DANIEL BUREN
MONUMENTA 2012

EXCENTRIQUE(S)
TRAVAIL IN SITU

GRAND PALAIS
ABOUT MONUMENTA
Marc Sanchez,
interview with Daniel Buren

Marc Sanchez: Daniel Buren, it is now a few months before Monumenta is due to open. You have been working on this project for a long time, but what struck you most when you were asked to produce a work for this building?

Daniel Buren: First of all, I would like to say that this building, because of its size, its beauty and its history, is one of the most difficult places for an exhibition. Even more than its architecture, the really striking thing about this place is its atmosphere, its lightness, the impression of being outside when you are inside. The spirit of the place is sunshine and light.

MS: 2012 will be the fifth Monumenta show. Have you taken into account the way the four other artists worked in the building and the works they showed here, the way they reacted to the space?

DB: Obviously! When you are not the first, you can see who went wrong and who managed to pull it off. It is something of an advantage. It is interesting to analyse the causes of success or failure. As the place itself is primordial, more than in other venues, even the artists who have a feeling for space, a feeling for the site, can go wrong, and if they make a mistake here, it is fatal. And artists whose work does not take the site or space into account run the risk of falling flat here, if they are not careful.

MS: You have asked Patrick Bouchain and Loïc Julieanne to help you with the technical side of your project. It is not the first time you have worked together. How did you establish a dialogue and collaboration with them?

DB: As you know, I have worked on a great number of pieces with Patrick Bouchain since the Paris Biennial in 1985. So the dialogue between us has been going on for years and keeps going whether we are working together or not. He looks at my work and I look at his; sometimes he asks me to participate and I do the same for some of my pieces. So for Monumenta, we talk things over and, as always, it is very fruitful. Patrick Bouchain has an excellent eye and a sharp critical sense, which stops me going off the rails. If I have several different projects in mind and I have doubts about the quality of some of them in relation to the others, he will quickly analyse all that and push me towards the one that will be the richest, most direct and most complex, all at once. As he has
often said himself, Patrick Bouchain knows how to be an assistant and he does it with talent — that is a great quality in someone who is himself a great creator. He is even the best "assistant" imaginable. He is familiar with all the administrative problems and safety issues that could make a fine idea unfeasible and he can therefore warn you straight away and stop you from rushing into dead ends. More than that, without losing sight of the essentials, he can guide you towards feasible solutions and avoid all sorts of pitfalls.

MS: How did you come to the present project? Did you go through successive stages, try different approaches or did you have a clearly defined plan to work on from the start?

DB: My first aspiration, when the invitation came, was to work with the extraordinary light in this site. But also to work with the fact that, more than an exhibition venue, it is a huge public place where you can hear the rain hammering on the roof, or see clouds sailing past and where the sun and the colour of the sky are very present. My second strong conviction (so strong that I made it one of the prerequisites for my participation) was that the work had to be done right here and that visitors had to see it as they walked along the whole length of the building, that is, entering by the south or north door. No question of entering by the main door, in the centre of the nave, which is too close to the central dome of the skylight, the heart of the whole building. This central entrance makes it extremely hard to use the whole space, especially for a solo exhibition, because everything can be seen immediately.

In my opinion, if ever there were a real disaster in the Grand Palais it is certainly the main entrance, a piece of fin-de-siècle pompousness leading into a ridiculously small bay compared to the fake majesty of the entrance, which makes it all the more pretentious and counterproductive given the otherwise extraordinary effect of the great nave as a whole. It feels as if a whole bay, just behind the main entrance, has been sacrificed.

Of course, asking to block off the usual main entrance fuelled many discussions and a bit of imagination was needed to come up with solutions! You know, when you look at all the events held in this place over the last century and more, you are literally stunned by the inventiveness of the staging, all the transformations made to the architecture, to such an extent that you begin to wonder if it is still possible to do something new! Then you realise that they mostly created a décor, which was often intended to hide the architecture.

But what I wanted to do was quite the opposite. So part of the problem was to communicate my desire to capture the magnificent light in the Grand Palais and design forms that would make others feel the same desire and share the same sensations.

So I worked on a whole range of projects, some left the space almost empty, others filled it up, still others deconstructed, dismantled or multiplied the space. They all worked around the moment when my very precise feeling would meet the right form to express it visually. For a long time I had only a very vague idea of how to do it but the desire was extremely strong, although completely immaterial. I knew what I was aiming for but not how to get there or what forms to use.

MS: Now you have found the solution and in a few weeks you will see the first technical tests on full scale prototypes. How was the project developed from the start?

DB: The breakthrough came when I finally realised that this iron and glass architecture was based on the circle and the main tool used to design the building was a compass. So I made dozens and dozens of sketches. These drawings were the starting point for discussions with Patrick Bouchain and Loïc Julienne, and with Jean-Louis Froment, whom I had asked to help in the very early phase of the project. We launched into a game of ping pong: sketched, discussions, exchanges, new sketches, improvements, discussions, a complete change of approach, new sketches, discussions, and so it went on.

Then after bouncing all these very different projects back and forth, we decided to take a decisive step and choose one of them, still in the early stages. I jumped in the deep end and the architects made a model so we could grasp the scale of the place, understand its gigantic proportions, and try to see the relationship needed with the elements in my building project. That is when we decided on the proportions. The most important thing for me was to confront the confrontation between a device placed quite low down — a sort of ceiling made of hundreds of clear, coloured circles — and the great height of the nave of the Grand Palais. I expected this extreme tension to emphasise not the hugeness of the building but its volume, left as empty as possible. As if to give shape to the air circulating in it.

MS: You wanted visitors to enter by the north end of the nave and exit by the south. What does this unusual circuit permit or change in the way they see the work and the building?

DB: As I have just said, that idea came from my experience of the Grand Palais and I really wanted visitors to walk down the whole length of it. If you go in through the main door, you immediately "consume" what there is to see because as soon as you step into the space you are in the nerve centre. All the rest of the space becomes meaninglessly, as if peripheral, and no longer accompanies anything because it is all the wrong way round.

The usual entrance by the main door neglects the big spaces on either side of the central dome, to the north and south of the nave. They are not used to give the whole space a special rhythm, or to give it physical form; they are not revealed little by little as we walk down the length of the building. They are just relegated to a subordinate role.

