French artist Daniel Buren’s expansive career has led to permanent installations around the world, including at the Guggenheim Bilbao, Storm King Art Center in New York, and Toyota Municipal Museum of Art in Tokyo, and landed him in the permanent collections of the Tate Modern and Paris Museum of Modern Art, among others. He had his first solo show in Milan at Galerie Apollinaire at the age of 30, yet three years later in 1971, Americans found his Peinture-Sculpture, a six-foot wide banner that divided the lobby of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, too offensive for public display and Buren was removed from the group show. Three decades later, the same museum hosted a retrospective of Buren’s work. Now, Buren’s five-decade history is condensed into five paintings (one from each decade) on view at The 2015 Amory Show in New York.

Despite showing only a small portion of his oeuvre, each work at the fair involves a motif that has been with the Paris-based artist since the beginning: stripes. Be it a striped fabric on top of which he has painted abstract shapes, colorful stripes painted on canvas, or brown and black stripes made of resin and marble, the repetition of vertical lines is consistent in Buren’s work. For every exhibition, Buren also creates entirely new bodies of in situ (site-specific) work. At the closing of a show, his works are either entirely destroyed or attached to a set of rules that determine future placement. While works on view at The Armory Show were once in situ, they now follow such rules.
While he was in town earlier this week, we went to Pier 94 and spoke with the artist, who is also a founding member of the experimental B.M.P.T. movement of the late ‘60s.

EMILY MCDERMOTT: I wanted to talk about the meaning of in situ, for you, especially in terms of your work being shown in such a small space.

DANIEL BUREN: I use two terms. At least 90 percent of my work is in situ. For me, it’s not only to work with the architecture and space, it’s also to work with the time, to work with the people who are involved with the place. It’s also dealing with history. It takes all this into account.

Then I use another word, which is quite different: “situated work.” Everything that you see here are situated works. Of course, it’s everything we know about art—painting, sculpture, et cetera—but if I say “situated work,” they can be placed in different environments, but they always follow a rule. This is usually not the case for work in situ, because even if they are transported, they remain there forever or they are destroyed.

MCDERMOTT: What is the rule for situated works?

BUREN: The rules depend on the piece. For example, you cannot put it on the wall as you want, like you would do with a painting. These rules make it a little different compared to usual work you install in your apartment or public space. If you have it in your apartment and it’s not really what I would like, it’s really not my business. But if it’s back to a public place—a museum, gallery, whatever the thing—then it has to follow this way to be installed, which plays usually from the size from the floor, where you put it on a general wall, if it’s in the middle or corner. All these things are precisely said with the work and have to be followed.

MCDERMOTT: Did you start doing that with BMPT?

BUREN: When we were together, it was always in situ, so the problem [of transporting works] did not exist. But soon after, I worked very specifically. The painting I was doing that was close to this period, they had a very straight use: you cannot install it as you want. For example, it’s always on the floor or 10 centimeters from the floor. If you have it like that [points to painting hung in the center of a wall], it is wrong. If you see a work installed in this way, you can be sure they did not follow the rules. [laughs]

MCDERMOTT: So how do you chronicle all of the rules? Are they written alongside each piece?

BUREN: Each piece that is not anymore in my possession—usually it sold to a museum or private investor—has a rule for itself that indicates what to do.

MCDERMOTT: When you’re looking at a work, how do you come up with the rule?

BUREN: For example, this is resin and marble and they have to be on the floor and in the middle of the wall, whatever the size of the wall. If you have a big wall and such a piece, it should be in the middle on the floor, and then you can install other works on the wall. Of course, my idea from the beginning is that by following these rules, the work will have a very different impact [in different spaces]. Imagine any work of art in your collection and if you put it next to mine, you will have, automatically, a different work. The other work, a Jeff Koons or whoever’s, will look different too. [laughs]

MCDERMOTT: That translates into your belief about the audience being part of the artwork.
BUREN: Absolutely. You can take it from the biggest frame and then to a fair. It’s specific, a very special context, where you cannot even dare to have the feeling you are in a normal situation. It’s not a museum and it’s even less like a private situation. So this context will certainly bring a way to think about what you look at. I think it’s true for absolutely everything. The only difference is these things are always part of my work. My work is never autonomous. [laughs]

MCDERMOTT: It’s never finished when you’re finished with it.

