhibition, showing, as Buren ironically observed, “where to find the harmonious collaboration.” Where the modes of ideological production failed to be reproduced by artists willing to participate in the exhibition, the government’s values had to be upheld by force. In these “helmeted games of official art,” as Buren called them, he noted that the exhibitors tried a “last fraud” to bring the avant-garde within its orbit by posting a photograph of the police charging at the protest that had taken place on May 16 alongside what Buren described as “sinister and puerile declarations.” They integrated the protest into the exhibition via documentation that gave evidence of the exhibition’s own historical importance. According to Buren, exhibiting the photographs was a way of “making the ‘sour’ and ‘excited’ enter the exhibition by force.” The demonstration was appropriated as a “work” in the exhibition, giving it “an air of contestation.”57 The institution thus attempted to recuperate the protest and present it on the organizers’ own terms, and in so doing “harmoniously” recognize the position of the protestors as a valuable aspect of the exhibition history, and a demonstration of their own liberal ability to tolerate and incorporate dissent.

Consistent with his analysis in “Critical Limits,” then, any message, however oppositional, when brought under the umbrella of the institution, became an argument for the institution. In stating this, however, Buren turns it around not as a resolution, but as a warning: “in these photos ‘of the exhibition’ the exhibitors are the helmeted and armed individuals. Justice is thus rendered to them.”58 Exhibiting themselves recursively, the organizers demonstrated the violence necessary to mount an art exhibition. Alongside his article, Buren himself chose to publish two images of the May 16 events. In one, the riot police stand around outside the Grand Palais before charging the sixty-some demonstrators that had come, and the second shows the entrance to the exhibition after the police had charged for a second time. If, in the context of the exhibition, such photographs would have confirmed the authority of those in charge, in the context of Buren’s article, they came under the criticism of his own interpretive apparatus, as evidence of institutional malfeasance.

Despite Buren’s early rhetoric about revolution, sympathies with the positions of radical groups, and attacks on other artists for only offering moderate advancements in the history of art, we cannot understand his project as an attempt to overthrow the institutions whose power structures he critiques. Rather, Buren’s stripes intervene in the space of arts institutions in order to demonstrate how artworks, including his, depend on the institutions for their
intelligibility, and his relationships with the institutions where he showed were generally friendly. As he discussed in an interview with Catherine Millet years later, many different people work for institutions, and “if an artist has found a way to challenge the institution it is because someone at the museum agrees with what the artist is doing and that person is likely in conflict with other members of that institution.” This nuanced perspective was beneficial to the dissemination of his work. A photograph memorializing Il s’agit de voir speaks to this complicity between the artist and gallery director as the two pose like metonyms for their assets, arm in arm, grinning before the stripes that are as fused to the gallery as the two men are to each other. Just as the gallery provided Buren with his first solo exhibition, Buren’s work in turn effectively promoted the gallery by serving as a monumental advertisement, transforming its entryway into a variation on the advertising hoardings where he had pasted the same striped papers in previous months. Crimp argues further that such complicities are the reason that, despite early protestations to the contrary, Buren presented his work as painting. It is only by presenting itself within the context of such a conventional artistic category that the work is able to ask, “What makes it possible to see a painting? What makes it possible to see a painting as a painting? And, under such conditions of its presentation, to what end painting?”

Phenomenological Aspects: Authenticity and Illusion

Buren’s institutional critique required direct viewer experience of the original work in situ in a way that undermined contemporary critiques of medium specificity. During this same period artists associated with pop, land art, and conceptual art were undermining hierarchies between direct experience and its mediation through strategies that included equalizing, or eliminating entirely, distinctions between artworks and their photographic representations. Buren sought to distance himself from such a collapse of distinctions. In the preface to a book of photographs documenting his use of the stripes as a “visual tool” from 1965 to 1988, he highlighted the irony of the ways in which viewers are willing to accept photographs of artworks as though they are the works themselves in a way that they will not do with, as he gives the example himself, a threatening crocodile. A photograph of a crocodile will not bite, but for Buren, photographs of his artworks are dangerous as they threaten to consume what they represent. Photographic mediation, he argued, is powerful and yet “treasonous” because it eclipses the artwork about which it purports to speak and creates its own separate reality. For this reason, when photographs of his work have been printed, Buren has always been careful to have them...
labeled not with the title of the work alone, but with the designation “photo-souvenir”—a way of pointing to the fact that _ceci n’est pas un œuvre d’art_. At the same time that the photograph functions as a “photo-rappel” (photo-reminder), however, he noted that it also functions as a “photo-oubli” (photo-forgetting) when the image overtakes and replaces the first impressions that one might form while seeing the original artwork in situ. At base, these issues of memory were issues of visibility, and the language Buren used evoked the mimicry and invisibility of camouflage. Referring to photographs as “cameleonesque,” he described the relationship between the photograph and the artwork as the superposition “of one image on another, the second—under pretext of memorization—accelerating the process of forgetting the memory that one had of the first by substituting for it and succeeding at making therefore a sort of perfect palimpsest.” The term “photo-souvenir,” however, does not just emphasize the idea of the photograph as a sort of note-taking device, or memory aid, but in pointing to its function as such, it also guards against the idea that the image will become a “photo-oubli” by eroding the power of the photographs to be mistaken for what they represent. The expression “photo-souvenir,” Buren hoped, would give the photographs a “somewhat negative, passive aspect” that would “reduce the impact that the photo-souvenir has immediately.”

