Up and Down, In and Out, Step by Step, A Sculpture, a work by Daniel Buren

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The numerous works of art that Daniel Buren has executed here and abroad over the last two decades bear witness to an impressive oeuvre. Born in France in 1938 and recognized internationally for nearly 20 years, Buren has contributed to the radical redefinition of contemporary art. The Art Institute of Chicago, continuing its commitment to the art of the present, acquired Buren’s 1977 *Up and Down, In and Out, Step by Step, A Sculpture* (figs. 1–3) for its permanent collection in 1982. Consideration of this major example of recent art in relation to other works by this artist not only leads to an understanding of Buren’s approach in general but also serves to elucidate the artistic goals of the 1970s as these have evolved from and revised those of the 1950s and 1960s.

Throughout his career, Buren has sought to reevaluate prior ideas about art in order to discover alternative avenues for visual experience. Works by Buren are generally executed outside of the traditionally defined exhibition space. Always done “in situ,” they are allied with a specific site and exist physically only during the period of their exhibition. For every work, the artist uses fabric or other material that has been printed with alternating white and single-colored vertical bands measuring 8.7 centimeters (about 3 1/2 inches) in width. The artist’s decision concerning where to adhere or hang the striped material governs the physical form and meaning of each new work.
Buren arrived at the decision to limit the format of his work to printed vertical stripes in 1965. After several years of experimentation in search of the means to create "a work of which nothing can be said except that it is," he concluded that the adoption of prefabricated material (visually not unlike the kind used for awnings, canvas furniture, etc.) would eliminate the mechanical necessity of painting the stripes himself. The repetitious vertical bands meet Buren's requirement for painting that is "simply to exist before the eye of the viewer," as they themselves offer no message or painterly materiality. With the interpretive, personal touch of the artist removed, the stripes function purely as visual fact.

Although the consistently repeated vertical format that provides the "internal structure" of each work, according to the artist, "remains immutable," varying only with respect to color, each piece is unique. In 1968, Buren began to extend his concerns beyond the traditional confines of the studio. Since then, every work has been directly related to and affected by the conditions of its placement. A brief analysis of several of Buren's important pieces points to their extraordinary visual variety and lends insight into the nature of his intent.

Two works of 1968, among the earliest implemented outside the studio, are seminal to Buren's later development. For the first of these, done in Paris that year, Buren pasted some 200 rectangular sheets of green-and-white-striped paper to many of the billboards found throughout the city and its suburbs. He placed

*Figure 1* Daniel Buren (French, born 1938). *Up and Down, In and Out, Step by Step, A Sculpture*, 1977, photo/souvenir: a work in situ. The Art Institute of Chicago, Twentieth Century Discretionary Fund (1982.44). Installation view (detail), 1977, looking north. Photo: Rusty Culp. In this and all other works by Buren illustrated here, the material used, unless specified otherwise, is white and colored striped paper in vertical bands 8.7 cm wide adhered to the surface by glue.
the striped rectangles randomly over or beside advertisements of every kind, juxtaposing them with the commercial statements and images already there (see fig. 4). In speaking of this work, Buren emphasized that he accomplished it anonymously and without permission, that is “without invitation, and without commercial support and without a gallery.” 6 The work materialized quite literally “without,” and thus “outside of,” the usual framework of artistic activity. Neither contained like a painting on canvas within the edges of a frame, nor shown as part of the conventional exhibition system, it was inserted instead into the context of everyday, outdoor advertising display. Buren thus ingeniously succeeded in producing a work that had no designated author and communicated no inherent message. Moreover, glued beside and over all manner of advertisements, the striped rectangles, viewed as works of art, ironically did not possess any institutional or economic “backing” of their own. Through his deliberate negation of museum or gallery auspices, Buren opened to question the accepted methods of both making and exhibiting art in order to reevaluate the interrelated roles of authorship, content, and presentation in the creation of aesthetic meaning. 6

