As part of New York-based gallery Bortolami's new program, Artist/City, which will develop site-specific installations throughout the US, veering away from the New York-Los Angeles axis, Daniel Buren is presenting Passage Aller-Retour (2016) at the M Building in Miami. Passage Aller-Retour is comprised of a large mirror and five free-standing architectural elements—porticos—that bisect the exhibition space. Painted in Buren's usual primary-to-garish colors, these porticos generate a virtual corridor across the gallery, which is "extended" as a reflection on the large mirror that sits at one end of the room. That these elements reproduce the dimension of the actual threshold one crosses to enter the room—which is recoded as both the source of the objects and as one of them—only reinforces the idea of a hallway, and in so doing, fuses Buren's free-standing additions to the building's architectural substance. Paradoxically, the space of the gallery itself, even with this new corridor, is empty of any architectural elements that are external to it. The viewer is not able to reach for any outside reference in order to explain these porticos. The place of presentation determines the elements presented. As Buren likes to say, "the site prompts the work."

*Passage Aller-Retour*, in fact, functions around architectural echoes—through physical, dimensional, and optical reproduction. The porticos echo one another as well as the entrance to the gallery. The mirror echoes the space, visually elongating the corridor as it also reproduces the image of the viewer. The mirror itself could also be understood to produce an echo of...
BUREN’S PROCESS HAS PROVEN TO BE SO FLEXIBLE, SO IMPOSSIBLE TO ENCLOSE OR DELIMIT (IT CAN LITERALLY WORK WITHIN ANY SITE), THAT ITS MUTATIONAL INSTABILITY, ITS CAPACITY TO ADJUST TO ANY LOCATION, IS DIVESTED OF SOME OF ITS FORCE. REPETITION OVERRIDES DIFFERENCE. CONTINGENCY IS STRIPPED OF ITS EDGE.
a more historical kind, by allegorizing the "indefinite extensibility" of the Buren stripe, which is here placed on the sides of the free-standing architectural elements. This reading of the work invisibly surfaces as the exhibition is being billed as a celebration of 50 years of Buren's employment of the 8.7 cm-wide stripe. Finally, the colors, changing from portico to portico, render the experience of traversing the corridor at once textured and repetitive. Inseparable, the porticos' chromatic arrangements modulate as one gazes upon them from different points along the way, while a recurring modularity is nonetheless retained throughout.

A clear distinction is established between how the physical elements should be crossed in contrast to a standpoint outside of it—both physically and conceptually—from where it can be viewed. In generating this condition of extensibility to the work (within the work itself, in the dialectical transactions that emerge), Buren stages the very notion of perception, and therein foregrounds Passage Aller-Retour's own mechanism of meaning-making as its very meaning. All this, in the complexity it achieves, cannot help but challenge the general ambivalent injunction across contemporary culture and everyday life to simplify at all costs for effortless consumption. Beyond generating this tight logic of interaction, superimposing new circulation itineraries on the exhibition space, and consequently, opening a de-naturalizing "location" of self-awareness for the viewer, it is hard to say what the gesture of reproducing the architectural elements of a site—of having a "site prompt the work"—really does. This again names our problem and gives it a generative dimension. It is what still makes thinking of—or around—Buren's work interesting as more than just hagiography. Whatever radicality there was in working in the manner in which Buren does, seems drained by canonization and the perpetuation of irresolvable contradiction. Buren himself has said, "These phenomena against which the artist struggles are epiphenomena or, more precisely, these are only the superstructures compared to the foundation, which conditions art... Art is the most beautiful ornament of society as it is now, and not a warning signal for society as it should be—never that." At this point, Buren's process has proven to be so flexible, so impossible to enclose or delimit (it can literally work within any site), that its mutational instability, its capacity to adjust to any location, is divested of some of its force. Repetition overrides difference. Contingency is stripped of its edge.

Reproducing a gesture that Buren has been deploying for decades (highlighted in the commemorative intent of the show), Passage Aller-Retour seems most useful in its ability to conceptually underline the presence of Buren himself within all of this. Five porticos and a mirror utilized as a machine to reemphasize the value of Buren-the-brand. Here "brand" can be understood not as a pejorative term, but instead, as the name of a structure of production wherein the semiotic dimension of a product or practice accrues value through its self-perpetuation with the actual products or practice ceasing to be of primary importance. From this perspective, Buren's work serves as a prism through which to think again about his foundational gesture as an artist: the militancy of abandoning the studio and working exclusively in situ. And to think, furthermore, what this has to do with our contemporary moment.