Buren did not see treason as the essence of photography, however, but as a function of its relationship to perception. The more spatially sophisticated the artwork, the more treasonous the image becomes. Since a work that is spatially complex, and in some cases, surrounds the viewer, requires active seeing, it evolves as the viewer pieces together a full range of vision. Buren intended his _affichages sauvages_ and other installations to multiply points of view, encourage the mobility of the viewer, and enlarge the frame of vision beyond two dimensions. Whereas being in the space with the work produces an active viewer because “one must discern among the heteroclite elements, stoop, walk, climb, descend, retrace one’s steps,” photographic representation undermines this complexity by framing a selection of the site and reinserting the viewer into a familiar, simplified position in which one is able to clearly identify the photographic subject. Buren articulated his position on photography specifically in opposition to André Malraux’s plans to use the photographic reproduction of artworks in the creation of his _Musée imaginaire_. Buren saw Malraux’s efforts to democratize art as “laudable,” yet he described this project as a “discount museum,” which he ultimately saw as a perversion of the masses. Photography would seem to be an ideal medium for establishing artistic autonomy outside the museum, as photographic reproductions are able to freely circulate beyond institutional borders and find an audience independent of the museums and
galleries. In this light, Malraux’s use of photography could itself be read as a critique of traditional arts institutions for the way that it undermined the aura of the precious objects that undergird institutional authority. Yet, as Buren shows, photography can just as easily be used as a tool for the assertion of institutional projects that diminish the historical and cultural specificity of artworks in order to recompose them according to their own narratival interests. In the shadow of Malraux’s plans, Buren’s insistence on the perceptual distinction between the artwork and its photographic representation focused attention on the value of the specific aesthetic experience of the viewer in order to assert the ability of the artwork to be autonomous vis-à-vis the museum, while contingent on its relationship to its situation in the world and in relation to viewers.

Buren placed emphasis on the eye and seeing, however, during a period in which sight and visuality were repeatedly being put in question by structuralist philosophers in France. As Martin Jay has demonstrated, during the postwar era, phenomenologists, psychoanalysts, and semioticians developed critiques that sought to undermine the primacy of vision and the “disembodied eye” that had emerged during the Enlightenment with Descartes to instead situate sight within the flux of a sensorial body. It became common during the period in which Buren was developing his practice to think of the subject not as standing apart from the world and seeing from an omniscient remove, but as immersed in a world of images that themselves could no longer be expected to reveal deep truth and knowledge but instead provided only surface illusions. Moreover, vision became associated with repression in the form of surveillance, functioning as part of an apparatus that compelled self-regulation of behaviors, turning the supposed seeing subject into an object of the other’s controlling gaze. Given the strong intellectual culture of critique around vision, it is interesting that Buren insisted so strongly on seeing as the key aspect of his work, yet the way in which he did so sought to reveal the relationship between the invisible and the visible in order to show how institutional structures hide and reveal, frame and marginalize.