The second work of this early period of Buren’s career similarly took issue with—in order to analyze—preconceived assumptions about the institution of art and the institutions for it. As his contribution to the invitational “Salon de Mai” exhibition of 1968 at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, he adhered a large piece of green-and-white-striped paper, 15 feet high and 54 feet long, to one of the museum’s interior walls. At the time this exhibition was in progress, he hired two “sandwich men,” frequently seen in Paris in those years, to walk around the neighborhood of the museum wearing their customary placards. In place of the publicity advertisements for shops, announcement of films, etc., which they normally carried, Buren’s sandwich men bore signboards covered with the same green-and-white-striped paper used on the wall in the exhibition. Circulating anonymously through the streets, the striped signboards contrasted significantly with the officially presented work of art in the museum (see fig. 5). They pointed to the fact that different assumptions pertain to the perception of a work that is viewed on the premises of an art institution than to one that utilizes commercial display systems of street advertising. Whereas the work pasted on billboards completely circumvented traditional methods of exhibiting art, it functioned outside the museum yet had specific reference to it.

Like these two Paris pieces, all of Buren’s succeeding works are derived from and inserted into existing reality—a non-art context. Explaining, for example, the way in which he arrived at a work of 1969 for the Wide White Space Gallery in Antwerp, Buren described how he applied striped paper, the same as he used for the invitational poster for the exhibition, to the flat plinth that ran along the outside of the gallery’s building. The striped material followed the contours of the plinth from a hydrant beside the building to the doorway, and from the doorway into the gallery itself (see fig. 6a-b). Instead of hanging traditional

Top
Figure 2. Buren. Installation view of figure 1 (detail), looking east. Photo: Rusty Culp.

Bottom
Figure 3. Buren. Exterior portion of figure 1, Michigan Avenue entrance. Photo: Rusty Culp.
paintings on the gallery walls, Buren gave shape to this work by way of the external architectural detailing, extending the colorful series of stripes on line with the chosen plinth from the outside of the building to the space within. As Buren concluded, “the piece inside the gallery, thus dictated by the situation outside, uses only the space available as a result of the given architecture.”

_Sail/Canvas, Canvas/Sail_ (1975–76), a work in two phases, once more illustrates how the given reality can determine the resulting work. For the first phase of this piece, Buren organized a sailboat race on the Wannsee, Berlin’s large lake. Nine boats were rigged with sails made with his characteristic striped material, each of a different color—white with yellow, blue, red, green, or orange, etc. Steered by children, they could be seen from the shore as the wind propelled them through the water at various speeds (see fig. 7a). Some months later, for the second part of the work, he hung the sails on one of the long walls of the Berlin Akademie der Künste as if they were paintings (fig. 7b). Spacing them evenly, he arranged them in the sequence of their boats’ arrival at the finish line of the race.

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Top

Bottom

In this instance, as the double-entendre of the work's French title (Voile/Toile, Toile/Voile) suggests, canvas sails and sails as paintings are one and the same. Buren himself has written, "the form [of this work] is defined solely by the function of the canvas [toile] in its capacity as sail [voile]." Furthermore, once on exhibit in the museum, where art is supposed to be housed, the sails unquestionably could be viewed as art objects. Having first staged this work in a non-art situation and afterward having subjected it to the traditional methods of fine-art display, Buren exposed—while he also bridged—the gap between the interior and the exterior of the traditional exhibition area and between generally accepted art and non-art contexts.

Every work by Buren both acts upon and is activated by its context. His examination of the significant role of all aspects of the museum or gallery context in the interpretation of art is central to his approach. A work may be physically placed in a public, non-art situation like the Paris billboards or, like the Berlin sailboats, it may dialectically connect an art and non-art environment. In the case of a one-person exhibition in 1975 at the Städtisches Museum Mönchengladbach, Buren chose to work totally within the traditional exhibition space itself.

In preparation for his Mönchengladbach work, entitled Starting from (A Partir de là), Buren studied nearly ten years of successive exhibitions held at the Städtisches Museum, which had been founded on the premises of a large private house. By means of documentary installation photographs and with the help of
the museum's director, he was able to distinguish an essentially unvarying approach to the placement of art works that the institution had followed for nearly a decade. From his summary of these installations, Buren derived a composite pattern of rectangular voids. For the resulting work, he covered the walls of all rooms on both floors of the museum with striped fabric, choosing blue and white material for the ground level, brown and white for the stairway walls, and red and white for the upper level. Wherever a painting—selected from a cross-section of the museum's numerous shows—had once hung on the wall in a particular spot, he cut a rectangular section to size out of the striped material so that the bare wall behind showed through (see fig. 8).9

The conspicuous absence of actual paintings gave striking visual presence to the wall, the support that normally is unseen. As a result, the background wall came to be read as foreground. As Buren has asked, “Is the wall a background for the picture or is the picture a decoration for the wall? In any case, the one does not exist without the other.”10 Since the museum's installations over almost a decade proved to be nearly identical in terms of the placement of objects, Buren was able to exhibit the customary nature of presenting art. He revealed the ingrained assumptions of our culture concerning the display of paintings, since they tend to be hung on walls at eye level, according to size, and at specified distances apart.

