

Gallerist

Daniel Buren Shows His Stripes: The Celebrated Artist's Two-Gallery Show Is On, After a Sandy Delay

Noticing something strange along the street? A 74-year-old Frenchman may be responsible

BY ANDREW RUSSETH | 1/08/13 7:35PM



A new Buren poster on Ninth Avenue, near West 22nd Street. (Courtesy Bortolami Gallery)

Last fall, right after Hurricane Sandy slammed into New York, observant Manhattanites may have noticed that odd posters had appeared along some of their city's streets. Pieces of striped paper, with the stripes precisely spaced, had been posted to walls and billboards around downtown without any explanation. There was no brand name—no text of any kind. Just stripes. One with bright

aquamarine and white stripes popped up about a block from this writer's apartment, on Avenue A near East 14th Street. About a week later, they were gone.

Earlier this week, the striped posters began popping up again. They are the work of 74-year-old French artist Daniel Buren—he calls them *affichages sauvages* (savage postings)—and he's been installing them around various cities for nearly five decades. The stripes are always the same size, exactly 8.7 centimeters across. The posters in November were timed to coincide with a two-gallery show at Bortolami and Petzel in Chelsea, which was scuttled by Sandy. Two months later, that show is finally coming to fruition.

Late last Friday afternoon, just as it was starting to get dark out, Mr. Buren was standing in Petzel, watching as two young women attempted to install some of that paper 20 feet high on a wall.



It was not going well.

The sheets of green and white striped paper that they were pasting to the wall were sucking up the glue and expanding, so that when they dried, they cracked. The women tore off the sheets and started again with a new kind of adhesive. There was a large stack of fresh striped paper on the floor.

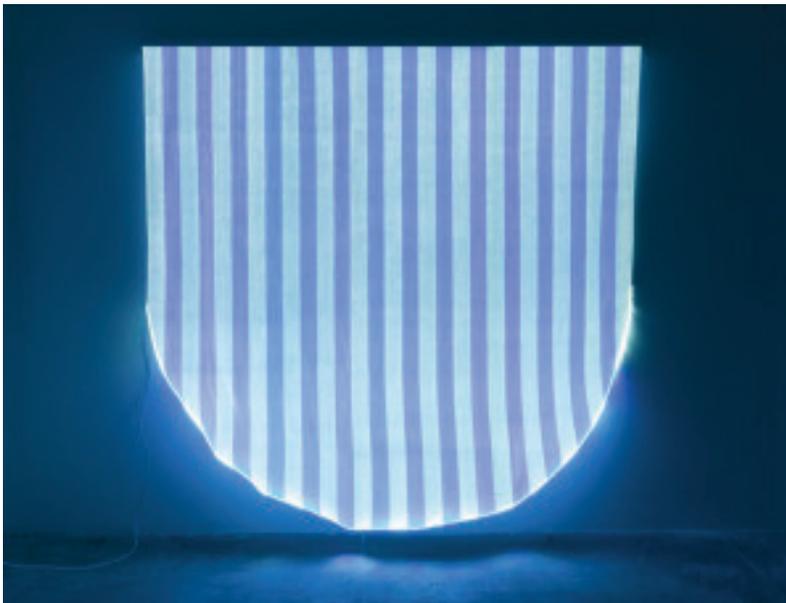
“Amazing,” Mr. Buren said, eyeing a large stack of fresh striped paper that sat, ready, on the floor. He looked a bit surprised; this had never happened before.

“You know, paper's pretty powerful stuff!” one of the women called down, and he nodded, not looking particularly concerned. A compact man with a solid head of white hair, he looks a bit like you would expect a celebrated avant-gardist to look—dressed in all black with a serious mien, but he's warm and exuberant when he gets excited about an idea, which happens frequently.