BUREN: That’s perfect.

MCDERMOTT: Why do you want to create work that extends beyond yourself?

BUREN: I always thought it was a way to change the general rules about art, and also to give an impulse to something else. It’s a transformation about attitude. Most of the time, when someone buys the object, it’s 100 percent transferred to them. I don’t think this is true. Something exists within the object that can never be appropriated. This little part, I try to make it visible.

MCDERMOTT: Some artists have an idea and then they want to put it in a certain space. Is it ever like that for you?

BUREN: No, never. If I do something for a public space, it’s not something that I have in my head and go, “Oh that’s a good location. I should put it here.” That for me never exists. When I see the site, then I have an idea that is new and I would never do unless it’s there. It’s the space or the people there, which will give me the idea.

MCDERMOTT: I was going ask that—is the location, in terms of culture, an influence?

BUREN: Everything plays. I don’t want to say I take everything when I do something, sometimes I am totally ignorant, but the more I know, the best idea I can get. Often, it’s moving around the world; I am automatically influenced by this connection. You know, I don’t have any studio.

MCDERMOTT: You don’t have a studio?

BUREN: No.

MCDERMOTT: So when you’re creating the situated works rather than in situ, where do you make them?

BUREN: The way I’ve always done it is in special exhibitions. So they all start, more or less, in situ. [laughs] I quit the studio when I was pretty young, in 1967.

MCDERMOTT: What made you want to quit having a studio?

BUREN: A very basic, stupid thing. Economically it was impossible for me to afford in Paris. I had just a little room to work. Then all of a sudden, instead of continuing to fight or find the money, I said, “What can happen if I decide to go to work without any studio? What I am going to do, and where, and how?” Just like that. I found that the street was free. I found it was easy to jump from what I was doing to print some stripes on paper and then glue it, which was something used in Paris for centuries, like people put posters up for political action, so I was having this cultural background. I started to work like that and I realized it was incredible. That was before graffiti. The attitude is pretty close, but that was before people really started to make graffiti. I was not thinking, “I will keep going like this,” but still today, I don’t have a studio. [laughs]
MCDERMOTT: You don’t find artists who don’t work in studios too often now.

BUREN: I don’t think too many exist. When I work for something more traditional, like an exhibition, I do everything for the show. The show can be completely in situ, and then after you clean everything and it’s finished, or I produce something a little more like a moveable object, then we can sell some and see it 40 years later. But they were all done for an exhibition. When it’s completely in situ people can say, “I like that. Is it possible to do something like that in my place?” I say that because it is not untouchable. It’s pretty rare, but if someone gets an idea like, “I know I can’t take this wall, but is it possible to do something in that vein in my living place?” it’s always possible.

MCDERMOTT: There’s one piece from every decade on view here and I know some of the only other retrospectives you had recently were at the Guggenheim and also in Paris. What’s this like for you?

BUREN: It’s very strange to see, because they almost seem to be in the same family, but they are very far apart. I need to think more about that. It’s curious to see it together. People will never see that, but it’s so small compared to what I’ve done. It’s very strange to see something where you concentrate 50 years and what’s left is very small. [laughs]

MCDERMOTT: Stripes are obviously a recurring theme. What drew to you to them begin with and why have you stuck with them?

BUREN: At the beginning it was intuition. Before I did the pieces here, I was already working with stripes, but in a very different way in ’60, ’64. In ’65, I found this material close to what I wanted. It was the idea to have something very banal, but very strong. When I saw this [type of linen] material, I thought using it would be much better [than a canvas]. I found it, I used it, and I painted on it.