As Buren has noted, his one-person exhibition at Mönchengladbach functioned as a retrospective of the museum’s own exhibition history.11 The nature of accepted modes of museum presentation was the subject of a work in which content and context merged. Starting from, with its emphatically striped walls pierced by the shapes of paintings once present, existed within the supporting framework of the museum, from which it could not be detached, since the work was inseparable from its container.12

In each new set of circumstances, Buren discovers aspects of the site or situation that he turns to the purposes of his art. A work exhibited from October 1980 through May 1982 at The Art Institute of Chicago took advantage of the fact that the museum extends over an active railroad line, probably a unique phenomenon for any major museum anywhere. One large window of the museum in the Morton Wing stairhall exhibition area overlooks the tracks, which run beside and under the building. With the cooperation of the city of Chicago’s transporta-

![Figure 8 Buren. Starting from (A Partir de là), 1975. Photo/souvenir: a work in situ using printed fabric adhered to the surface with glue (detail). Städtisches Museum Mönchengladbach, West Germany. Photo: the artist.](image)
tion system, Buren enlisted the commuter trains that regularly pass the museum to realize his piece, titled Watch the Doors Please. He adhered a weatherproof vinyl material printed with stripes—white with red, blue, yellow, purple, or green—to the central double doors of the entire fleet of train cars servicing the south side of Chicago and its suburbs. A label with the train schedule at the museum window informed museum visitors when they might catch a glimpse of a two- or four-car train with colorful, rectangular doors whose color sequence depended on how the cars were linked together randomly at the yards each day.13

Watch the Doors Please dramatically reversed the traditional art-viewing process. It was not affixed to a wall or confined to a specific gallery. Subject to the conditions of real time and place, it came instead to the viewer, who had to wait for the work as he or she would for a train. The expansive glass window of the Morton Wing—whose mullions resemble gigantic, over-lifesize stretcher bars—functioned as if it were a huge transparent canvas and provided a ready-made frame through which to see the work (see fig. 9). The striped, rectangular doors passing at various intervals in front of the window’s frame were not an illusionistically depicted image, but a colorful actuality. Replacing both picture frame and canvas, the window in radical fashion brought about the total fusion of observed reality and art.

The commuter trains literally served as the vehicle for a work of art that conjoined this renowned art museum to the commercial, quotidian world surrounding it. The striped doors, being rectangular, suggested moving paintings and ironically alluded to the tradition of painting on canvas they had left behind. They could be seen not only from within the museum but also from station platforms or bridges; from a distance, they appeared as transitory flecks of color, highlighting the Chicago skyline or animating the suburban homes and shrubbery they passed intermittently. Without attempting to impose the assumptions of an art context upon a non-art context, Watch the Doors Please traveled back and forth between and united otherwise separate worlds. In themselves, the stripes could be read purely as decorative elements. Commuters unaware of the work even interpreted them as a new safety feature of the transit system.14 Framed by the window of a prestigious art institution, however, the striped doors had to be dealt with as part of the discourse of art. The work as a totality, therefore, engendered multiple points of view and opened the door for dialogue on a number of levels. Just as the conductor admonishes passengers to pay attention upon entering the train by announcing “watch the doors, please,” Buren’s work in parallel manner urged museum viewers at the window to be aware of, and look beyond, the prescribed boundaries of art.