The show at Petzel, which opens on Thursday, Jan. 10, along with a show of other new works at Bortolami, includes a number of such installations made with striped paper. Here's the part you might not be expecting from storm-ravaged Chelsea galleries just recovering from Sandy's flooding and with bills to pay: when the

exhibition closes on Feb. 16, all of the paper will simply be thrown out. They are what Mr. Buren calls *in situ* pieces, works designed for a specific location. Once the papers are taken off the wall, their short lives as artworks are over. Collectors aiming to acquire such works must have them fitted for a given place, which makes them tough sells.

“You can give me your house, and I will do that in your house, and I will be very happy,” Mr. Buren said during an interview with *The Observer* at Bortolami. His French accent lends a piquancy to his more radical statements. “You will pay me for the cost of the thing, and it will be difficult to resell,” he continued. “That is the only problem. That is a good problem.”



Daniel Buren, 'Photo-souvenir: Optical Fiber White and Blue Half Circle Situated Work,' 2012. (Courtesy the artist and Bortolami Gallery)

Even as he approaches his sixth decade as an artist, perhaps the most decorated artist of his generation in France (he has been in the world's most prestigious exhibition, the Venice Biennale, 10 times, and won its top prize in 1986), he still carries himself with the air of the charismatic and opinionated enfant terrible who took Paris by storm in the mid 1960s. He had a gang then, having joined with three other artists,

Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier and Niele Toroni, to form a group called BMPT. Each of them adopted a single abstract motif and repeated it. Mr. Mosset offered up nothing but basic shapes on canvas, Mr. Toroni just single dabs of a brush, spaced equally across each of his canvases, and Mr. Buren those 8.7-centimeter stripes, a design that he found printed on fabric in a Parisian market.

“My painting, at the limit, can only signify itself,” Mr. Buren told an interviewer in 1968, as the group was gaining attention. “*It is*. So much so, and so well, that anyone can make it and claim it.” What meaning, after all, can one ascribe to ready-made stripes, repeated ad infinitum? “Perhaps the only thing that one can do after having seen a canvas like ours is total revolution,” he declared back then.

The artists signed each other's canvases, painted each other's works (sometimes in public) and issued manifestos that made clear that they sought to eject all content from their paintings, killing off the medium and starting over from the beginning. One from January 1967 declared, "Because to paint is to give aesthetic value to flowers, women, eroticism, the daily environment, art, dadaism, psychoanalysis and the war in Vietnam, we are not painters." And then, 10 months later: "Art is the illusion of disorientation, the illusion of liberty, the illusion of presence, the illusion of the sacred, the illusion of Nature ... Not the painting of Buren, Mosset, Parmentier or Toroni. Art is a distraction, art is false. Painting begins with Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni."

Beginning in the mid 1960s, Mr. Buren began to design his work for specific locations, and in 1968 he ventured out onto Paris's streets, pasting his stripes around the city. In 1970, he spent about 10 days giving New York the stripe treatment, sending out a card informing people that they could call a telephone number to find out his pieces' locations. He was what some might now call a "street artist." Those in the know were lured to examine new parts of the city; those who were unaware were merely baffled. "They would say, 'What is that?!'" Mr. Buren recalled. "'It's intriguing' or 'It's stupid' or whatsoever."

The notion that artists should move out of the white box was in the air. At almost the exact same time that Mr. Buren was pasting his stripes around urban areas, the New York-based artist Richard Artschwager, whose retrospective is now at the Whitney, was installing his first "blps"—knockwurst-shaped blobs—around the city.

As for the stripes that appeared around town last fall, Mr. Buren said he wouldn't even consider doing that in Paris anymore. "I know today that many, many, many people in Paris will quickly say, 'Oh yes, it's a work from Buren,' because in a way I'm quite well known, and I think that destroys the idea of the piece." But he liked doing it in New York, where it might still catch people unaware, a spare stretch of lines amid all of the graffiti and advertising. "That piece was looking very fresh. Very fresh," Mr. Buren said, sitting in Petzel. "Of course, I think that, so take that as you want. It's said by myself. It could be totally wrong!"