Jean-François Lyotard took an interest in interpreting Buren’s work through a phenomenological lens at the end of the 1970s, arguing that it provided a vision appropriate to the culture and politics of the moment. In his early attention to painting, Lyotard had focused on figurative work, writing about Cézanne, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty had done three decades earlier in the wake of World War II with his essay “Cézanne’s Doubt,” before turning his interest toward the art of his own time, befriending and writing about hyperrealist cinematic painter Jacques Monory. Eventually, however, he
came to argue that realism assumes a viewer with an intact subjectivity, one that can look at an artwork and take for granted that that viewer recognizes what he or she sees. In an implicit attack on the artistic restrictions and presumptions that characterized both the former Zhdanovist doctrine of the Soviet Union and the realist tendencies of French leftists during the period in which he wrote, Lyotard argued that this ideal viewer is not only presumed to understand “what an apple is,” but, moreover, is able to identify its socialist traits. Such a worldview was not appropriate to Cézanne, who painted famously uncertain studies of apples during a time when understandings of perception were destabilized by advances in physiology, and it would not be appropriate to France in the 1970s, in a country and during a time that was still negotiating the ongoing process of decolonization, seeking its footing after the fall from the supposed utopian heights of 1968, and in the midst of an oil crisis and economic downturn that brought the end of the Thirty Glorious Years. Lyotard argued that Europe was particularly saddled with doubt about its economic future, its relationships with its former colonies, the nationals that were migrating to the metropole, and its cultural relevance in the shadow of US hegemony. In a time when subjectivity was so in question, realist art, he argued, was not appropriate. Rhetorically, he asked, “Will I recognize my apple?” Lyotard distinguishes between what is given in reality and the realm of ideas in which thinking takes place. In order to make the viewer think, the artist must produce work that, in his words, “exceeds what is given” and makes visible what is not immediately apparent.

Lyotard’s essay, “Faire voire les invisible, ou: Contre le réalisme,” focused on Buren’s outdoor artwork *Les couleurs: Sculptures* (1977) and its indoor pendant *Les formes: Peintures* (1977), both of which were purchased by the Centre Pompidou on the occasion of its opening, and both of which undermined the institution’s ability to capture and control their visibility. For *Les couleurs* Buren had fifteen flags measuring around 1.5 by 3 meters each and made from striped fabric in five different colors—sky blue, yellow, orange, red, and green—each of which appeared three times, and each of which had its extreme vertical edges painted white (see plate 12). The flags were positioned on rooftops and monuments across the city, including on the Palais de Chaillot, the Grand Palais, and the Louvre, and he positioned telescopes on the rooftop terrace of the museum, complete with guides that instructed visitors on where to point the telescopes in order to see them.

The museum had just opened its doors on January 31, 1977, following years of construction, an even longer public debate, and decades of itinerancy for the national public collection of modern art, which had been progressively grow-
ing since the nineteenth century. *Les couleurs* was among the first artworks to be collected specifically for the new location, and it was the first from among these to go on public display. The work celebrated the new building both in its architecture and in the position that it occupied in the city. Making use of the new museum’s panoramic roof terrace, which provided sweeping views north, west, and south, the work privileged the museum as offering the only complete view of the work so that a visitor would be able to see all of the flags in quick succession from a single location, knowing, thanks to the collaged photographs of the cityscape identifying the name of each flag location like a distant mountain peak, that they had achieved a comprehensive view of the artwork. While Buren’s *affichage* projects could only be seen punctually, and would most likely be seen unexpectedly, *Les couleurs* provided visual stability. For Alfred Pacquement, who was a curator at the time when *Les couleurs* was installed, and its director at the time of the museum’s Buren retrospective in 2002, the work was particularly appropriate to the building whose glass walls provide views out over most of the city. Placing the flags beyond the frame of the building and thereby creating a work that required specifically seeing across the boundary between the inside and outside, museum and the streets, affirmed the vision of planners and architects who imagined the Centre Pompidou as a museum that would be integrated with the city, a permeable structure that would welcome the street culture of the neighborhood.