But in a building like this the whole thing must be alive, in its place and vivid, not just the part under the dome. It must be discovered as you walk along, instead of crashing down on you as soon as you step through the door, which is already deliberately crushing and disproportionate. Besides, this is the principle of all churches, especially cathedrals. You never step directly into the choir; you usually have to walk through the rest of the building. And the time it takes is important because that is what really puts you into the spirit of the place.

The main door to the Grand Palais is certainly well placed for a car show, an art fair or various events for which the relationship to the space is secondary, but it is dreadful for discovering a work or a solo show which single-handedly and directly confronts this monumental place.

This "defect" in the way people enter the building was strikingly obvious for Richard Serra's Monumenta (otherwise one of the best two so far, in my opinion) and I later discovered that he too had requested an entrance by the north door, but it was turned down.

I repeat that crossing the building in this way was one of the conditions sine qua non for me to work here and I said so as soon as I was invited, well before I knew myself what I would do there. Entering by the north (or the south) was, and still is, absolutely crucial.

Finally, visitors will enter the nave through the north door and the entrance will be signalled outside by a special porch; they will go through quite a long corridor ending up in the great nave, in the exhibition itself. Instead of the usual grandiose entrance, this sort of fairly long, narrow square tube will "frame" the exhibition like a sort of telescope; a simple, modest tunnel, a mouse hole leading directly into the light-filled, grandiose space of the great nave.

MS: Light plays a very important role in this project and the nave of the Grand Palais
is particularly sensitive to that: a cloud passing in front of the sun radically changes the light. And since the exhibition is open until midnight, it also takes place at night, which requires electric lighting. How did you deal with these issues?

DB: I think that my work will be at its best when the sun is shining. Without the sun it will not only be different but amputated of one of its raisons d’etre. That is one of the risks inherent to such an approach. As is often the case in my work, the piece depends not only on the setting, but on the climate, the light, the sun, clouds, rain and so on. It is the combination of these weather conditions which characterises the work and it is the effect they have on one another which, in the end, makes the work. Even if individual visitors might prefer one state to another. Between the opening of the exhibition in early May and its closing at the end of June we should have a few sunny days in Paris.

Night time is another story all together because the electric lighting installed on the ring around the dome in the nave, more than 30 metres from the ground, will sweep over the whole structure from north to south, east to west and back again.

I must say, right now, as we are talking, although we are familiar with the potential of the lighting systems we are going to use, I will have to see it with my own eyes to know what the effect will be, especially since all the electronic programs that control the light have to be adjusted in situ and therefore at the last minute. It is unfortunately far too soon to tell you much more. But there is one thing I am sure of: it will be a very different piece by day and by night. The electric lighting will add quite a different dimension, which will go well beyond just lighting the work and the spaces.

MS: The colours are foremost in this project: you wanted people to see them, walk into them and for them to be projected on the place and on the visitors themselves. But you also wanted their names to be spoken and heard in many different languages. Why did you include sound in the exhibition and how will you get the public to hear the names?

DB: The idea is to use sound to act on the volume of the space, to mix sound with the ambient air by using a very specific, particularly sophisticated system, which will influence the visitors in the space, taking them by surprise rather than inflicting a steady flow of sound on them. The sound will be made up of words: mostly just the names of the four colours, plus black and white, and numbers. They will be the keys to the construction of the whole piece and will end up with the total number of coloured circles filling the space.

This text will be spoken in about forty different languages, from all over the world, such as Creole, Gaelic, Hebrew, Czech, Albanian, French, German, Finnish, Arabic, English, Spanish, Italian, Berber, Portuguese, Turkish, etc. The speakers will say the names of the colours in alphabetical order in their respective languages and then additional sound will be mixed by Alexandre Meyer.

MS: How did you choose the colours and arrange them in the work?

DB: First of all, and this often happens to me, the decisions and choices madedepended not only on the constraints of the venue but also on the materials available. For colouring the light as I wanted to, the best solution turned out to be plastic film, a light, flexible, transparent material, stretched over circular steel frames specially made for the occasion. But this film comes only in four basic colours: blue, yellow, orange and green. So I used those four colours because there was no other choice. So that was my basic coloured material, to which I added white and black. Then, using a very simple system which proved to be very effective, I distributed those four colours over the plan of the whole device, starting from the top left (the north is on the right) and systematically filling in all the circles with colours in the alphabetical order of the names of the colours (in French): blue, yellow, orange, green. That gave an astonishing distribution in which the first colour (blue) was used 95 times and the three others 94 times. An equal distribution, plus the first colour, as if the cycle B, Y, G, B, Y, O, G, B, Y, O, G could go on forever but had to end with the first colour, blue.

In the centre, the vertical projection of the circumference of the dome stops the accumulation of coloured circles and opens a big circular empty space on the ground. This ring is filled with round mirrors reflecting the image of the dome, which visitors can climb on too. The dome is coloured with a checkerboard pattern of filters, placed at the highest point in the space, on the skylight itself, more than 55 metres in the air. The colour used here is blue, and I am looking forward to seeing how it will mix and the new colours that will appear when it is projected on the four colours of the circles underneath and on the black and white stripes on their vertical posts.

DB: Metaphorically speaking, as soon as visitors step into the dome they enter a "forest" of vertical black and white posts formed by the legs supporting the coloured circles; in the centre of this forest there is a "clearing", an empty, circular space, suddenly free, where they can stop and rest for a while. In this clearing, the coloured "sunshade" is no longer just over the visitors' heads but nearly 37 metres higher up. The space is suddenly "empty", compared to the clutter they have just been through, and by sucking them upwards should make them aware of the spatial dimension of the building and the volume of air and light filling it. The dome then becomes an enormous sphere, a great balloon or sort of airship, which suddenly rises freely into the sky, a sort of invisible air current, in contrast to the devices anchored to the ground below.

The circular mirrors, that visitors can sit, lie or walk on, reflect the image of the central dome, whose pattern and colour are projected directly on to the ground with the first ray of sunshine.

MS: You have just decided on the final title of the exhibition: "Escentrique(s)." What you have just said helps us understand this choice, but is there anything else you would like to add?

