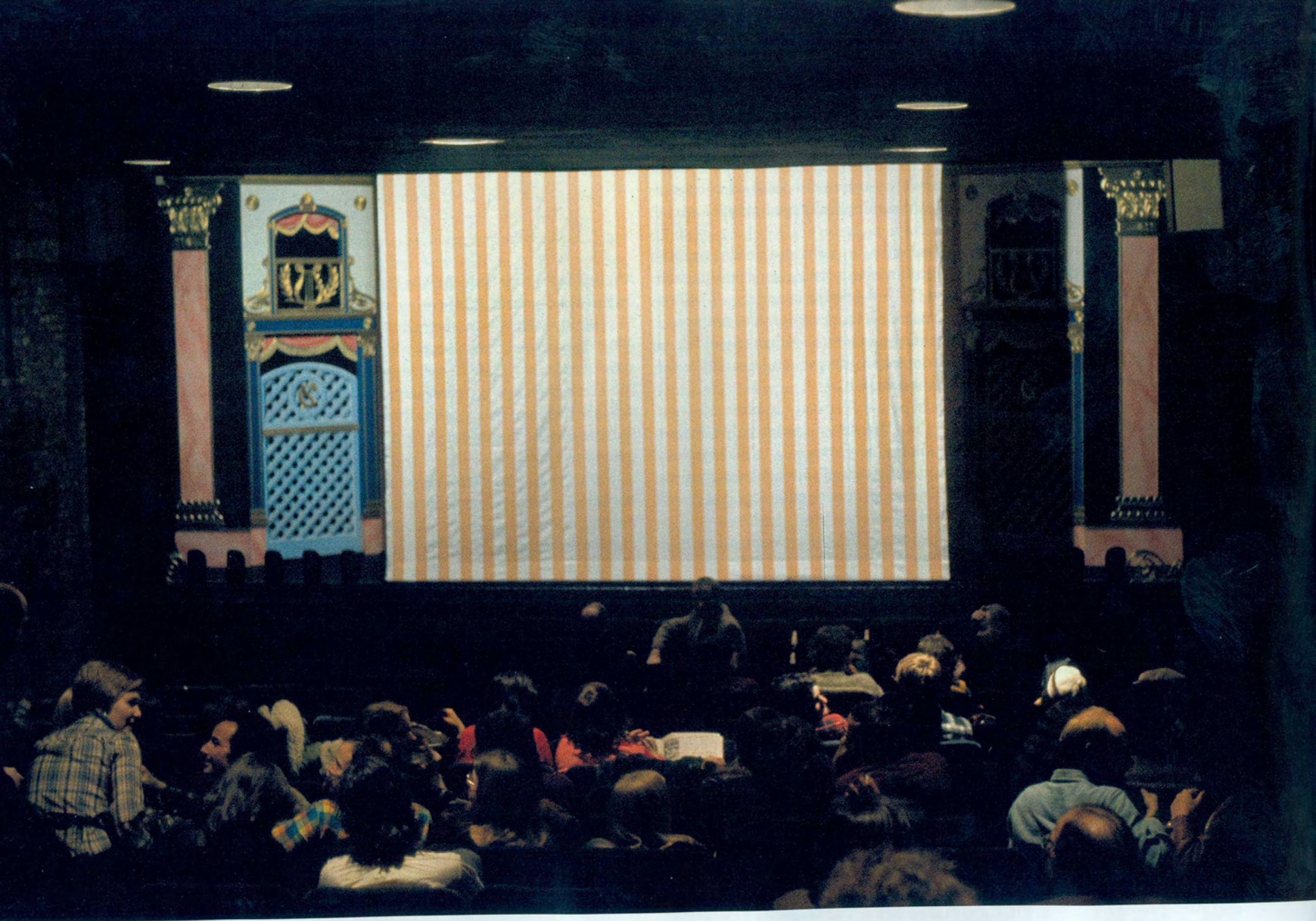




Daniel Buren, *Act III*, work in situ, 1973. Documentary photograph, New Theater, New York, January 1973.