A few pages away, in the same catalogue, Buchloh argued that the way in which Buren fulfilled the vision of the museum did not work to level it with the street, but instead reinscribed its authority. Like Lyotard, Buchloh’s concern over the state of contemporary art was anchored in cultural and political developments of the time. He pointed to shifts in support for the arts during the 1970s that resulted in artists losing the personal freedoms they had enjoyed in the previous decade, which had allowed artists to produce more politically and formally radical art. In periods of economic hardship, artists, he argued, became “symbolic legitimation” for private enterprise and public institutions. Projects like *Les couleurs* evidenced this by using size and scale as “cynical compensation for critical negation,” and in consequence, became “simply decorative” rather than socially engaged. Indeed, Buchloh’s position on Beaubourg resembled that of many leftist artists, critics, and intellectuals of the era who lamented Malraux’s cultural policy of the previous decade. “The utopian promise of the museum, to offer equality and public access to historic knowledge and cultural experience,” had become, he argued, “perverted into a cynical strategy of populism that sells public legacies of bourgeois culture as a sedative/substitute,” which becomes itself “consumable goods” that “conceal
its real price of labor.” Flags were loaded with associations of nationalism and corporatism, as the flag was ubiquitous in France at the time—a fact that was highlighted by the proximity of Buren’s stripes flying in direct proximity to those of the department stores La Samaritaine, the Galeries Lafayette, and the Bazar de l’Hôtel de Ville, while others were planted directly atop architectural monuments to national culture. Whereas Buchloh’s 1977 essay “Formalism and Historicity” argued that Buren’s painting both drew on the history of art and “assum[ed] the role of the critical historian of his own activity,” with this new work he reevaluated his judgment, finding it to have become a form of entertainment too squarely focused on the present. With the loss of its critical historicity, its status degraded, according to Buchloh, to “mere objecthood” or “mere aesthetic voluntarism, i.e., decoration.”

Equally interested in the ambiguities of Les couleurs, Lyotard offered a contrasting reading of the work that commended its destabilizing effects on the institution. He rejected the idea that the flags were a sign of “Caesarism” in a battle to take over the capital—an effort that would accord with Louis Chevalier’s accusation that the new museum for which the project was designed was part of the technocratic takeover of the lived city—and instead read it as embracing instability. In understanding the visual effect of the project, Lyotard distinguishes, as Buren might have, between the project as experienced directly and its photographic reproduction. The photos-souvenirs of flags soaring among the roofs, chimneys, and domes of the city, he argues, generated the impression of domination due to the way that they zeroed in on their optical targets and were then manipulated in the darkroom to produce the ideal clarity, lighting, and enlargement. Most importantly, Lyotard considered the role of the margins that are eliminated by the photos-souvenirs. Without them, one is left with the impression that the work is monocular, linear, immobile, definitive. For the viewer standing atop the Centre Pompidou and trying to match up the guides with the city as seen through a telescope, the process did not create an affirmative one-to-one relationship. Instead, as Lyotard described, the viewer “explores, grazes the deranged space, held by a thousand unexpected à côtés,” while the banners themselves are constantly readjusted by the weather. The experience of looking through the telescope plunges the viewer into a distortion in which the vertically oriented, disembodied vision of monocular perspective is augmented to the point that it is denaturalized, becoming a visual hindrance. In this way, the telescopes’ technique for emphasizing the participatory nature of viewing is not unlike Le Parc’s distorting glasses for another vision that plunged their wearers into a virtual kaleidoscopic world, with the difference that Buren trades Le Parc’s fascination with the distrac-
tion of dominant peripheries for a near total lack of peripheral vision, resulting in a frustrating inability to scan. Additionally, by creating a work about distance viewing, this in situ project put in question what the actual site of the work would be. Is it the place where the artwork is installed, or is it the place from which it is seen? In separating the two spaces, Buren effectively amplified the idea of the disembodied eye, while, according to Lyotard, immersing the viewer in the density of the city landscape. As with the imagined realist apple, Lyotard might have wondered, Will I recognize my flag? Yet such a question posed here implies more pointedly the roles of nationalism and commerce as constitutive elements in the formation, or corruption, of the public sphere and the individual’s in/ability to identify with social markers dressed up as officialdom.

As a pendant to Les couleurs: Sculptures, Buren conceived another set of striped canvases titled Les formes: Peintures to be installed inside the museum. For this project he cut black and white striped canvases to the exact dimensions of five paintings hanging in the museum’s modern collection, painted the extreme left stripe with white acrylic paint on the recto side, and mounted them on the wall directly behind the paintings so that they could not immediately be seen. The only way that a museum visitor would know that the striped canvases were there would be by reading the explanatory wall labels for Buren’s works that were affixed below those identifying the paintings that covered them. The artist delegated the choice of paintings to the museum authorities, who selected works that were important to the collection, represented different periods and dimensions, and were regularly placed in the continuity of galleries. Although the curators made choices consistent with their usual working processes, for Buren, these specific canvases did not convey any particular meaning; rather, the installation referred back to his argument in “Critical Limits.” In writing about Les formes, Buren echoed a point from his earlier essay, stating that the project “reinforces the fact that underneath a frame, there is always something that the frame ignores or camouflages or that is foreign to it, that is to say the wall, and this wall is not innocent.” Aligning perfectly with the frame of the host painting, the hidden canvas invites the viewer to step away from a standard viewing position to nearly place his or her head against the wall in search of the meager thinness of the canvas in cross-section.