DB: No.

MS: These days it is now usual for the public to take photos in exhibitions and to photograph themselves among the works. Will you allow that to happen in your exhibition?

DB: Of course, I don't mind people taking photos of the work or of themselves or both at once. The Grand Palais, as I said before, is a public place and visitors must be left as free as possible and allowed to take photos if they want to. But if they are to be published there are specific rules and laws on the matter which must be complied with.

MS: What, if any, is the best point of view for seeing your exhibition?

DB: There is an easy answer to that question. I have always tried to build pieces which are coherent and precise, but leave visitors great freedom in the way they use them. That means they often have hundreds of different possible viewpoints, that visitors can choose from. So for this exhibition I will not be picking out any one vantage point that is better than the others. If there were one, and I hope there isn't, I would consider it a failure. But I will never contradict a visitor who thinks that a particular viewpoint
is the one from which the work is the most interesting or the most spectacular, even if I don't really agree.

MS: Other artists will be doing things in your work during the exhibition. There will be dance, literature, theatre, music and even circus acts. Are you generally happy about these hybrid events and encounters within your work?

DB: Of course! I cannot remember ever having turned away artists who have asked if they could use my work in some way to perform theirs. There have been many such requests, for example, in the main courtyard of the Palais-Royal, for plays, ballets, films and so on. You must know that I systematically accept all these requests, free of charge, even if I do not necessarily agree with the film, work or choreography in question. On the other hand, I am much more circumspect for commercial requests, for advertising, for example, and then it is not free any more. For the Grand Palais, I am delighted that other artists, from various disciplines, have agreed to come and perform in the space I have created. I am sure that these encounters will be a very rewarding, culturally and aesthetically.

MS: While Monumenta is in progress, Cnap and Flammarion are bringing out a joint edition of Les Écrits, a major collection of over six hundred texts that you wrote between 1965 and 2012. What type of texts are in the book?

DB: You were, of course, the driving force in the publication of the first three volumes of Les Écrits, published by capcMusée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux during my exhibition in 1991, on which you worked, and here you are again involved in the sequel! We are using Monuments as an opportunity not only to publish Les Écrits, 1965-1991, which is out of print, adding forty texts that were omitted at the time, but also to continue this major undertaking by adding texts written between 1992 and 2012. This new work will therefore contain all the texts that I have written, large and small, pamphlets and open letters, essays or correspondence with artists, and will include the important interviews, rewritten and corrected by me before publication. As I said in 1991, such a book cannot replace the work carried out during these years, but it accompanies it. Most of these texts were written and inspired by the work itself, but sometimes they are utopian and precede the works by several years. They will be seen in a new light when confronted by the works they heralded.

MS: The existence of these many texts which you say accompany your work shows how important writing is to you. Is reading these documents necessary to grasp the full dimension of your work?

DB: When two separate activities, both of them public, exist side by side, whatever you think of these activities and even if one powerfully dominates the other, could you leave the secondary activity aside on the grounds that it is less important? The whole seems to me to form a corpus that cannot easily be amputated. In the human body, the eyes and the feet do not have the same functions, even if for some people one part is more essential than the other, but who would gladly accept to do without one or the other?

Let us suppose that it was possible to separate the written work from the visual and plastic work. I think that would then be possible not only to see and follow my work, but also to understand it perfectly, without ever having read a line of my texts about it. The visual work stands on its own. Now, if we were to take the opposite example, could we say that someone who had never seen my work, but had read all my writings, could have a fair concrete idea of my art? My answer is categorically no, it's absolutely impossible. On the other hand, I believe that my writing and my art support one another. But my art does not need anything else to exist and be understood. I am not absolutely sure that my texts do not need my art to be understood...

So, even if they are connected, and sometimes inseparable, I think that only my art can sometimes be theoretical, and my writing, never.

MS: What will happen to this work after the exhibition?

DB: The substance will be completely destroyed. It will subist, in fragmentary form, in a few surviving printed images, as long as these souvenirs photos exist. But I hope it will stay burnt in the memory of a few visitors.

Marc Sanchez and Daniel Buren
Interview realised in February 2012

EXCENTRIQUE[S], WORK IN SITU
Daniel Buren
The different devices of Monumenta

Device no. 1
The usual entrance by the main door to the nave of the Grand Palais is replaced by a new entrance through the north door.

Device no. 2
The north door is redesigned to take visitors directly into the nave through a long, square, relatively dim corridor, lit only by two rows of LED lights along the foot of the walls. Its entrance is on the footpath itself, signalled by a large black and white striped porch.

Device no. 3
Device no. 3a:
A ticket office specially designed for this event is set up near the Champs-Élysées-Clemenceau Metro station. It is shaped like the main installation inside the nave, but is in different colours.

Device no. 3b:
Arrows painted on the ground lead visitors to the porch described in no. 2.

Device no. 4
An aggregate of circles in five different sizes (from 2 to 6.5 m in diameter), linked tangentially one to another to form a sort of suspended carpet, fills as much of the nave as permitted by safety regulations, i.e. approximately 8,500 square metres. The circles are covered with transparent coloured plastic film and supported by tubular legs (9 x 9 cm section) in varying numbers depending on the diameter of each circle. These posts (1,300 in all) give the impression of a forest, originally black and white, but transformed by the light shining through the coloured circles.

The plastic film is in four colours (the only colours available for this material): pale blue, golden yellow, orange and soft green. These circles are positioned so that they are spread over the whole surface in equal proportions: 95 blue, 94 yellow, 94 orange, and 94 green circles, making a total of 3,777. There is an extra blue circle at the end, as if to start the next cycle.

The coloured circles are placed at a height of 2.3 to 2.9 m. The empty spaces between them are used to adjust the entire device visually and to give access to the circles if they need cleaning (to remove pigeon droppings, for example).

Device no. 5
The "carpet" stops suddenly directly below the central dome. This circular hole in the "forest" of legs is like a clearing in the woods. It is roofless, approximately 32 m in diameter and covers an area of nearly 900 square metres.
Device no. 6
Circles of mirror glass, of the same diameter as the coloured circles, are arranged inside this "clearing" on podiums 17 cm high. Visitors can walk, sit or lie on them. They reflect fragments of the central dome and therefore device no. 7.