Watch the Doors Please, therefore, fulfilled Buren’s aspiration for an art that dispenses with the traditional canvas, which, for him, is a mask that, under the guise of self-sufficiency, conceals by ignoring the realities of its given context.15 “Right from the start,” Buren has affirmed, “I have always tried to show . . . that indeed a thing never exists in itself. . . .”16 Dispensing with the canvas as his arena of activity, Buren investigates beyond its borders in order to visually involve the work’s total frame of reference. “Where the empty canvas was once both the authority and the obstacle as a medium for experiment, today the authority of the institution is the only medium available for the artist,” according to the artist.17

Fulfilling museums’ institutional requirements for acquiring and housing objects for their permanent collections, Buren’s Up and Down, In and Out, Step by Step, A Sculpture (see figs. 1–3) exemplifies the way in which he has succeeded in establishing an entirely new relationship between the work of art and its surroundings. Step by Step . . . was originally created for “Europe in the Seven-
ties: Aspects of Recent Art,” an exhibition featuring the work of 23 artists that was held on The Art Institute of Chicago’s second-floor, East Wing galleries during the fall of 1977. For this work, Buren cut green-and-white-striped paper to size and glued it to all of the risers of the museum’s Grand Staircase, which led up to the rest of the exhibition galleries (fig. 1). He also put the striped material on the lower level staircase risers (fig. 2) and—on line with the main interior stairs—continued the work outdoors on the steps of the Michigan Avenue entrance (fig. 3), as the accompanying label and diagram specifically indicated. When the work was purchased later for the museum’s permanent collection, the artist stated that the choice of color for the printed stripe should be made by the curatorial staff and further suggested that this color might change with each reinstallation of the work. The continuation of the stripes on the stairs that lead to the lower level and on those outdoors remains an optional extension of the piece, but the striping of the risers of the entire Grand Staircase is necessary for the work’s completion. As with any item in a collection, this work may be installed for any period of time and removed at any point, but, unlike a traditional painting or sculpture, it exists only when on view. Like all works by Buren, Step by Step . . . temporally and spatially embodies what is present.

Although materially and visually concrete, it cannot be severed from its supporting framework to receive life as an object isolated from its appointed context.  

*Step by Step* . . . testifies to the radical developments in art that revolutionized aesthetic practice simultaneously here and abroad in the years following 1968. Precedents for these developments are to be found in the work of a slightly older generation of artists who, generally speaking, have been identified with either the Pop or Minimal art movements. In the early and mid-1960s, these artists challenged and revised previous notions about painting and sculpture and laid the groundwork for succeeding artistic innovation. *Step by Step* . . . takes its historical place in the Art Institute’s collection of contemporary art in relation to, but in distinction from, its paintings by Frank Stella or Roy Lichtenstein on the one hand, and its sculptures by Donald Judd, Carl Andre, or Sol LeWitt on the other.

When Buren decided in 1965 to use material printed with vertical bands, he carried even further the significant conclusions reached at the beginning of the decade in this country by artists such as Stella and Lichtenstein. Although visually disparate from one another, the paintings of these two artists share certain ideas and, in turn, parallel Buren’s own rationale. In response to the precepts of Abstract Expressionist painting that dominated the decade of the 1950s, Stella by abstract means and Lichtenstein through the use of pre-existing imagery applied new criteria to painting. Stella’s *De La Nada Vida a La Nada Muerte* and Lichtenstein’s *Brushstroke with Spatter* illustrate the converging attitudes of these otherwise diverse artists.

*De La Nada Vida a La Nada Muerte* (fig. 10) presents a series of evenly spaced, horizontal lines that change their course at several intervals as they stretch across a 23½-foot expanse. Although the eye instinctively may read the painting from left to right, there is no narrative of any kind, nor any thematic or compositional beginning or end. The painting instead gives the impression of having been cut out of an endlessly repeated pattern of parallel linear elements that regularly veer upward and then resume their horizontal direction. Rather than being contained within a given rectangular format, these horizontal lines serve to define the raised plateaus and notched valley of their outer rim, lending the painting its aspect of being an independent object. In the interest of directness, Stella in this period curtailed any visual incident that would accrue as the result of imagery or compositional arrangement. The work must be viewed as a continuous entity that does not offer the option of isolating one particular section from another.

