Daniel Buren Shows His Stripes

NOTICE SOME STRANGE ART ALONG THE STREETS LAST FALL? A 74-YEAR-OLD FRENCHMAN MAY HAVE BEEN RESPONSIBLE

The celebrated conceptualist’s two-gallery show is on, after a Sandy delay

By Andrew Russeth

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 preciously 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 aperix and white stripes popped up about a block from this former apartment on Ave nue 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 office✉️ng Samstag and has been installing them around various cities for nearly five decades. The strips are always the same size, nearly 8.7 centimeters across. The posters in November were timed to coincide with a two gallery show at Petzelum and Petzel in Chelsea, which was scuttled by Sandy. Two months later, that show is finally coming to fruition.

On a few afternoons, just as it was starting to get dark, Mr. Buren was standing in Petzel, watching as two women attempted to install some of that paper 30 feet high on a wall.

It was not going well. The sheets of green and white striped paper that they were pulling to the wall were sticking 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 adheฐาน. There was a large stack of fresh striped paper on the floor.

"Amazing," Mr. Buren said, eking a big stack of fresh striped paper that was ready, on the floor. "I was a bit surprised this had never happened before."

"You know, paper’s pretty powerful stuff."

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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 celebrat-
ed avant-gardist to look—dressed in all black with a serious manner, but he's warm and engaging when he gets ex-
icted 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, in- cludes a number of such installations made with striped paper. Here's the part you might not be expecting from storm-struck 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 his pieces, works designed for a specific location. Once the work is completed, all that remains is an empty gallery, filled with spotted art and eye-catching artists. Collectors aiming to acquire such works must have their work cut out for them, which makes them tough sales.

"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 pliancy to his more radical statements. "You will pay me for the cost of the thing, and it will be difficult to resell," he contin-
ed. "That is the only problem. That is a good problem."

Even as he ap-
proaches his sixth decade as an artist, perhaps the most dec-
ated artist of his generation in France (he has been in the world's most prestigious exhibition, the Venice Biennale, 10 times, and won its prize in 1969, he still carries himself with the air of the charismat-
ic and opinionated utterer who took on the art world in the mid 1960s. He had a gang then, having joined with three other artists, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier and Nicole Tornoci, to form a group called N.B.T.S. Each of them adopted a single abstract motif and repeated it. Mr. Mosset offered up a grid of handmade paper strips, Mr. Tornoci his single days of a brush, spaced equally across each of his canvases, and Mr. Buren those 8.73-centi-

meters stripes, a design that he found printed on fabric in a Parisian market.

My painting, at the least, can mean something," Mr. Buren told an inter-
viewee in 1968, as the group was gain-
ing 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 strips, rep-
ted ad infinitum? Perhaps only the thing that one can even have-
ning seen a canvas like ours is total rev-
olution," 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 effect all content from their paintings, killing off the median and

starting over from the beginning. One from January 1967 declared, "Because to paint is to give another value to flowers, women, eroticism, the daily environment, art, dadanism, psychoanalysis and the war in Viet-

nam, we are not painters." And then, 16 months later: "Art is the illusion of disintegration, 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 Tornoci. Art is an ab-

dition, art is false. Painting begins with Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Tornoci."

Beginning in the late 1960s, Mr. Buren began to design his work for specific locations, and in 1968 he re-
visted out of Paris's streets, painting his stripes around the city. In 1970, he spent about 10 days giving New York the treatment, sending out a card informing people that they could call a number or write to find out his pieces' locations. He was what some might now call a street artist. Those in the know were tired 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 stu-

did or whatever.'"

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 painting his stripes around urban areas, the New York-based artist Richard Artschwag-

er, whose retrospective is now at the Whitney, was install-
ing his first "blobs"—knob-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," he said. But he liked doing it in New York, where it might still cause more people unaware, a spare stretch of lines amid all of the graffiti and advertis-

ing. "That piece was looking very fresh, very fresh," Mr. Buren said, sitting in Paris. "Of course, I think that, to take as you want. It's said by myself. It could be totally wrong!"

About other opinions, big or no opinions. He's disdainful of the art market. ("Sup-
pousedly 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 director of the Louvre 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 document-
ary 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 cer-
tain time, not I think so long—and I can give you a sense of the scale on which he's thinking those days—40 or 50 years later, everything like that will start to look really meaningless.

Setting such photos "was already a little silly," he added. "Now, he noted with ex-
aperation, many performance art-
ists are re-performing pieces that they did decades ago, in new contexts. "To redo it, I think it's even more ab-

surd," he said, laughing.

Ironically, there is a kind of re-per-
formance for 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 giv-

ing the installers trouble that af-

ternoon, for instance, is based on a site-specific work that he did at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in Germany in 1968. It was gallery director Stefanie Borto-

lami's idea to redo some of those piec-
es, he said. "I'm using this new space, which, of course, is totally different, to rework from the ideas of these pre-
vious works—so, 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 "altered works," which can be moved about like ordi-
nary 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 alter-
nating-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 com-
pany Broucher Soeurs to produce new stripes using fiber optics (these look like simple sheets of plastic until illuminated) and other PERI-

glas stripes over linen stripes.

Both shows are dedicated to the memory of artist Michael Asher, who di-

ed 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," Mr. Buren said. "That was a big loss." Mr. Asher's work fre-
quently 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 amaz-
ing that no one was thinking about, or to find a way of something that every-

one 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 mus-

ums and public spaces, and that force you to see things that often go un-
noticed or unmentioned. One of his particularly memorable pieces was in MoMA's 2008 "Color Chart" show: a striped vest for MoMA's guards, produced with Broucher Soeurs. 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 Knuegenheim retrospective in 2005, has become more interested in beauty for its own sake, as his rigidly limited selection of colors and ma-

terials of the 1960s has given way to a wider array of display options—in silk and glass, as glowing fiber optics and an artist's first ever monumental exhibition in Paris's Grand Palais. In Paris, he now has a quarter of a million visitors in six weeks and a new taking on a ladder of elevated plastic screens that bathed visitors in color. Radical critique has given way to a quiet, poetic, and then turns romantic, becoming more decoration.

Mr. Buren is quoted at that sugges-
tion. "All artists, are first, all dec-
orative 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 conceptual art or avant-
garde, are continually in flux. Mr. Buren pointed to Matta's paper cut-
outs. "Even those didn't completely attack people, saying, 'Oh, he's become completely nice. It's an old guy. Look at this stupid stuff. Totally decorative," when he did maybe the best thing of the times."

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