

# Art in America

## Daniel Buren at Bortolami-Dayan

This installation of eleven 1966 canvases by Daniel Buren was a revelation, a kind of missing link in the career of the French painter turned conceptualist. Under the influence of *Art Informel*, Buren had liberally splashed and stained his canvases in the early 1960s, gradually confining his forms to vertical stripes by mid-decade. But like so many artists of his generation, he had by then come to feel that the act of painting was itself problematic: executed in the hermetic space of the artist's studio, it was private and essentially apolitical. So in 1966, Buren purchased some bolts of canvas printed with colored stripes, discrete lengths of which he stretched and framed. But he did not yet forgo paint altogether. Bands of white acrylic seem to seep in from the frame, submerging sections of the preprinted canvas and striking a tension between paint and print. Arranged chronologically from May to October, the sequence of canvases in this show illustrated Buren's literal marginalization of paint. In the last compositions, white veins of acrylic merely trace the edges of the canvas, functioning as a kind of internal frame.

It is no accident that Buren's paintings of this time mirrored and pointed to the function of the frame. Like some American contemporaries, notably Robert Ryma, Buren was reducing "painting" to its elemental components: support, markings, methods of installation. Subsequently his focus turned to the conceptual frames of the gallery and museum. His critique of the institutionalization of art extended to its production. As he wrote in "The Function of the Studio," his now-famous 1971 treatise, "[T]he museum and gallery on the one hand and the studio on the other are linked to form the foundation of the same edifice and the same system. To question one while



Two views of Daniel Buren's exhibition, showing (above) three paintings from 1966 and (below), *The Colored Screens*, 2007, 48 Plexiglas squares; at Bortolami-Dayan.



leaving the other intact accomplishes nothing." Replacing the painted mark (and the myth of the studio) with commercially printed fabric tied art to a different system—the logic and economy of mass production.

In keeping with this paradigm, Buren began locating his striped compositions in public spaces, supplanting advertisements on billboards or banners with striped panels. By drawing attention to the social functions and economic boundaries that define urban space, Buren generated a dialectic of center and margin, as in 1975, when he extended (and fragmented) his Museum of Modern Art exhibition by placing striped panels in the then-

marginal neighborhood of SoHo.

So it is interesting that 12 large suspended screens of colored and striped Plexiglas (*The Colored Screens*, 2007) were installed next door to the 1966 canvases in a vacant lot beneath the abandoned elevated railway that cuts through Chelsea, a lot framed by graffiti-marked corrugated steel gates. The shimmering, jewel-like Plexiglas panels highlighted the disparity between the historical and current functions—social, cultural, economic—of the neighborhood. This pairing of 1966 and 2007 is instructive. Would Buren still proclaim, as he did back then, "Art is exclusively political. What is called for is the analysis of formal and cultural limits"?

—Kirsten Swenson