Conveying frozen energy and movement, *De La Nada Vida a La Nada Muerte* resists interpretation beyond its essential visual impact, a quality reinforced by its metallic paint surface. Referring to this type of surface, Stella recalled that “it had a quality of repelling the eye in the sense that you couldn’t penetrate it very well. It was a kind of surface that wouldn’t give in and would have less soft, landscape-like or naturalistic spaces in it.”19 The industrial nature of the work’s painted surface enhances its impersonal qualities and its implied removal from the hand of the artist. Expressive or compositional considerations exterior to the direct experience of the work itself, therefore, may not easily enter its domain. As Stella has often been quoted as saying, “My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen is there,”20 meaning that his work does not refer to another or higher order.

Roy Lichtenstein, known at first for his comic-book imagery and more recently for paintings that refer to works by other artists, has also questioned the tenets of Abstract Expressionism, with its emphasis on painterly expression and content. Along with Stella, he has striven to establish the painted surface as an
independent reality, claiming that his painting “doesn’t look like a painting of something; it looks like the thing itself.” endeavors “to hide the record of his hand” so as to endow the painted surface with the appearance of autonomy, Lichtenstein has eliminated direct reference to his own painterly manipulations. He has avoided giving evidence of his personal intervention in order, paradoxically, to lend the painting its sense of directness. His *Brushstroke with Spatter* (fig. 11) parodies the expressionistic use of brushwork characteristic of painting in the 1950s. By depicting the exuberant brushstroke as if it were a representation of a magnified detail from a photographic reproduction, the artist has subjected it to objective scrutiny and has negated it as a descriptive or charged pictorial tool. The depicted image of brushwork and accompanying drips receive a life of their own while being given equal representational status with the surrounding field of painted, photographic dots. The painting thereby signifies the fact that, whatever its subject matter or representational means might be, it is a flat plane and, as such, a reality unto itself.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the question of how to make painting a self-referential reality presented itself as a central issue. Through their respective techniques of distancing, artists like Stella and Lichtenstein deliberately suppressed inherent reminders of personal invention and expression that can be evoked by compositional arrangement or brushwork. In the mid-1960s, Buren pushed these attitudes even further. The commercial prefabrication of striped material forces what is on the canvas surface and its actual fabric to merge and allows the artist to dispense with personal, artistic fabrication. Emptying the canvas of compositional, figurative, or landscape elements, Buren uses vertical stripes to deny all expressive reference.

If, during the early part of the 1960s, certain artists turned their attention to demonstrating the primacy of the painted canvas surface *per se*, others investigated the essential nature of three-dimensional form in order to stress the material actuality and presence of sculpture for its own sake. The work of artists like Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and Sol LeWitt (see figs. 12–14) eschews all modes of compositional configuration and personal expression so that any interference with the immediate perception of the work as an essential, material whole is abolished. With their desire to move “away from illusionism, allusion and metaphor,” in the words of their contemporary Robert Morris, they sought to eradicate all traces of figuration.

Buren’s reduction of his format to mechanically reproduced, repeated vertical bands bears comparison with this unprecedented approach to sculpture on the part of major artists such as Andre, Judd, and LeWitt. His utilization of commercially printed stripes, moreover, is similar to these sculptors’ adoption of industrially available, non-art materials instead of stone, clay, or bronze. Just as the printed fabric of Buren’s work negates the intervention of the artist’s hand, so
does Andre’s use of individual metallic units, Judd’s use of plexiglass and stainless steel, and LeWitt’s use of baked enamel preclude the handling of material through carving or modeling. Works by these three artists in the Art Institute’s collection typify their highly individual, yet analogous, attitudes toward sculpture and mark their innovative rift with the past.

The sculpture of Andre is made up of separate, uniform elements which the artist stacks together or aligns side by side in order to form a single whole. Since 1965, when he decided that sculpture “should be as level as water,” Andre has conceived works which, as he puts it, “cut into” space from their position on the ground.24 Steel-Aluminum Plain (fig. 12), a flat, checkerboard square made of steel and aluminum, is composed of single, unjoined squares of identical size. Andre emphasizes the fact that the elements of his sculpture belong to industrial society. Standard and pre-fabricated, “the materials [he uses] have been processed by manufacture.”25 As a method, his repetition of uniform, industrial elements shares an affinity with Buren’s repetition of similarly sized, printed stripes.