For Lyotard, this movement of the viewer physically displacing him- or herself in space as necessary to the correct visualization of the work recalled the anamorphic skull in Hans Holbein’s The Ambassadors (1533), and Jacques Lacan’s analysis that anamorphosis counters the symbolic order of painting
by undercutting what is illusionistically represented to instead force a recognition that the painting exists in real space. Of course, all of the modern paintings behind which Buren’s stripes were situated had already undermined the reign of linear perspective and broken with illusionistic space, yet in doing so the artists mostly worked within the frame of the object whose autonomy was not in question. If modernist painting broke with the illusion that the painting was a window into a three-dimensional space to instead call attention to it as an object constructed from materials, Buren’s *Les formes*, like *Les couleurs*, advances this movement by recognizing the objecthood of the artwork while reinvesting it with three-dimensionality by showing it to be integrated into the world of which it is a part. In this way, his challenge to disciplinary boundaries was an essential aspect of his institutional critique. His two-dimensional canvases and posters were not intended to be flat surfaces in themselves, but to exist only in relation to the three-dimensional spaces that surrounded them; his *peintures* were *formes*. Similarly, as “*couleurs*” his stripes took on the forms of *sculptures* as flags that wave and billow in the wind and drape in folds as they rise above their rooftop plinths and dot the city with color. Asserting the physical integration of the work into real space exceeded the physical limitations of the institution, while corrupting disciplinary specificity undermined the
conservative epistemological distinctions whose boundaries continued to be policed by formalist artists, critics, and salon organizers.

As important as the promiscuous range of sites at which Buren’s work would appear was the range of ways in which it disappeared. It was their challenge to visibility that unified his two projects for the new museum. Buren himself observed that while *Les couleurs* was “as far as possible” from the museum and therefore “at the limit of the visible,” *Les formes* could be found in “the most interior place possible of the Museum, in its heart even, within its hanging works,” it was “the closest possible,” and also therefore “at the limit of the visible.” Buren used the invisibility of his own work to put pressure on the functions of museum institutionalization. The work not only pointed to the support of the museum by intervening on the wall that physically supported the paintings, but it also pointed to the system of paratexts that it uses to inscribe artworks within epistemological systems of identifying, categorizing, and cataloging. The artwork was present but invisible, much like institutional power itself, and like institutional power, if one knew the stripes were there, one could look for them, and they would reveal themselves. Considering the problem of institutional critique in visual art, Lyotard offered that if one wanted to conceive an exhibition in which the invisible presuppositions of art exhibitions are made visible that one would have to understand the visible and invisible as “trespassing” on each other in “reciprocal implication.” Drawing on Gestalt theory, he argued that “the visual does not have a homogeneous reality, but necessarily comports the invisible” in an alternation between seeing and not seeing in a temporal unfolding. Each element of the visual object is, in principle, successively visible, but the totality of this object is, in principle, simultaneously invisible. “The visual then does not include only the unseen, but also the invisible.” It is not only that the whole cannot be seen in the moment, but also that seeing it completely is impossible. It slips away in being exposed. Its totality is necessarily invisible. Such interpretation demanded recognition of the intersubjective relationship between the artwork and the viewer as well as the fact that a perception in flux meant a destabilization of meaning for the artwork. Meaning would be fixed neither by the institution nor by the artist on whose mastery the institution depends.

**Conclusion: Decorative Means and Ends**

The “style of absence” that characterized the zero degree became in Buren’s work a style of disappearance. The camouflaging that occurred as the color and geometry of his stripes and installations mimicked the appearance of advertising and the function of wallpaper, flags, or other devices was visual, but
it was also rooted in the social appropriateness of the stripes to the contexts in which they were situated. Buchloh dismissively referred to Les couleurs as “decorative,” yet others have embraced this aspect of Buren’s work and championed the social importance and history of the decorative arts. Defenders of the decorative, including Buren himself, have pointed to the way that decoration has long participated in the interdisciplinary blurring of boundaries between painting, sculpture, and architecture, and, in so doing, has often created installations that were in situ long before site specificity became a category of art practice. Others have argued that exhibiting “minor” decorative art progressively undermined the hierarchy of major fine arts museums. For Buchloh, however, decoration raised the problem of cultural affirmation as the “merely aesthetic” displaced “critical negation.”