The prompt for this kind of reflection, beyond merely looking at the objects on display, lies in the fact that Passage Aller-Retour is the second of what will eventually be three projects by Buren at the M Building in Miami, collectively titled Daniel Buren/Miami. This trio allows for a complicating of the M Building as a site that exceeds this current exhibition. The first of these installments included paintings originally produced in the mid-1960s when the artist still retained a studio and had yet to fully move into the mode of working exclusively site-specifically. The juxtaposition of the paintings and the porticos "prompts by the site" warrants revisiting the moment that marks the differences between them. Interestingly, this can also be considered a signaling of the fundamental scission that opened the possibility for the emergence of a future negotiation between Buren the-critical-artist and the unplaceable materialist, in contrast to Buren the-brand, the value-producing semiotic-machine—two modalities that reflect our current dichotomous condition. Here we see a schematic that on the one hand favors the agency, and that on the other, is geared toward involuntary modulation, which the current social dynamic thus opens for or imprints upon individual subjectivity.

One of the arguments that has been put forth to highlight the significance of Buren's in-situ methodology is that it rigorously cuts itself from the need for any external information. The meaning of the work is determined by the site in which it is presented, and what it demands from viewers is the application of knowledge that they already have on some level, or that they can develop through their engagement with the work itself. Guy Lelong posits the irreducible difference between Buren and an artist like Donald Judd, for instance, in that the definitive crux of the practice of the latter relies on an already accepted theory—namely that of Clement Greenberg's staunch take on Modernism—in order for Judd's attempt to reconceptualize sculpture to be effective. The demonstration of this divide between the two artists' site-specific modes of working may have its most emblematic moment in Buren's censure at the Guggenheim in 1971, which was in part imposed upon him due to Judd's complaints. Buren, unlike Judd, relies on depositing all of the necessary information into the work itself. Or, perhaps more accurately, all that constitutes the meaning of the work can be found in—or maybe as—the dialectic that is established through the exchange of site and work. This inversion is then subsequently enveloped into a further dialectical relationship between this exchange and the knowing perspective of the viewer.

But it is here where an interesting conundrum emerges. As Buren places it all in the work, making the work self-contained in an extreme way, the production of value on the social sphere is shifting from the discrete unit—whether the intellectual object or, more generally, the commodity—to the performance of the producer. This is not to propose that the critical intent of Buren's practice is fraudulent or fantastical. Even as early as 1972 with his intervention in Documenta V, in which he placed his work beyond the spaces allotted to him in order to unearth the arbitrary core that often plagues curatorial practice, you can see his work taking up a trenchant critique of exhibition making even as we continue to develop it today. His unveiling of frames and containers are a benchmark in the history of critical artistic
production, its perceived shortcomings and contradictions, often
underlined by Buren himself, notwithstanding. His attack on the
problem of exchange and other challenges to the "parade of art"
are all valid and valuable. The issue at hand, instead, is that aside
from this critical activity, there was something happening simulta-
neously—the consolidation of a value-producing structure that
was swelling in importance beyond the works that it generated—
through the performance of this activity.

The social ontology developed by French sociologists, Luc
Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, in their research from the 1990s
on the changing conditions of contemporary capitalism with
the emergence of entrepreneurial ideology, may serve as a lens
through which to think of this displacement of the locus of value
production. For them, the social dynamic is determined on two
separate planes. On one, there is a series of normative fulcrums
through which we determine our actions; in other words, there
is a series of beliefs and commitments that we use to justify our
activities. On another plane, there is a series of forces, unleashed
into our historical conjuncture by structural changes in capital-
ism, that modulate us in particular ways. Both spheres are
equally real in the sense that they both constitute the social
dynamic, but from their simultaneity it does not follow that
at all times their power to determine social relations will be
identical or unchanging. To schematically lay the grid of this
ontology over Buren’s production, one could say that his critical
production belongs to the first plane and that his performance’s
accumulation of value is determined by the forces that comprise
the second plane.