Device no. 7
The central dome is made of concentric circles, the edges of which touch the beginning of the steel pillars that support the whole structure. The skylight is partly covered by blue filters forming a large coloured "chequerboard" more than 40 m above the visitors' heads.

When the sun comes out, all these colours (on the dome and on the circles in device no. 4) are projected on the ground, on the steel poles, on the rings holding the filters, on the mirrors and, of course, on the visitors passing from one colour to another. Depending on the angle of the sun, the colours sometimes mix to make new colours.

Device no. 8
Inside the aggregate of circular cells are three different elements, with specific functions, designed by Patrick Bouchain and Loic Julienne.

Device no. 8 A:

near the north entrance, one of the cells is used as a reception desk to inform visitors.

Device no. 8 B:

further along in the west part of the nave, nineteen different cells are used for a café-restaurant which can seat a hundred people.

Device no. 8 C:

near the exit (the south door), a set of five adjacent cells forms a bookshop.

These three devices are constructed mostly from white painted wood, with specific LED lighting for use at night.

The walls are constantly transformed by the reflection of the coloured circles, which form the ceiling and roof, depending on the tilt of the earth in relation to the sun, the clouds, time of day, etc.

Device no. 9
Round white wooden benches for visitors to sit on are dotted along the circuit.

Device no. 10
Electric lighting is used at night.

The light fittings are attached to a technical bridge around the perimeter of the central dome, 32 m above the ground.

Computer-operated spotlights move up and down and left to right independently of one another. They send intermittent waves of light over all the devices below.

Device no. 11
Sound is an important part of this work: voices read out the figures underlying the construction of the main device, the initials of the four colours in alphabetical order plus black and white, and then the names of those colours.

The texts are read by 37 people in 37 different languages from all over the world.

The original soundtrack was mixed by Alexandre Meyer.

The soundtrack is broadcast by highly directional mobile speakers, computer-programmed so that visitors go through waves of sound which come and go, stop and start, and change language from one sound zone to the next.

Brief comments on this set of eleven different devices

As this text was written more than two months before the installation, it gives the broad outlines but omits details which may prove important.

Entering the nave by the north should avoid the difficulty caused by the usual main entrance (on the east side of the building), which projects visitors into the centre of the space and renders the rest of the exhibition almost secondary. Besides, this door is probably the least interesting element in the whole building, because it is so pompous, disproportionate and heavy. It is so massive that it seems to replace the entire east bay, which it should open on to, and which, in fact, does not exist; hence the very uncomfortable feeling of entering a place which seems unfinished and yet offers a sort of apotheosis even before its full measure can be taken.

This entrance is also in complete visual contradiction with the extraordinary finesse of the nave itself, which is twenty times larger but so much lighter and finer.

Visitors will therefore have to walk down the whole length of the building and discover the central area from a different angle.

This space, left empty because of the "hole" in the systematic covering of the area, suggests an enormous cylinder, 32 m in diameter, going right up to the dome, which, as it closes over the top, can be imagined as a sort of hot-air balloon rising into the sky.

Although the circles are covered with a coloured film, they are completely transparent and therefore reveal the enormous volume above the visitors' heads. As the visitors walk along, the architecture turns blue or yellow or orange or green. Through the small triangular spaces between the circles, they catch a glimpse of the real colour of the building and can compare it with the coloured impression given by the transparent circles.

The nave of the Grand Palais, where Monumenta is held, is an enormous public place where people can wander about, meet friends, talk, stroll, stop for a while... Inside the exhibition all by itself, visitors can buy sandwiches, drink a cup of coffee, leaf through or buy books, sit or lie down, run about, take photographs...

In this great nave, the sky is more important than the walls, hence the search for a work that proceeds directly from this feature and accentuates its effects as much as possible.

As with all my work in a public space, the night lighting does not attempt to recreate the effect of daylight.

On the contrary, it is specific lighting designed to transform the diurnal work, in the light of day, into a nocturnal work, lit by electricity.

Daniel Buren
Paris, 5 March
The visual tool

The 8,7 cm wide vertical stripes, alternating white and color, may seem to be the signature of Daniel Buren’s work. But rather than a signature, they are a sign, the only immaterial element in his art for over forty years (amidst constantly changing elements). There are good reasons for this.

In 1965, when Daniel Buren was busy painting and already interested in bands of color, he spied a striped fabric in the famous Saint-Pierre textile market in Paris. At first he thought the stripes would make an interesting background for a painting: “This pattern has two advantages: firstly it stands out and cannot be taken for a neutral background; and secondly it can be used as a guide for whatever is put on the canvas.” That made him realize that the painting’s environment was more arresting than the painting itself. It then occurred to him that the striped motif was a powerful revelatory instrument to be deployed in space.

He called it his visual tool. This tool, judiciously arranged in a given place, can attract attention and at the same time blend into the site: it is this balance which has made it so effective and enabled Daniel Buren to keep using it. Like punctuation marks, the vertical stripes reveal the specific features and dimensions of a site (they function like a measuring instrument); they also incite the viewer to look at a familiar place in a new way; they are a call, a sign, the only unvarying element in a vocabulary which has been renewed from place to place over the years.

Yet the stripes are also a lure: the visual tool must not be regarded as a motif in itself, repeated over and over. The art is not in the sign itself, but in what the sign shows and reveals to an attentive viewer. It is intelligible in its context, just as a word used in different sentences by millions of people over the centuries never says exactly the same thing and takes its particular meaning only from the context in which it is uttered.

Work in situ

The notion of work in situ, as Daniel Buren uses it to describe his art since 1965, means that the work is site-specific; it cannot be envisaged without the setting that it was designed for and built in. This postulate and method emerged at a time when Buren was experimenting with painting. He quickly realized that “the painting’s surroundings [...] always seem richer and more important than the painting itself.” But the decisive nature of the context is often overlooked, ignored or just silently accepted because of “the work’s so-called independence” (it supposedly has an intrinsic content which behaves in the same way under all circumstances). Daniel Buren objects to this idea. He believes that the surroundings have a powerful, unspoken influence on the work: museums in particular impose their constraints and their underlying implications, which are almost always in profound contradiction with the works on display.