Those defending decoration would seem to have agreed with Buchloh on the affirmative history of the decorative arts. In a roundtable conversation on Buren’s work that took place in 1992—after Buren had passed decisively into creating dishes and wallpapers for private residences—philosopher Jean-Louis Deotte noted that at the root of the word decorative is decorum: “the ensemble of rules that it is suitable to follow in order to maintain rank in good society.” François Mathey, chief curator at the Museum of Decorative Arts, and the general commissioner of the 1972 “expo Pompidou,” similarly praised the historical decorative while lamenting its undignified moral fall. Citing seventeenth-century poet Antoine Furetière, he argued that the decorative was a way of adding theater to the world. Yet he observed an “insidious slippage” during the nineteenth century from the sentiment of moral or social obligation in decorum to bourgeois decoration. Mathey argued that during the reign of Louis-Philippe I, “ornament disappeared along with simple decency,” and in this same moment, the “decorative” appears as decorum’s farcical double alongside the rise of industry and money. During this period, decorative art became associated with the profit of the industries that were used to mass-manufacture art objects for the first time, and we see the triumph of the effect of different styles that are linked not by historical force, but by the mere fact of their affectation in a sort of nineteenth-century pastiche. Referring to the juste milieu art of the July Monarchy, but using language that could be applied to the culture of advertising that Arsène-Henry described during the Thirty Glorious Years, Mathey argued that “the everyday universe borrowed the supposed mask of art, itself taxed with the ‘decorative,’ as if it were necessary to add to it a supplementary value. This excessively decorative art well expressed the complacent satisfaction of a certain society padded in its certitudes.” For Mathey, the most important thing is that artwork be “just,
dignified, moral,” all qualities that modern decoration failed to achieve.\textsuperscript{84} In contrast to this, Buren embraced the decorative and rejected morality, yet the way in which he did so did not embrace the spectacle that Debord condemned. Instead, Buren minimized the consumerist messages that his art would have communicated through the effect of blending into its environment by embracing its visual style.

In a 2001 interview, Buren differentiated among various ways of understanding the decorative and defended his work against the judgment that its decorative element was somehow anticritical:

I am absolutely not put off by the terms “decoration,” “décor,” “decorative,” etc. The curious thing, is that they were, it seems to me, led astray of their initial meaning during the entire 20th century to become a sort of insult imposed on works that are made to carry this qualification. . . . The decorative for me, in the best sense of the term, is an integral part of art, be it ancient, classical, or modern, figurative or not, in two dimensions or three dimensional. What’s more, to work directly in the place, on the place, with the place, or against the place, recognizes \textit{ipso facto} a physical attachment to the place in question and in this way rejoins one of the characteristics of art called decorative. To deny it would be stupid. But the decorative is stronger and subtle and slides into all works, even the most traditional and transportable that think they escape it, and therefore often appear to the detriment of these here, because they become the “décor” of a wall, of a space, of a place that they never either thought about or conceived. These works become therefore decorative in the most pejorative sense of the term.\textsuperscript{85}

Buren would have his own work escape the denigrated form of decoration since it is composed in situ and thereby acknowledges the unavoidable attachment of art to physical space. Importantly, in contrast to the in situ’s capacity to transform the space in which it exists as its critical function, through the years he would deploy the term “decorative” to deprecate institutions’ use of artworks.

Perhaps more notably, Buren accused Harald Szeemann of using artists’ work decoratively in his text “Exhibition of an Exhibition,” which he prepared as a response to \textit{Documenta V} (1972). “More and more, the subject of an exhibition tends not to be the display of artworks, but the exhibition of the exhibition as a work of art,” Buren wrote. “The works presented are touches of color—carefully chosen—for the picture that each section (room) composes in the ensemble,” and in so doing, the curator has a leveling effect on all of
the artworks. Art is destroyed in being exhibited in such circumstances because, as Buren noted, “even if yesterday, the work became famous thanks to the Museum, today it no longer serves as anything other than a decorative gadget for the survival of the Museum as a picture, a picture whose author is none other than the exhibition organizer himself.” The historical distinction that Buren made in this statement pointed to a particular innovation of Szeemann’s at the end of the 1960s, when he effectively became as well known as the artists that he showed for the exhibition *Live in Your Head: When Attitude Becomes Form: Works-Processes-Concepts-Situations-Information* (1969). Szeemann’s curatorial choices for this show innovated the idea of the “invitation exhibition,” in which he allowed the invited artists to use the Bern Kunsthalle, where Szeemann was director, as a studio space for producing whatever they chose, rather than having the curator select specific works from the artists’ studios in advance. This in itself can be understood as an act of curatorial institutional critique, which echoes Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, and Toroni’s painting demonstration at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture two years earlier. It was indeed one that displeased the Kunsthalle’s board of directors, yet Buren understood this technique to be a false display of freedom, an “illusion of liberty” that masked the power structures in play. Notably, this included Szeemann’s unusual acquisition of private funding from the tobacco company Philip Morris, whose support allowed him to act unilaterally in organizing the exhibition. As sociologist Christoph Behnke has argued, Szeemann’s curatorial innovations deprofessionalized exhibition in a way that was antagonistic to bourgeois divisions of labor while inventing the idea of the curator as a “managerial” “administrator” of art.