Awareness of the emergence of post-war cybernetic and
communications technologies aids in understanding the struc-
tural changes that we continue to see in our capitalist system’s
forms of value-production vitality. Through these shifts we have
seen that production itself has spilled past
the edges of the sites for which an earlier
stage of our economic configuration had
been exclusively designated. What the
theorist and activist Mario Tronti called
the “social factory,” is nothing other than
the historical reality that the entire plane
of the social, particularly as it becomes
entwined in massive computational and
media infrastructures, increasingly sus-
tains only capitalized life. We are as good
as the value that we create and the profit
that can be turned, based on our activities
and capacities. Such capacities are then
set to work through the ways that we
are diagrammed into particular positions,
confusing leisure and labor, and affective
and material production. In this way, we
end up tangling together the differenti-
ated spheres of production, circulation,
and consumption. Consequentially, our
affective and performative dimensions
matter even more. Now, this is most easily
discerned on some of the media platforms
and networks that we use, but nonetheless, they are merely the
immediate manifestations of the grid of social relations that orga-
nize our lives. The vectors through which capitalism overcomes
its limitations cut right through us.

Buren’s original gesture of abandoning the studio found the
full force of its power at a time when the agential dimension of
the social dynamic was robust and healthy. While this is not to
imply that structural forces were not ferociously at work in the
late 1960s and early ’70s, when Buren’s practice began, it is to say
that there was a moment in which deliberate critical production
had repercussions in the world and its institutions that we do
not see now. This justifies the high regard in which Buren’s early
gestures and texts are still held. These texts and gestures, and
their repercussions at the moment of their emergence, are also
the basis for cementing a convincing critical practice as a way to
mine for symbolic value down the road. It will be a change in the
social dynamic itself, a strengthening of the plane of structural
forces, that will shift the locus of value in Buren from his actual
production to the performance of his practice.

In some sense, Buren didn’t change. There is a kind of
rectitude and coherence in his work that is undeniable. But the
conditions in which he works did change. And in their alteration
they shifted the place where value is produced within his prac-
tice, and with absolute disregard of the intentions that organize
that practice. In some ways, the emergence of Buren—the brand
has nothing to do with the artist himself and has everything to
do with the grid of relations in which his practice continues to
unfold. It is not so much that the site prompts the work, but that
the socioeconomic conditions surrounding both, end up deter-
m ing how an artistic practice produces value.

In light of these changes in our social dynamic, what are we
to make of Buren’s post-studio mode of production today? If we
return to the question of the studio at this juncture in contemporary art, it is because the studio—having one or not—no longer happens in relation to critical agency. It happens, instead, as a "response" to structural forces. Art historian Lane Relyea is right when he states, "No longer does the studio appear as an ideological frame that mystifies production ... as belonging to a 'system' such as Buren described, as a space characterized by boxlike structures, of 'frames and limits,' each assigned a discreet place in some rigid, stable, and all-determining structure or order. What system or structure does exist today is more properly described as a network." The metaphor of the network invites a whole series of adjacent metaphors—including the horizontal, the democratic and the de-centralized—into the unending conversation of what an artist does these days. Such ongoing versions of this metaphor ultimately come together to displace the integrated subject or the critical agent rendered operationally ineffective under current conditions, and in its place, erect a stage for the artist with a practice.

This ambiguous term—a practice—on the face of it makes things seem more quotidian, more down-to-earth and relatable, while on another tier speaks to the place of value production as it can be read within the performance of being an artist, or, more precisely, of how it can be read through the practice of an artist whose particular social, commercial, and discursive networks tend to be strategically connected to one another. The studio "is all exterior," Relyea concludes. "It offers a purely negative difference based on sameness, places the artist as a like item within an integrative inventory of database, gives the artist a mailing address and a doorstep, thus providing the means for one to show up within the network." But it is a situation of mutually reinforcing elements: the network generates an artist that must perform in it a practice that is not beholden to critical agency as a way to find value and visibility, while the performance of being networked perpetuates the condition of the studio as a node in a network, responsive to what current determining conditions demand.

Thinking of the way that the problem of the studio has been divested of a critical dimension reinforces what we are proposing here, which is that to think about Buren in any significant way, and to think about the social conditions in which we now live, we have to focus on where value is generated. In Buren, it is Buren himself. He seems to exist as a floating signifier that continues to matter as such, independent in some way of any material production, regardless of the careful ways in which he has crafted a practice, which, despite rigorous control of presentation and documentation, and despite the production of consequential discourse and action, has become a practice. And this may just say everything we need to know about the intolerable order of things that we are stuck with.

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