Through the idea of work in situ, he tries to reverse this relationship so that the art work transforms the place or at least reveals exactly what it is and what influence it has. The principle is simple: the work’s design, construction and exhibition must be decided from the site and done on the spot. This method means doing without a studio and refusing the usual formats (canvases that can be transported from one exhibition to another, photos, films, three-dimensional objects, and so on.) Daniel Buren therefore goes from place to place without knowing in advance what he will do there. His official biography just says he “lives and works in situ”: what counts is making, seeing and experimenting in the place itself. Each installation is unique and is demolished when the exhibition closes (except for long-term commissions), because it cannot be installed anywhere else (the “situated works” are the sole exception). Every work by Daniel Buren is inseparable from its site, acting sometimes in osmosis and sometimes in opposition.

Working in situ, is a way of questioning the artist’s supposed freedom and, more importantly, revealing the unsuspected but significant features of the site, giving a new vision of both the place and the work, which is broadened and perhaps liberated by the process.

Situated work

A work in situ, closely linked to the place in, for and in relation to which it was designed, is, by definition, site-specific. But there is second series of works that can be moved according to ad hoc rules: Daniel Buren calls them “situated works.” From the outset, his works on striped canvas, although in many ways close to painting, were always accompanied by precise instructions on the way they were to be shown when exhibited in another venue. The idea was clarified in 1971 when the museum in München Gladbach, Germany, where Daniel Buren had just exhibited a piece, had to move to a new building. The question of how the works could be transferred to a new venue was then addressed.

Just as certain pieces of conceptual art can be “performed” in other contexts, so situated works can be played out in other places, as long as the principles laid down by the artist are respected. But unlike conceptual art, the work cannot be reduced to these instructions. It exists only physically, in a space.

Most of the Expanded Hun, for example, are situated works: they are arrangements that are inseparable from a particular environment but can be adapted to an infinite number of different situations. The work changes each time, just as it transforms the site.

But Daniel Buren insists that these works cannot be put “just anywhere,” and that is part of his struggle against the “artwork’s so-called independence.” There are rules to be applied and a type of space to be used: situated works are mobile works, which can be seen in various combinations and versions.

The theatre seems to be the most pertinent metaphor for the principle of his situated works. Each installation is like the performance of a play: the text has not changed, but the staging and sets have nothing to do with the original performance and have a huge impact on our appreciation of the play and the look of the stage.

Light

Light – decisive for perception – is an integral part of Daniel Buren’s work. Just as difficult to grasp and describe as colour, it plays with materials that are reflective, translucent or transparent, and with shapes and shadows, and indeed colours, ceaselessly transforming the work and its environment.

Obvious or subtle, configured in infinite ways, light is always part of the whole. This is hardly surprising for an artist who works in situ, since the lighting can radically alter our appreciation of a place.

Incidentally, in his work in institutions Daniel Buren has often drawn attention to the way museums handle light: stable artificial lighting instead of natural overhead lighting, poor use of skylights and light wells, lighting systems that manipulate the way the works are perceived.

Daniel Buren also uses artificial lighting, especially at night. So The Two Planets, in the main courtyard of the Palace Royal in Paris, is quite a different spectacle at dusk when the lights come on. The work is open to a double interpretation: it has a diurnal and a nocturnal face, which once again shows how powerfully light influences our perception.

From the simplest arrangements (daylight), traditional and ancestral devices (Chinese lanterns, lamps, stained glass windows) to the latest technology (fibre optics),
the sensation of light which changes the appearance of things and spaces is one of the fundamental elements in Daniel Buren's work. Light crosses space, changes shape or colour, is harsh or subdued, natural or artificial, but it always acts strongly on the way we see things as the days and seasons pass.

Colour
Colour was there from the outset in Daniel Buren's art. Yet, when he arrived on the international scene, colour was curiously banned. The avant-gardes (essentially minimalist and conceptual art) were content with black and white, or grey, ochre, natural tones or the colour of the materials themselves, regarded as a sign of serious artistic intent. Daniel Buren stood out with his use of bright colours, dubbed "decorative," a term he readily accepted because "in a way, art has never ceased to be decorative."

When he started using striped fabric, he was restricted to the narrow range of colours available; but then he began to print or make his own tools. That opened up an infinite range of possibilities, which he readily explored while playing with natural colours, textures, light and so on. Colour took a growing place in his work. Admittedly it has numerous irreducible qualities: it radiates, diffuses, and assumes a certain volume. It can be applied to the stripes but also to other elements in the installation such as walls and partitions. The viewer is then "caught" in colour, which conquers a three-dimensional space.

With a very few exceptions (often for reasons of legibility), the choice and arrangement of the colours is left to chance. The artist's personal taste does not come into play in the composition. Alphabetical order, the sequence of the colours in the rainbow, a random selection... The colours act not in relation to one another, but within a design, each according to its own characteristics.

"I use colour in the awareness that it is a basic element in the visual arts. It is one of the few elements that artists can use and touch which, in a way, is pure thought. It cannot be transcribed into music, words, philosophy or anything else. It is raw!" Colour is probably one of the most intriguing and important things in visual art, and a key element in Daniel Buren's philosophy.

Sound
The question of sound haunted the visual arts in the twentieth century, when devices for making, recording, and broadcasting sound were in flux, and yet even now few artists have explored this path.

Daniel Buren experimented with sound from the outset. When he exhibited with three other artists at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture in 1967, a loudspeaker set up in the room they were painting in broadcast a message in three languages: "Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni advise you to become intelligent!"

As well as actually painting, the artist spoke directly to the spectator and the message was part of the work. Daniel Buren's voice could be heard in other works, describing actions and reading texts in some of his latest videos and performances. But speech is not the only form of sound he uses. It may be music, whether live (with the experimental group Luidelude) or recorded. Sound is regularly used in Daniel Buren's work as a means of measurement (the acoustics of a space gives clues to its volume), or revelation (the ear can attract the eye to something else for example the sound of water running under The Two Platonics makes people look into the ditch, or the water running throughout the mill of Counter-current, works in situ and in motion, Albi, 2008).

