by COLINE MILLIARD

DANIEL BUREN

Photographs by Thierry Bal
DANIEL BUREN IS SITTING OPPOSITE ME,
elegant in a dark waistcoat, framed by a café window overlooking
the Centre Pompidou’s plaza. Outside, herds of tourists gather
at the foot of the Renzo Piano–designed museum, some gawping
at a street performer blowing giant soap bubbles, others posing
with a monumental Alexander Calder stabile quivering in the
Parisian breeze. It’s an opposite background for the 73-year-old
Bureon, who is France’s most celebrated contemporary artist, a
national treasure once as controversial and now as revered as the
institution behind him. We’ve been talking for more than an
hour when, at last, I blurt out the question I’ve been dying to ask
since I ordered my first Perrier rondelle: Has he ever felt constrained
by the stripe pattern he’s been using in virtually all his works
since 1965? “Curiously it has never limited me,” he answers. “I’ve
tested it hundreds of times wondering, Has it become a tie? What
does it bring to the work? What does it mean? Up to now it always
works better with the stripes. And I’m not the only one who says so.”
Buren’s stripes long ago entered art history as an iconic strategy, a two-dimensional take on what art critic Rosalind Krauss, analyzing Minimalist sculpture, described as “the externality of meaning,” opposing the illusionism that “converts one material into the signifier for another.” Their origin has almost attained the status of myth. The story goes that in the mid 1960s, as Buren was buying cloth at Montmartre’s famous fabric market, the Marché Saint-Pierre, he came across a piece of linen with 8½-centimeter-wide stripes and adopted the motif as the “stable element” for his large canvases, then mainly concerned with painting and its impossibility. The found design reemerged as a bold statement, enabling the artist to investigate the visual potential of a recurrent module and to undercut still widely held romantic ideas of progress. “At the very beginning it was a very voluntary thing,” he recalls. “It was a systematic repetition, a strike against innovation, and all those things that interested me at the time. Then it changed completely, and it became what I’ve called a visual tool.”

For Buren this change was a real rupture with what went before, although he admits with a smile that the transformation “was so subtle that even the people who were following my work didn’t see the difference.” Understanding this shift is fundamental when considering his production post-1968. Perhaps galvanized by the spirit of freedom that was sweeping through the Western world at the time, Buren abandoned his pictorial preoccupation and took his stripes to the streets. From an end they became a means, “a tool,” he says, “to do things in the same way you do things with a hammer or with a piano.” As the student protesters covered Paris’s walls with political posters, he plastered the French capital with hundreds of his own offshoots sauvages, their mute abstraction contrasting with the slogans and advertisements around them. “With these I understood that what I was showing wasn’t the material but what surrounded it,” he says, recalling his first outdoor stripes.

Since then Buren has been using the motif to frame and transform spaces, ceaselessly creating new perspectives on familiar environments, from the grand courtyard of the Palais Royal in Paris, where he installed the much-decried black-and-white columns of his Les Deux Plateaux, 1985–88, to the Belgian beach he graced with Le vent souffle où il veut, 2009: dozens of colorful (and striped) wind socks, shimmering like a shoal of tropical fish floating in midair. He claims to have no system, and his approach to space varies from piece to piece, but his art is first and foremost a response to a context. This context, he stresses, encompasses not only physical characteristics, such as architecture, but also history, the broader surroundings, and how people use the space, although he rarely responds to all these facets simultaneously. “There is never one single possibility,” he answers when I ask him about his working method, “but several, all relevant to the place.”

Most of Buren’s spatial interventions are subtitled “work in situ.” The artist is, in fact, credited with the invention of the notion of in-situ, or site-specific, art, which is now so ubiquitous it is almost a cliché. “It has become nonsense,” Buren says with a shrug. But in the early 1970s, the heightened sensitivity to a work’s time and place inherent in this concept—a sensitivity he shared with Hans Haacke and Michael Asher, among others—led naturally to the formulation of Institutional Critique: an artistic practice that discloses and reflects critically on the role of galleries and museums. Forty years on, Buren is still challenging official perceptions. For the newly opened Turner...
Contemporary museum, in the British seaside town of Margate, the artist created Borrowing and Multiplying the Landscape, 2011, applying to the entrance’s windows opaque white and translucent yellow stripes that left clear only a few large discs affording picturelike views of the countryside that might have inspired J.M.W. Turner when he was at school in the city in the late 18th century. “It amused me to create this link,” says Buren, “not with Turner as an artist but with one of his subjects.” But the piece isn’t just an homage to the romantic master of cloudy skies, however. As playful and upbeat as it appears, it is also—and perhaps more significantly—a dig at the very idea of putting enormous windows in art museums. “If architects frame the landscape in such an arresting way,” Buren says, “it means many things that one is entitled to question: Are people coming to the museum to see what’s outside?” He has commented ironically on the implicit desire of museum architects to compete with the exhibited artworks. He did so at Turner Contemporary, designed by David Chipperfield’s award-winning studio, by setting up a system of mirrors that pulled the exterior landscape inside.

Similarly, at Pompidou-Metz—the Centre Pompidou’s branch in the northeastern French region of Lorraine—he created La ville empruntee, multiple et fragmentee, 2011, covering a gallery whose large bay windows opened onto the town center with mirrors, turning it into a dazzling reflection of the cityscape that was occasionally interrupted by his signature stripes. The museum virtually disappeared, obliterated by its picturesque surroundings.

As his prolific writing attests, Buren has always been a vocal critic of institutions. His 1973 essay “The Function of the Museum” is a fierce attack on the museum as a temple guaranteeing the status of art, one unable to question art’s nature and almost inaccessible to living artists. His criticism has not softened, but it has changed, because the institution itself has shifted from a paternalistic exclusivity to universal embrace. “Today the insane multiplication of the museum tool has exhausted it completely. We went from one extreme to the other. Now the museum takes everything in and thus flattens everything out. There is no distinction anymore,” he tells me. “That’s the last coup of the ruling society—I don’t want to say of the bourgeoisie, but that’s kind of what I mean. It accepts everything without setting up a hierarchy.” This abrogation of the critical faculty pervades our culture. “No one takes a position these days,” he continues. “Magazines are just supports for advertising. And people writing about art in national newspapers don’t really know what they are talking about.” Would he consider taking up his pen again? “I can’t do it anymore,” he answers, somewhat surprisingly considering that he didn’t hesitate a few years ago to accuse the French state of “vandalism” for not maintaining Les Deux Plateaux properly. “I might be wrong, but I think my image is going to get in the way.” It might well be that Buren is handing over the agitprop role he’s performed for decades to the younger generation. “I cannot believe that the art world as it is today can satisfy people in their 20s,” he says. “If I were their age, I’d dynamite everything!”