Then I completely stopped doing that and worked in the street with paper. I kept stripes because it was a sign, very easy to see and to play [with]—totally different work, completely attached to the site, and opening a different way. I was certainly not thinking I would keep that for so long, but little by little, I was still working with it 50 years later. [laughs] I cannot say it is the same, but I use it and it’s a reason I invented a term, which I call “visual tool.” It’s not only something you can recognize; it’s also something I can use to change an environment. It’s not strictly stripes anymore—I can use any material—but it’s always there, the use of this visual tool is always somewhere.

MCDERMOTT: Writing is also a huge part of your practice. Do you still write a lot?

BUREN: Recently I did, maybe too much. [laughs] Many things existed at the very beginning of my practice, and I knew that what I did visually could not be completely understood. I knew that certain aspects of the work need a long time to develop. You get the visual idea in two seconds, but this idea can be developed like like a theory. You can see later on if the theory was correct, followed, or completely abandoned. That’s why the writing can advance what is done. This is more or less how I started to write: to be sure that people will not totally misunderstand what my goal was.

MCDERMOTT: Then what is it like knowing that many people see your work without having read your writing?

BUREN: Some people have read the thing, but not too many. I think people can really catch, very closely, what it is. It’s not really with the help of the writing. It’s more because the visual work is more together and catchable by the viewer. [laughs]
MCDERMOTT: So do you think the writing might be more for critics or historians opposed to the general audience?

BUREN: It all depends on the type of writing, because I’ve done many things—an open letter, my wish about the development of something, how I feel with the institution, the museum, et cetera. These are texts, of course, but they are not directly related with the work. If I do a criticism, like I did in the ’60s, ’70s, about the institution, I try to be parallel and not contradict it with my work. That criticism, it’s something anyone can read and get the feeling to say, “I agree,” or “I totally disagree.” With the work itself, it’s a different method.

MCDERMOTT: But your views have changed since those criticisms.

BUREN: Yes my views have changed as much as the world, and more precisely, the world of art. You have to remember that all my criticisms of the institution were done directly from the world I was in and my analysis of it. Many things that I said about the omnipotence of the museums, for example, are today almost obsolete. In fact, the museum and the institution drastically lost their power by the pure fact that they disseminated by thousands around the world. During the last 35 years, the artists multiplied, the public grew enormously, the economy exploded, and so-called contemporary art became fashionable. All these parameters changed the art world form its previous aspects and fundamentals—the explosion of museums and institutions, explosion of Biennales and Triennials, explosion of money, explosion of interest, explosion of artists, explosion of countries interested in contemporary exhibitions, explosion of the public. Not to see that is to be more than blind. So many things I was thinking are obsolete today. The museums used to exhibit artists of around 60 years old, masters of their time. Some real masters were having no luck to be invited even once, so they never got recognized during their lifetime.

MCDERMOTT: And now you have “mid-career retrospectives.”

BUREN: Right! [laughs] Today it’s not strange to see an artist 30 years old having her first retrospective! Different time, different speed. After having been the key point of recognition for an artist, the museum today is just another place to experiment and work, like we can do in any art fair. The king or queen of the moment is completely ignored and replaced by the new one a few years later. Contemporary novelty in art disappears faster than the seasonable changes of the fashion designs. Contrary to Warhol’s 15 minutes of fame, I think that today in front of insatiable curiosity of the crowd, we would be better off to remain secret as long as possible, work in the denser part of shadows.

MCDERMOTT: In spite of all these changes, how would you define your overall approach or philosophy toward art?

BUREN: To remain as open as possible in front of the world, to always be curious, not to be afraid to experiment, and have a sense of self-criticism and a general criticism toward the surrounding. Also, trying to make a difference between serious research and pure gag! [laughs] And making as few compromises as possible toward doing things that might not be accepted by the majority of society, even if this dominant society is the one which is ruling the art world. To keep this fundamental idea, even if it’s a bit trivial: to have the desire to transform the world. At least such an attitude might protect you against today’s dominant cynicism.