Sound, as an instrument for revealing the invisible, adds another dimension to the art work. What is heard complements what is seen, and the one cannot be reduced to the other. Daniel Buren uses recorded sound (voices, his own or those of his friends), music, and the sound of the elements and materials. In addition, there is the ever-changing noise of the site itself because its atmosphere is inevitably an integral part of Buren's work in situ.

The motion
For Daniel Buren, the spectator must be active and explore a work from different angles and the work itself must take this dimension into account: some parts can only be appreciated through movement, and the whole piece may be mobile.

Daniel Buren has explored the possibilities of movement in depth. In 1975, he produced a street ballet on the scale of New York (Seven Ballets in Manhattan). For seven days, seven actors carried placards painted with his stripes instead of the usual slogans, advertising messages or demands. They walked through the streets of a different district each day, following the artist's instructions and performing his choreography. It was a strange ballet which questioned and muddled the urban landscape, making people look skywards and mixing with the ceaseless activity of the city. It was work in motion.

It contained the familiar ideas of walking about, the inevitable relationship between an object and its context, instability, multiple viewpoints and perspectives. But this time it was the work itself which took charge of the movement and imposed it on the viewer.

Daniel Buren has orchestrated several performances or on-going works in this way. In some the colours are revealed, in others they change with time and motion. These approaches remind us just how close his work is to theatre and even the circus. But art can no longer bear to be confined to its frame and hung on a museum wall; it leaps out the window and roams about. Movement becomes its driving force; the wind stirs flags and banners and fills sails, buses and trains whisk the works along, escalators become waterfalls, colours and forms escape and keep changing, nothing is established. And the viewer's eyes and body must move as well.

Viewpoints
How do we look at an art work? What about its environment? How does a work attract our attention? How does one place look at another place? What is there to be seen out of the window? Art history is full of many basic questions about viewpoints.

Instead of the single viewpoint that artists usually use, Daniel Buren offers multiple points of view, leaving the spectator free to choose his own perspective and change it at will. That is why the best way to approach his art is to walk around it, as each step brings a new vision of the work and the surrounding site.

Instead of the "one-eyed, unequivocal, dictatorial" viewpoint of paintings with the linear perspective of the Renaissance, Daniel Buren takes a different angle, for example, "real perspective" activated by a moving spectator. There are no longer one or two viewpoints fixed in advance, but a multitude, without any hierarchy or order, which interact, interfere with and induce one another, in a process of mutual enrichment and contradiction. Each viewpoint has a meaning of its own, which does not annihilate the others.

As when looking at Italian frescoes, Claude Monet's Water Lilies or Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau, the viewer orchestrates his own perception of the work and the site. His experience is unique, progressive and active (unlike the experience of looking at the great majority of paintings hung in museums, which must be seen from the front if anything is to be seen at all).

Moreover there is often virtual work to be done in synthesizing several viewpoints: a plane to be imagined, lines to be linked up visually and mentally. In return for this freedom, the view we have of the work is always fragmentary, an idea which also interests Daniel Buren. The only way to gain an overall picture is by walking around, creating a dynamic sequence of personal views of the work itself and of its exterior, its context.
Souvenir photos

Daniel Buren has always paid particular attention to the use of photography and the confusion or paradoxes it can trigger in art.

When he has completed a work, he photographs it. Since 1967, he has called these documents "souvenir photos," meaning that these necessarily fragmentary images are not the work itself, nor are they copies or equivalents of it in any way whatsoever: they are just reminders, tools.

Indeed, photography irremediably eliminates crucial features of the work: it imposes a single viewpoint—chosen by the photographer—flattens depth and makes it impossible to walk around the work. The spectator's view is necessarily passive and "manipulated."

Yet these souvenir photos have an essential status, because the works in situ are by nature ephemeral and, with a few rare exceptions, are doomed to disappear. The photos are all that is left. And the only possible retrospective of Daniel Buren's art, in the traditional sense of the term, would be a printed collection of all these souvenir photos.

Why a book? Firstly because a work in situ cannot be moved and reinstalled, but also because these images, whose very name deliberately reminds us of holiday snapshots, can be printed in books, on postcards or posters, published on Internet, but, certainly not exhibited in a museum or even commercialized. The danger would be to see them as works of art, to frame them and hang them on the wall, to sell them as unique "traces" of the work, as many artists have done with ephemeral works, thereby perverting their original creations.

Daniel Buren categorically refuses to give photography this function. For him, nothing can replace the visual, plastic experience of an art work. The photograph, although it is necessary as proof, must be content with its role as a souvenir photo. It refreshes our memories, testifies, evokes and betrays all at once. It is an "unpretentious image."13

Reflection

Daniel Buren has sometimes used reflections—in mirrors, shiny materials or water. The reflection's primary property is the inclusion of the space around the work (it is impossible to reflect just the work itself), stressing the artist's position on the fundamental interrelation between the object and its context.

Moreover, a reflection does not stay still; it depends on the viewer's position. Here we find another idea defended by Daniel Buren: no single viewpoint dominates. The mirror therefore contextualizes the object in relation to the spectator's movement: there are an infinite number of possible viewpoints and they are always fragmentary.

In some cases, reflection is used to obtain an optical effect: the impression of infinity when two mirrors are placed face to face, multiple reflections in corners, disappearing borders or startling perisopic vision.

Apart from these effects, Daniel Buren uses the mirror as a "third eye" so we can see what is in front and behind us simultaneously. The mirror "is not necessarily there to reflect something, but to show particular things that only mirrors can show." I would go so far as to say that the mirror never imitates anything, but always shows something else. More than that, it transforms the space and lets us see more and differently.16

Reflection offers a new, dynamic way of seeing. It also refers to the work to something else, to the exterior or to the viewer. The question of the mirror obviously intrigued many twentieth-century artists, but Daniel Buren's references go much further back, to the Renaissance, with the regret that the "reflective pieces on some of Uccello's battle scenes" have not survived.

Revelation

Revelation is one of the stakes in Daniel Buren's art—not a revelation in the mystic or prophetic sense, or a claim to absolute truth, but a critical, reasonable revelation. The sort of revelation brought about by optical instruments: a different way of seeing, the sight of something not previously perceived or a glimpse of the invisible. Taken as a whole, Daniel Buren's art can be regarded as "a tool for seeing," a tool put at the spectator's disposal.