Buren was not invited to exhibit in Bern, but he arrived anyway, prepared to argue for a truer artistic liberty by posting his own stripes around the city, including over advertising for cigarettes. The city responded by encroaching on Buren’s bodily liberty by arriving at his apartment in the night, roughing him up, and taking him to jail, where he was charged with defacing the city. While Buren’s intervention was less destructive than, for example, Michael Heizer’s, which involved destroying a section of pavement with a wrecking ball, his did not fall within the protective sanction of the institution, so it incited the repressive force of the police. Three years later, Szeemann invited Buren to exhibit at *Documenta V*, but again Buren protested Szeemann’s curation, this time by countering his “gadget decoration” with nearly invisible white stripes painted on white paper that he used to decoratively cover the walls of several galleries. In this way, he inserted himself among the other works on display while breaking up Szeemann’s curatorial program. Buren’s comments
on decoration are essential to understanding the critical function of \textit{Les formes} five years later. The invisibility of the stripes hiding behind the other canvases in the Centre Pompidou’s collection can be seen as presenting a challenge to curatorial authority. Hiding his own canvases was an act of refusal, a protest against the museum, whose role was thereby limited to categorizing, documenting, conserving, but not, in this case, displaying or “decorating.”

This use of the decorative and decorum for the purposes of institutional critique was being developed at the same time that Buren was working, albeit in a different visual mode, by Marcel Broodthaers. Through the 1970s, Broodthaers used décor not just as a strategy of display, but as the very subject of his artwork. These works emerged in the aftermath of 1968, during which Broodthaers himself gave a speech against institutional authority at the Palace of Fine Arts in Brussels. Later that year he presented his \textit{Musée d’art moderne}, a set of wooden art shipping crates stamped with standard signage indicating the proper way to transport the crate and its would-be precious contents along with a set of postcard reproductions of artworks, even as the paintings or sculptures one would expect to see were absent. In 1972, he added the \textit{Section des aigles}, and the \textit{Section de publicité}, which developed first as a museum collection specializing in representations of eagles across epochs, cultures, and
high and low media, and then a variation on this theme that was devoted to representations of the raptors in advertising imagery. In these collections and installations, Broodthaers reproduced the trappings of art-museum bureaucracy in an effort to highlight the ideological production of the museum as an institution that is based in Enlightenment rationality, yet steeped in excesses that emerged in bureaucratic frustration and defeat. 88

The decorative aspect of Broodthaers’s work did not fully develop, however, until two years later, when, at the Palace of Fine Arts in 1974, he presented his *Un jardin d’hiver*, an accumulation of potted palm trees and folding chairs organized in such a way as to produce a cliché arrangement. Rachel Haidu sees in this work a critique of institutions that makes use of decorative vegetation in order to evoke an environment specific to the period of the nineteenth century in which museums came to flourish. 89 By creating an atmosphere reminiscent of the café or waiting room within the museum, he brought together public and private space to show that, more than just spaces of sensory perception, museums are conditioned by, and themselves reiterate, historical narratives. Despite the fact that the spaces that Broodthaers constructs provide comfort for the viewer, who is invited to sit among calming greenery, Haidu argues that the décors had an alienating effect on the spectator, who “awkwardly fail[s] to find a place in the arrangement of objects.” 90 The following year he presented two installations titled *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers* on the themes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century war, showing, as Haidu says, the “morbid nonchalance” of war’s domestic spectacularization. 91 The spatial discomfort that Broodthaers created for his audience, Haidu argues, constantly restaged the theme of noncommunication and spoke to the political alienation of the post-1968 years. His perspective on communication was at odds with period enthusiasms over the potentials of free speech. While one can use this speech in public in order to claim self-representation, it is always ultimately refracted through (if not already originating in) the language of the administered world. A similar dialectic of freedom and control played out in the museum. Whereas art was supposed to embody authenticity and free expression, the museum, Broodthaers demonstrated, dehistoricizes its holdings as it takes objects out of the settings appropriate to their social engagement to preserve them in rationalized chronologies and taxonomies. Broodthaers used the decorative to describe this withdrawal from political engagement to the private world of fantasies cosseted by both comforting interior design and the administration that preserves it.

