

Daniel Buren celebrates the first 10 years of Madre Musuem of Contemporary Art in Naples

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«Je cherche à montrer que jamais une chose n'existe en elle-meme, dans une sorte d'en-soi»

Daniel Buren, 1980

To a journalist asking the meaning of IN SITU in regards to his work, Daniel Buren (b.1938, Boulogne-Billancourt) replied “...quite simply, (an IN SITU work is) a work which not only has a relationship with the place in which it finds itself, but also which has been made entirely in this place.” In a Duchampian sense (interestingly, Buren has often denied any affiliation with Conceptual Art and has publicly disagreed with the movement’s belief that everything happens at the level of the idea¹), ...an *in situ* project exists as a *rendez-vous* between an artist, a place and their mutual encounter expressed on one side by the fascination that a specific place exercises on the artist, and on the other side by the intervention, reinvention and often transformation of that place by the artist.

The relationship between Buren’s *opus* and context started very early, when, as a young artist just out from L’Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, he would disseminate the streets of Paris with his signs illustrating two coloured stripes (the 8.7 cm width striped pattern found in a flea market). Neither the police’s summons, nor several overnight stays in prison stopped him from doing that again and again until his black and white stripes, which he named *l’état zero de la peinture* (a reference to Kazimir Malevich, 1879-1935), became his signature. A cold, intellectual, non-illusionistic signature which challenged the then emerging advertising culture. “No more images!”- was crying the proliferation of Buren’s stripes, “rather, a two colours geometric pattern”.

Few years later, in 1971 when invited to produce a work for the VI International Exhibition at the Guggenheim in N.Y, his relationship with architecture kicked off. In response to the building, Buren created a gigantic canvas (20 meters high and 10 meters large) meant to fall in the middle of the spiral staircase from the top of the dome to the first floor. Unfortunately, due to the opposition of Donald Judd (1928-1994) and Dan Flavin (1933-1996) who were also participating artist, Buren’s canvas was never exhibited, but the artist had found his own path to the *In situ* works. Since then, his

¹ Plus d’un sera séduit par la tentation de prendre une “idée” quelconque, d’en faire de l’art et de l’appeler “concept”. (...) Exposer un concept est pour le moins faire un contresens fondamental dès le départ, qui peut, si l’on n’y prend garde, nous entraîner dans une succession de raisonnements faux. Exposer un “concept”, ou entendre le mot concept comme art, revient à mettre au niveau de l’objet le concept lui-même. Exposer un “concept” revient à dire qu’il s’agit alors d’un “concept-objet”, ce qui est aberrant.

Let us merely observe that it seems to us that to exhibit a concept is, at the very least, a fundamental misconception right from the start, and one which can, if one doesn’t take care, involve us in a succession of false arguments. To exhibit a “concept” or to use the word “concept” to signify art, gives us the same results as putting the concept itself on the same level with the object. This would be to suggest that we must think in terms of a “concept-object”; which would be aberration. From: *Mise En Garde*, Daniel Buren, 1969

installations have occupied and transformed the spaces of thousands of museums and dialogued with them in many different ways.

For Madre in Naples, the artist has created: *Axer/Désaxer* #2 and *Comme un jeu d'enfants* #1. Both realised in 2015 for the ground floor areas of the building, these works respond to the museum's historical stratifications (its foundations date back to the 13th century and its current shape is the result of a 19th century refurbishment) while adjusting to its features. The shortage of light for instance is one of these features and one of Buren's most loved and used visual tools.

The atrium, where *Axer/Désaxer* #2 is placed is an area with no openings with the exception of the main front door, where the installation starts. This 19th century, spectacularly high *Portone* has been repainted in yellow; its fringed plastic curtain equally painted in yellow and white as a sort of prelude to the leitmotif of the 8.7 cm width black and white striped path laid on the floor to take the visitors on a journey into the atrium's reinvention.

The decision to elect the main entrance as the beginning of the work is not accidental considering that Madre commissioned Buren's works to celebrate its relationship with the community. A festive, neighbourhood atmosphere welcomes the visitors from the main door and takes them to its internal spaces which have been dressed up for the occasion. A cheerful architectural pavilion made of *DIBOND*® panels of bright colours replaces the original walls in grey and white stucco. An explosion of: orange, lemon yellow and azure accentuate the atrium's high relief architectural decorations: the strips, the demi-lunes, the squares, while a whole side of the pavilion is covered in glass.

*"I use mirror glass either to show the viewer something that is behind him or to make something disappear, with the mirror reflecting what's around it; or to transform a space. Sometimes, I use mirror glass to contradict the architecture when is completely closed by breaking up its walls".*²

Which is what happens in the atrium of the Madre where the mirror glass, with its effects of watery reflections and neon lights, distorts the linear architecture, breaking its walls with a new space. This presents a whole new dimension where the rigid division created by the black and white stripes on the floor meets the fluidity of the bright colours on the left wall, and the enlarged, or narrowed, elongated or shortened figures of the visitors on the right.

Mesmerized and captured by their own deformed images frozen in a setting which looks as unreal, flashy and extravagant as elaborately thought through from an engineering point of view, the visitors are also made aware of the transformation which occurs around them, the whole space magically moving as if rotating towards a new axis, which is rectilinear in relation to the street outside. The previous diagonal and therefore marginal geometric relation between the museum's entrance and the street outside, is finally replaced by a straight and persuasive invite to come in.

A climate of playfulness is restaged in *Comme un jeu d'enfants* #1 which occupies the spacious, square room behind the atrium. This installation made by assembling some one hundred modules of geometric forms is inspired by the solids of the German pedagogue Friedrich Wilhelm August Fröbel (1787-1852); its wooden spheres, cubes and cylinders conveying a childlike sense of creativity mixed with experimentation and- strangely

² Daniel Buren in "Interview with Daniel Buren" by Christophe Gallois. *Travaux in situ* 2010-2011. Centre Pompidou Metz, 2011

enough- potential wilderness. Again, there is some tension between the rational and the irrational and Reality (the way we know it) is questioned. Which reality do we know? Which one do we live?

The volumes are arranged in intersecting lines with sharp precision (a reference to the spatial order of the building with its previous lives as a convent, a bank, a state administration site) yet, while walking through the coloured arches, the towers, the square bases and triangular pediments, one is also subtly reminded of the sudden turns life reserves us starting from a Kindergarten. The unpredictable impulses, Chaos lurking behind a prescribed path. There was a time when the chaos was not that scary and falls were lived through with no fear, while running through the prescribed paths, attempting (already desperately?) to reunite with a mythical past, free from geometry and constraints.

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