In his first fly postings in the late 1960s, he sought to expose the unspoken and/or unconscious rules that govern sight, the conditions for art's visibility and the false assumptions about what an artist does. He developed these ideas later when he was officially invited to various institutions. His pieces reveal hidden constraints: "It is not because the constraints cannot be seen at first glance that they don't exist. A lot of the work I do is designed to flush them out, then if possible to expose them publicly."18

When he acts on an environment or a specific site, his intervention brings out forgotten or unsuspected elements: the basement of the Palais Royal and the convexity of its courtyard were revealed by The Two Plateaux, for example. With each piece, he offers an opportunity to learn to look and a broadening of the visual field.

For each site Buren invents new ways to reveal things, usually a device in which the only fixed element is the visual tool, the 8.7 cm wide stripes, an instrument of measurement, rhythm and revelation. A sign that has become a signature, or at least an indication of an investigation to be carried out.

Writing

That writing is an important activity for Daniel Buren is made particularly clear in his collected texts Les Écrits, published in 1991 and then in 2012.19 Defying the cliché that it is for artists to make art and critics and historians to write about it, Daniel Buren does both at once. Through his writing, we see his ideas and oeuvre taking shape. We are privy to his doubts and contradictions, his development and enrichment over the years.

Yet Daniel Buren expects his reader to put his texts into context: they are the writings of an artist, produced at a certain moment, in a particular context, no more and no less. Moreover, in Buren's case, writing is a direct product of the work: the impetus comes from his art, and its making. Although a few exceptions prove the rule, his texts are not manifestos intended to guide later creations. And reading them is no substitute for going out and experiencing the works themselves.

Daniel Buren has clearly explained why he writes.20 A combination of the need and desire to "make up for the lack of good criticism," a way of stepping back and thinking about art, part of a contract or for sheer pleasure, writing "can talk about things that painting cannot, because painting is visual and cannot talk about itself."

Visual art and the written word: two systems with their specific features. One cannot be reduced to the other and they do not contradict one another: "Although visual language is essentially "silent," we can still talk about it, just as we can talk about a good meal without being fed," says Daniel Buren.

Ranging from group talks to technical instructions for performing his works, interviews, descriptions, open letters and responses to criticism, this collection of Buren's writings is an excellent analytical tool and a powerful invitation to experience his oeuvre.

Notes

3 The concept of a work in situ as Daniel Buren defined it has often been used since, sometimes rather loosely.
This work always has two separate parts. In the first part, nine Optimistes (small sailboats for children and teenagers) are fitted with striped canvas sails (white with red, blue, yellow, green or brown stripes). The two white stripes at the edges are covered with white paint. The boats then race in a regatta.

In the second part, after the race, the sails are exhibited in a museum in the city where the regatta was held. They are presented in the order they crossed the finishing line, from one to nine and from left to right, as befits the exhibition area.

Souvenir photos:
“Voile/Toile – Toile/Voile” situated work, 1973-2011
Lake Grasmere, Great Britain
sails, paint

Watch the doors, please!
Work in situ and in motion for the group exhibition “Europe in the Seventies” at the Art Institute of Chicago from October 1980 to March 1982.

The Art Institute of Chicago straddles a railroad and has a large window looking down on the lines. The window is usually hidden but was uncovered for this exhibition, becoming the only place in the museum with a view of the outside. A schedule near the window informed visitors exactly when trains with doors covered with striped paper would be passing. The work was called Watch the doors, please! and could be seen not only from the museum but from various vantage points by the railway lines in the city.

Souvenir photo:
“Watch the doors, please!” work in situ and in motion, 1980-1982

Couleurs superposées (Superimposed Colours)
Performance and work in situ presented in various places (museums, theatres, exhibitions), initially in Genazzano in Italy, in 1982, as part of a group project called "La cattura di Babele" [The Raft of Babyl].

The work is an hour-long public performance, during which paper is pasted up and then torn down. For forty minutes, five actors paste coloured striped paper on the wall, according to the artist’s instructions. The white stripes must be exactly aligned. The spectators see colours and shapes appearing and disappearing as successive layers are added. Then for the remaining twenty minutes, the actors, still directed by the artist, tear off the freshly pasted papers to reveal fragments of the
previous layers. The spectators watch the evolution of work on a picture that is never finished and whose successive stages are recorded only in their memory. After the performance, the whole piece is destroyed.

Souvenir photo:
"Couleurs superposées"
in situ / work in situ, 60 minutes, 1982-2009
Opéra-Théâtre de Metz-Métropole, Metz wood, paste, paper

Points de vue ou le Corridoroscope
(Viewpoints or the Corridoroscope)
Work in situ for Daniel Buren's solo exhibition at ARC, Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, in May and June 1983.

A long corridor zigzagging from the entrance to the exit was built in the curved space of the museum, masking the surrounding structure. Holes were made at various places in the black and white striped walls, through which visitors could see the walls of the building, cut-out fragments of the corridor projected and suspended in space, paintings from the museum's storerooms, lines falling diagonally across the corridor structure, the big skylight letting daylight into the corridor from above, the building opposite the museum, and the dome of the invalides.

Souvenir photo:
"Points de vue ou le Corridoroscope"
in situ, 1983
white paint, paintings from the museum's storerooms, wood, mirrors, steel tubes, fabric, sound

La cabane éclatée no 2 (Exploded Hut 2)
Situated work and construction in situ for solo exhibitions in Marseille, at ARCA in 1984 and in the Centre de la Vieille Charité in 1985.

This hut is a parallelepiped 4.20 m long, 2.80 m wide and 2.80 m high set up in the middle of the gallery. The ceiling of the hut is lined with white cotton vellum and the walls consist of frames covered with blue and white striped fabric. The frames are assembled with clamps and the joints of the pieces of fabric form a white stripe which is covered with white paint. Geometrical "doors" and "windows" are cut out of the walls of the hut and projected on the walls around it.

Souvenir photo:
"La cabane éclatée no 2"
situated work, 1984-1985
Centre de la Vieille Charité, Marseille wood, fabric, white fabric, paint

Les Deux Plateaux
(The Two Plateaux)
Sculpture in situ, public commission for the main courtyard of the Palais-Royal, Paris.