For both Mathey and Broodthaers, evocations of the decorative raise the specter of the nineteenth century. This period of rapid change and modern-
ization held the promise of mass democratization and expansion of cultural literacy, as well as the threat of evacuating or hollowing out tradition. Buren’s practices, since at least his early demonstrations, have been interested in the historical development of arts institutions, as the artists made explicit in arguing for continuity with salons of the previous century—all were, as they put it, “objectively reactionary” in promoting the myth of artistic freedom. Rather than referring back to a golden age, however bureaucratized, Buren used the decorative to focus on the present. In some cases, this included, as with Broodthaers, a semiotic interest in advertising, but he added to this a focus on spaces of sensorial experience and viewer perception.

Buren’s use of decoration as institutional critique functions according to the way that it articulates decorum. The bourgeois revolution that Mathey credited with its downfall was the very source of the awning materials that Buren later adopted. If the material that he used came from the world of decoration, the way in which his work operated made use of decorum in the sense that it required the rules of institutions in order to be intelligible. His use of the decorative allowed him to employ a minor art form typically associated with the margins of a space, and many of Buren’s “decorative” works are unconventional installations that highlight the liminal spaces or the places where the building meets the surrounding world: the windows, doors, moldings, parts of the building that one sees or passes through. One would not be inclined to pay these spaces much attention if not for the chance that they were ornamented. Buren’s stripes point to the contingencies of the museum or gallery and thereby make it appear less as a hermetic monolith. Such work is “just, dignified, and moral,” to use Mathey’s words, in ways that are intelligible to the art establishment without seeking to be agreeable to it by using the gallery spaces provided in the ways that the institutions intended. In a reversal of Mathey’s dismissal of decoration in favor of “morality,” Buren embraced the decorative in his work and argued in 1968 that the reason that he did not reject the art world entirely was because he was not a moralist. If he were, he might have made a point of working, for example, exclusively outside the art world.

The rules that Buren followed were those of the museum, but his use of decorum can equally be applied to the minor arts of street advertising. In these instances, however, he mimics the rules to the effect that he disappears into his environment. The blankness of Buren’s stripes, their insistence on ephemerality as they are destroyed in the weather and by the public, and the fact that the reality that they create disappears along with them, unpreserved by the camera, all suggest the absence of history in this work that does not
so much remember as it shows the process of forgetting, as it stages its own disappearance. In its application to the streets, then, it translates Mathey’s observation that those who deal with the decorative “treat the living environment.” While the GRAV also made objects that were intended to decorate private homes, Buren’s use of the decorative was at odds with the former group’s flashy, eye-catching sparkle, as his use of bright geometric colors disappeared, rather than leapt out, from their environment. The instability that his work generated was less based on optical illusion than the interpretive ambiguity that would follow upon seeing his work simultaneously in and out of place.

Buren’s embrace of the zero degree decentered the artist, and his gallery and street installations worked to decenter the viewer. At the same time, the critique that his work made against French cultural policy evolved along with the adaptations of government to social demands. While retaining their ambivalence and visual instability, as Lyotard showed, arts institutions changed with the times, and Buren’s objectives increasingly cohered with state projects. As Caillois observed, ornamentation was an essential aspect of mimicry, yet in the epigram to his essay he cited a warning that he elsewhere attributed to the Cabala: “Beware,” he wrote, “in playing the ghost one becomes it.” The frightening power of the ghost is only one side of an ambivalence, the other face of which is marginalization and invisibility. To return to Crimp’s question about the visibility of painting as such, the more that Buren’s stripes were visible as artworks, the more they merged with institutional expectations. The camouflaging effect of Buren’s work, and the decorum with which it followed the rules of its various sites, meant that the work risked losing its friction and transparently fading into complicity with the ideological values of the places in which he would situate his stripes.