About other opinions, he makes no apologies. He's disdainful of the art market ("supposedly the most interesting work will be the most expensive") and of most viewers ("there's not so many people who like to make an effort for an artwork"), and he still has issues with the work of the late sculptor Donald Judd, with whom he quarreled ("Flavin was much more innovative").

He's also not a fan of artists who once staged happenings and performances and now sell documentary photographs of those events. "I have never, never, never

wanted to make and sell any kind of thing that could be a picture of a work," he said. "Never, never. It's a very easy way to make some money, but within a certain time, not I think so long"—and this should give a sense of the scale on which he's thinking these days—"40 or 50 years later, everything like that will start to look really meaningless."

Selling such photos "was already a little absurd." Now, he noted with exasperation, many performance artists are re-performing pieces that they did decades ago, in new contexts. "To redo it, I think it is even more absurd," he said, laughing.

Ironically, there is a kind of re-performance to Mr. Buren's own work at Petzel. Each site-specific paper piece at the gallery is actually based on a previous work. The one that was giving the installers trouble that afternoon, for instance, is based on a site-specific work that he did at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in Germany in 1968. It was gallerist Stefania Bortolami's idea to redo some of those pieces, he said. "I'm using this new space, which, of course, is totally different, to rework from the ideas of these previous works—so, in fact, it's totally in situ, and it's totally old and new." A historical survey, of sorts, done with all new work.

The show at Bortolami has new pieces that he calls "situated works," which can be moved about like ordinary paintings but still carry with them certain rules when installed—like an agreement they will always be hung flush with the floor, or in the center of the wall. (A recent piece he made after Sandy was a row of alternating-color blocks that have to be hung at the level of the water that flooded the gallery.) He's teamed with the Léon, France-based textile company Brochier Soieries to produce new stripes using fiber optics (these look like simple sheets of plastic until illuminated) and another set of Plexiglas stripes over linen stripes.

Both shows are dedicated to the memory of artist Michael Asher, who died last year at age 69. "We not only were very, in a way, admiring of the work of each other, but very, very close friends," he said. "That was a big loss." Mr. Asher's work frequently critiqued institutions with an even more directly political voice than Mr. Buren's.

"The best work he did when he found something that was just amazing that no one was thinking about, or to find a way of something that everyone knows, and finding a way to show that," Mr. Buren said. The same can be said of his own pieces, which lead the eye on new trails through museums and public spaces, and that force you to see things that often go unnoticed or unquestioned. One of his particularly memorable pieces was in MoMA's 2008 "Color Chart" show: a striped vest for MoMA's guards, produced with Brochier Soieries. "I wanted the people to have something nice," he said. "Not some fantasy from an artist."

There is no question that in recent years Mr. Buren's art, which made its last major appearance in New York with his Guggenheim retrospective in 2005, has become more interested in beauty for its own sake, as his rigidly limited selection of colors and materials of the 1960s has given way to a wider array of display options—in silk and glass, as glowing fiber optics and an Hermès scarf. For the biennial Monumenta exhibition in Paris's Grand Palais last summer, he drew a quarter of a million visitors in six weeks with a hulking installation of elevated plastic screens that bathed visitors in color. Radical critique has given way to wallpaper, one is tempted to say. It's an old story—an avant-garde project shocks and then turns romantic, becoming mere decoration.

Mr. Buren scoffed at that suggestion. "All artists are, first of all, decorative artists," he said. "In the 20th century, when *decorative* became a dirty word, you don't have any of the great masters of the 20th century."

Notions of what art is truly radical or conservative, decorative or avant-garde, are continually in flux. Mr. Buren pointed to Matisse's paper cutouts. "Even Henri Matisse was completely attacked by people, saying, 'Oh, he's become completely gaga. He's an old guy. Look at this stupid work, totally decorative,' when he did maybe the best thing of the time."