Filling the entire main courtyard of the Palais-Royal, The Two Plateaux are composed of a set of faceted columns installed in relation to the architecture of the building, the position of the colonnades, the convexity of the ground and the declivity of the basement. The tops of the columns in the central area are aligned and form the first "plateau." Columns of the same height are installed in trenches and their gradual sinking reveals the slope of the "plateau" below ground level, where water is running. The work interacts with the place, exhibits, unveils and animates it. Despite nationwide controversy, a work stoppage, a sabotage threat, and signs of incomprehension scrawled on the hoardings, the work was finished in July 1986.

Souvenir photo:
"Les Deux Plateaux" permanent sculpture in situ, 1986
concrete, marble, stone, galvanized steel, water, electricity

Dominant – Dominé,
coin pour un espace, 1,465,5 m² à 11° 28' 43"
(Dominant – Dominated, a Corner for a Space, 1,465,5 sq. m. at 11° 28' 43"
Work in situ for Daniel Buren’s solo exhibition at Centre de la Vieille Charité in Marseille, from May to September 1991.

The curved inner side of the ceilings, including the arches and windows, of the two great naves of the Entrepôt Lainé were covered with white PVC panels screen-printed with black stripes to emphasize the architecture of the old warehouses. A wooden floor laid on sloping scaffolding was covered with sheets of mirror glass over the entire area of 1,465,5 square metres. The mirror, lying at an angle of 11° 28' 43", connected the ground floor of the building with the ambulatory on the first floor, opposite the public entrance. The architectural features of the building were reflected, extended and inverted in the mirror and ends of the great arches met in a ring.

Souvenir photo:
"Dominant – Dominé, coin pour un espace, 1,465,5 m² à 11° 28' 43"
in situ, 1991
mirrors, wood, PVC, silk screen inks

Effet/Contre-effet
(Effect/Counter-Effect)
Work in situ for the group exhibition "Versailles Off" in the grounds of the Château de Versailles in October 2004.

This work was conceived from the spot from which Louis XIV liked to admire his gardens, in the axis common to the castle and the perspective in which, in a masterly trompe-l’œil created by Le Nôtre, the Apollo Fountain seems to be the same size as the Neptune Fountain, the green square of the Tapis Vert looks quite small although in fact it is 350 metres long, and the Grand Canal seems to float above the other lawn. Buren laid a big green and white striped trapezoidal frame on the Tapis Vert. From this standpoint, it looked like a frame standing upright in front of the lawn, but if the spectator moved to the right or left, or walked closer, it returned to its real shape. This work unveiled Le Nôtre’s trompe-l’œil by giving the fountains, lawns and artificial lakes their real proportions:
"Effect/Counter-Effet.

Souvenir photo:
"Effet/Contre-effet"
in situ, 2004
wood, white paint

Around the Corner

A tower in the Guggenheim Museum reaching from the ground to the top floor, penetrating each ramp to the outside wall and encompassing the entrance to the museum, the cloakroom, the reception desk and ticket office. Its tip was in the exact centre of the museum’s rotunda. This construction was lined with medium density fibreboard panels covered with mirrors, which espoused the architectural structure. It was oriented in the same way as the streets and avenues of Manhattan. The inside, darkened by a tarpaulin, was artificially lit, while the literally dazzling light in the remaining three-quarters of the rotunda was intensified by the mirrors. Vertical green strips were stuck on the upper part of the spiral balustrade and magenta filters were laid on every second pane of the skylight. When the sun shone, the colour was projected into the ascending ramp, usually filled with exhibits but here deliberately left empty.

Souvenir photo:
"Around the Corner"
in situ, 2005
lead weights, medium density fibreboard, mirrors, tubular scaffolding, daylight, self-adhesive vinyl

One Thing to Another
Situated works for Buren’s solo exhibition in Lisson Gallery in London from November 2011 to January 2012.

A display of three site-specific works closely linked to colour and light. A pergola with a clear roof was covered with filters which
projected their colours on the ground. A horizontal suspended frame around the perimeter of the room held a succession of coloured Plexiglas panels (blue, yellow, red and green). The light from the skylight cast delicate coloured shadows on the walls. At night, electric lighting took over. Situated works were installed in the other rooms, new pieces using woven fibre optics linked to white or coloured electroluminescent diodes. When they were turned on, the diodes coloured the work and lit up the space; when they were turned off, the pieces looked like plain white canvas.

Souvenir photo:
“One Thing to Another”
situated works, 2011-2012
woven fibre optics on aluminium, electroluminescent diodes, electricity

**DANIEL BUREN**

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

Daniel Buren was born in Boulogne-Billancourt in 1938. In the early 1960s, he developed a radical art form which played simultaneously on an economy of means and the relationship between the support and the medium.

In 1965, when he was working on paintings combining circular forms and stripes of various sizes and colours, he decided to use industrial canvas with 8.7 cm wide vertical stripes (white alternating with a colour). This versatile support was the starting point for research into what painting is, how it is presented and, more broadly, the physical and social environment in which an artist works.

His work soon systematically questioned the place in which and for which they were designed. At first that meant streets, in 1965, and then galleries, museums, landscapes or architectural structures. For these installations he coined the expression “work in situ.” The term has characterised a large part of his production ever since.

The stripes, which he calls “a visual tool”, are used to focus attention on the significant features of the place in which he works. He deploys them within specific and sometimes complex arrangements combining painting, sculpture and architecture.

His works in situ play on viewpoints, spaces, colours, light, motion, the environment, outlines and projection; they may be unashamedly decorative or radically transform the venue.

Incisive, critical and committed, Daniel Buren’s work is in continual flux and always provokes comment, admiration and argument. In 1986, he produced his first and most controversial public commission, The Two Plateaux, for the main courtyard of the Palais-Royal in Paris. That same year he represented France at the Venice Biennale and carried off the Golden Lion.

He is one of the most active and best-known artists on the international scene and his work has been presented in the world’s greatest institutions and in a wide variety of sites.

In 2007, Daniel Buren was awarded the Premiun imperial by the Emperor of Japan, a distinction regarded as the Nobel Prize for the visual arts.