Although his visual concerns ultimately differ from those of Andre, Judd also depends on industrially available materials for the realization of works that simultaneously contain and are contained by space. In the case of the Art Institute’s piece, Untitled (fig. 13), the interior and exterior of the object are allotted visual equivalency. Rectangular sheets of deep yellow plexiglass, bolted to the top and around two sides, contribute a glossy, reflective, and translucent surface to a work whose hollow aluminum interior core commands equal visual weight with its exterior. No one part of the work takes precedence over another, while viewpoints are multiple. A slick, shiny, industrial-appearing object that is not handmade, it possesses an air of independent self-containment. Perceived as a single totality, Untitled avoids a balanced compositional arrangement of subor-
dinate parts and thereby resists figurative interpretation. In this way, Judd’s work relates to the non-hierarchical pattern of stripes employed by Buren.

Speaking of his pieces of 1965, LeWitt pointed out, “Using lacquer, much work was done to make the surface look hard and industrial.” 26 At this time, he evolved his “modular structures,” wall reliefs or free-standing objects that yield numerous variations on the square and cube. LeWitt’s Nine Part Modular Cube (fig. 14) is also visually grasped as one entity. It invites an infinite number of angles for viewing; no area of the sculpture dominates over another, nor can any one of its parts be segregated. Presented as a three-dimensional grid, sculpture by LeWitt apportions the space in which it is placed while equally partaking of it. His decision to apply a consistent—although originally arbitrary—ratio of 8.5:1 (representing the material and the spaces in between) to all of his three-dimensional pieces has led to infinite visual possibilities, as have Buren’s identically proportioned stripes.

The free-standing sculpture of these three artists, who seek to avoid capricious forms of invention, interacts with the given spatial reality; thus, the placement of
the work is significant to its visual comprehension. As Andre once claimed, “A place is an area within an environment which has been altered in such a way as to make the general environment more conspicuous.”27 Although their works function as self-sufficient objects, they refer, without deferring to, the surroundings on which they strikingly make their mark. By the mid-1960s, the interchange with the given reality set up in works such as these established a precedent for works, which, in the late 1960s, would directly interconnect with the allotted exhibition space.

Of this generation of artists, Dan Flavin most directly affords in his work a prelude to that of Buren. Early in the 1960s, when Flavin decided to substitute standard fluorescent light fixtures for canvas and paint, he created an unprecedented body of works, such as the Art Institute’s Monument for V. Tatlin, No. 8 (fig. 15), whose substance—light—is their content. During the second half of the decade, Flavin abandoned the traditional, delimited placement of a work on one area of the wall. In coordination with the physical structure of a particular room or rooms, arrangements of pink, blue, green, and/or gold electric lights serve to activate the entire exhibition site. These installations depend on and relate to their architectural settings. Because of the integration of material and background support, they foster an absorbing interplay between white or colored light and space.

Flavin’s expansion of the work of art into the surrounding exhibition space opened the entire exhibition area to consideration and use. By 1968, certain artists came to the conclusion that a work need not be separate from the supporting wall. At the end of that year, LeWitt at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York and the late German artist Blinky Palermo, at the Heiner-Friedrich Gallery in Munich—unknownst to each other—decided to produce works directly on the surface of the exhibition wall itself.

The integration of work and architectural setting has been accomplished by different means and to different ends by LeWitt and Palermo. For LeWitt, “the wall is understood as an absolute space, like the page of a book.”28 With the intent of integrating his work with its environment, LeWitt came to the idea in 1969 of “treating the whole room as a complete entity—as one idea.”29 Since then, he has realized numerous wall drawings in exhibition spaces throughout the world. For each work, he adapts a pre-determined system of lines to the chosen space so that “no matter how many times the work is done it is always different.”30 For example, in a work such as All Combinations of Arcs from Corners and Sides, Straight Lines, Not Straight Lines, and Broken Lines (fig. 16),


the superimposed configuration of linear elements interlocks with their enclosed spatial support so that the work of art and its place of display are brought together as a unified whole. No longer merely supplying a neutral backdrop for a painting or drawing, the wall for LeWitt becomes an integral part of the total work.

Like LeWitt, Palermo, in wall drawings that no longer exist, dispensed with the intermediary canvas surface in order to ally the work with the walls of the room. Rather than adapting a system of lines to the given environment, he correlated the found shapes of architectural elements with the space itself. For an exhibition at the Konrad Fischer Gallery, Düsseldorf, for example, Palermo painted the projection of an ordinary and actual staircase profile (see fig. 17) onto one of the gallery’s walls in a suitably proportioned, relatively narrow section of its space, which somewhat suggested a corridor.

Aspects of the wall drawings of these two artists correspond to the radical ideas of Buren. Whereas the work of LeWitt involves the fusion of predetermined linear elements with the existing architectural space, the work of Palermo fuses background support with forms obtained from an architectural reality. Both artists similarly established an interdependent relationship between the exhibition space and the exhibited work of art so that the walls and “image” mesh. Denying the conventional canvas support, LeWitt and Palermo, in similar fashion to Buren, confronted the reality of the exhibition environment and “drew” the context and content of their work together. In addition, Palermo, unlike Buren, allowed the forms of architectural reality—such as an actual staircase—to prescribe how the resulting work “takes shape.” The stairway profile afforded Palermo an undulating form that was extracted from material reality rather than invented. It thus dictated the formal outline of Palermo’s wall drawing in the same way that the Art Institute’s Grand Staircase determined the sculptural form of Step by Step.

The Art Institute’s work represents Buren’s significant break with artistic practice of the past. Whereas LeWitt and Palermo have defined the context of their work solely in terms of the literal walls of the allotted physical space, Buren has extended the definition of context to include the historical, political, social, and economic systems of support that surround exhibited works of art. Explaining that, “by architecture,” he means “the inevitable background, support and frame of any work,” Buren has further maintained that, “when we say architecture, we include the social, political and economic context.”

Step by Step . . . demonstrates the way in which Buren integrates the work of art with its context, the one reciprocally informing the other. In a text outlining his principles, Buren insisted: “It is not a question of ornamenting (disfiguring or embellishing) the place (the architecture) in which the work is installed, but of indicating as precisely as possible the way the work belongs in the place and vice versa, as soon as the latter is shown.” He added that, in short, “the object
presented and its place of display must dialectically imply one another.”33 Set within the surrounding architectural structure, Step by Step . . . derives its meaning not only from its impressive physical circumstance but also from its incorporation within the total framework of the museum. “Any object placed on exhibition in a museum space,” Buren has written, “is framed not only physically by the museum architecture but also . . . by the cultural context which a museum signifies.”34

Diverging from the work of LeWitt and Palermo, as from all prior art, on the essential question of context, Buren’s work converges with functional reality and is not restricted to installation within traditional exhibition confines. Similar to the sails of Sail/Canvas . . . or the doors of Watch the Doors Please, the staircase of Step by Step . . . maintains its practical role while also functioning as art. As an actual juncture between the museum’s lobby and its collections on the second floor, the work unites the separately defined art and non-art spheres. Performing as both staircase and sculpture, it acts as a liaison with the chronologically arranged galleries of European painting and sculpture that encompass works from medieval times to the 20th century. Through its fusion of sculptural form and architectural function, Buren’s work defines the museum’s main stairway—in all of its grandeur—as the institution’s symbolic pedestal and core, elevating the museum visitor literally and figuratively into its “hallowed halls.”

In contrast to all works in the Art Institute’s collection to date, Step by Step . . . cannot be considered apart from its total context. Physically separated from the galleries where traditional works, generally severed from their original settings, are shown in historical sequence, Step by Step . . . interacts with the museum considered as an architectural and cultural whole. While other works are subject to multiple categorizations and relocations, Buren’s work is solely contingent upon the existing reality with which it coincides.

NOTES

1. The use of this Latin term, referring to “situation,” has been used freely in recent years to describe works done on site. Buren, possibly the first to adopt this phrase in relation to contemporary art, has used it in connection with his work since 1968.


3. Ibid., p. 25.


9. A guide accompanying the exhibition reproduced installation photographs of past exhibitions in order to illustrate where specific works had previously been placed.


A Work by Daniel Buren


14. Judy Munson, “Rail cars are artist’s rolling canvas,” Suburban Trib (Southwest Cook County, Ill.) (Dec. 29, 1980).


18. This work was conceived by Buren after he had proposed an early version of Watch the Doors Please, which, for practical reasons, was realized only later at the Art Institute as a special exhibition in itself.


25. Andre quoted in Bourdon (note 24), p. 27.


27. Quoted in Bourdon (note 24), p. 28.


33. Ibid., p. 124.