The Group That Was (Not) One: Daniel Buren and BMPT

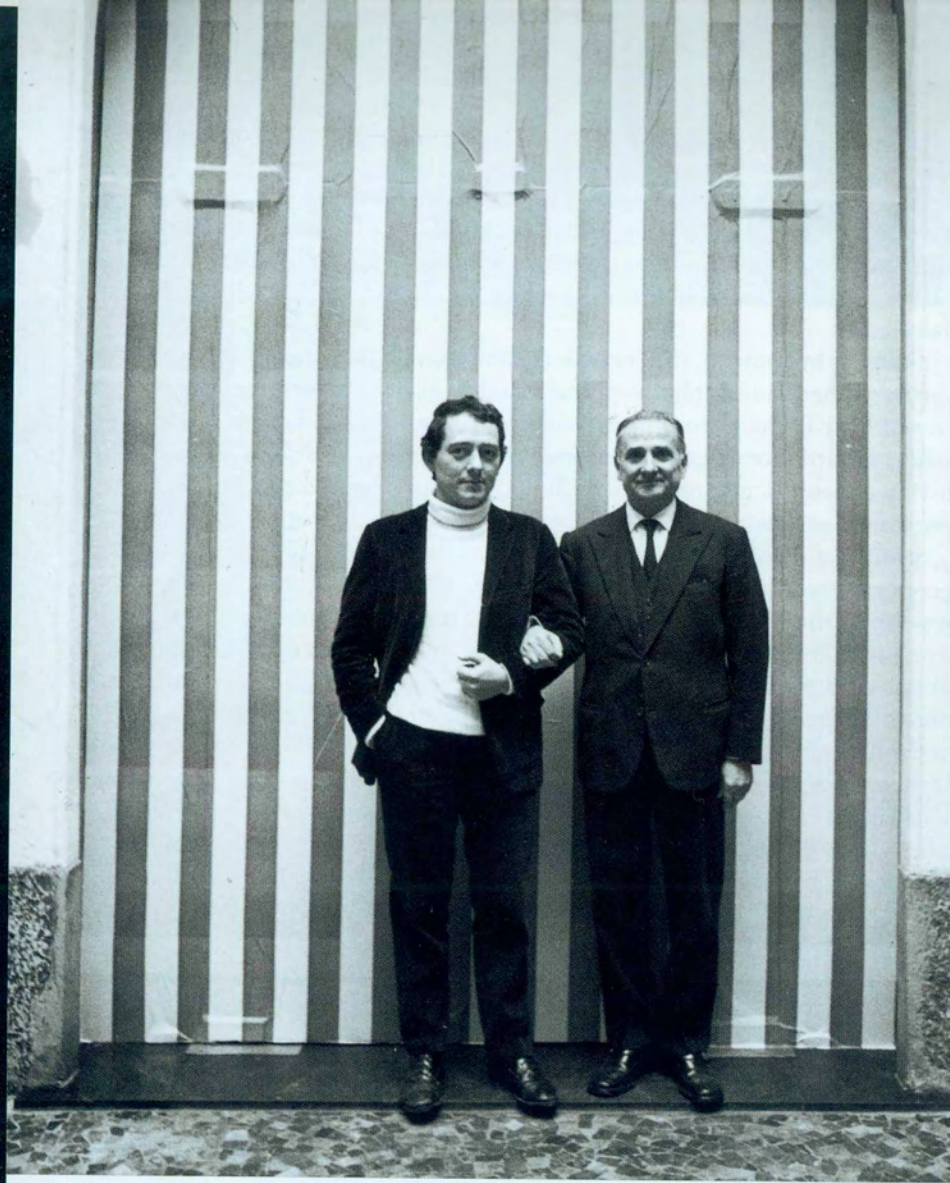
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IT IS NOT KNOWN whether Guy Debord ever commented on the activities of Daniel Buren and his companions Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni when, working collectively in 1966 and 1967 under their surnames only, they staged the most radical critique of the neo-avant-garde on the road to spectacularization.* Had he done so, he would no doubt have been the first to observe in relation to their practice something he had recognized ten years earlier in his damning commentary on the work of Yves Klein—that, under the totalizing conditions of capitalist consumption, spectacle and radical (neo-) avant-garde gestures were no longer mutually exclusive but rather increasingly complemented and reinforced each other. Buren, for his part, was well versed in the history and strategies of the Lettrist and Situationist internationals, rewarding his early interest in the theory of spectacle and *détournement* later with the acquisition of one of the most comprehensive collections of Situationist texts and documents, and even adorning the entrance to his living room with Debord and Asger Jorn's collaborative painting calling for the immediate abolition of alienated labor.

It is known, by contrast, that neither Roland Barthes nor Michel Foucault (the artist's other, hidden philosophical Penates) ever paid any attention to Buren and BMPT. The philosophers wrote at that time on artists such as Jean Degottex, Gérard Fromanger, and eventually Cy Twombly and Andy Warhol, while Buren was articulating the most ambitious and epistemologically challenging artistic proposition to emerge from Paris that decade, if not in the post-war period as a whole. That fact points, of course, first of all to a lack of reciprocity between philosophers and theorizing artists in Paris, since Barthes's essays—from those collected in *Mythologies* (1957) to "The Death of the Author" (1967)—were foundational for Buren's elaboration of the written apparatus with which he buttressed his work, beginning in 1970 with the publication of *Limites Critiques* (Critical Limits), the central text for all subsequent understanding of the formation of "institutional critique."

At the time of BMPT's first public performance, on January 3, 1967, which consisted in the four artists fabricating canvases in public, each with the artist's own individual painterly logo, throughout the opening day of the Eighteenth Salon de la Jeune Peinture, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, their systematic staging of manifest contradictions was philosophically hard to handle. It fused a Marxist-Debordian critique of the institutions of art with a poststructuralist critique of signification/representation and authorial identity. In hindsight, it is even harder to tell whether BMPT's contradictions were dialectical devices to entice baffled spectators or intrinsic to the collective's ambitious program. One conflict was the claim that BMPT had never been a group, as Buren has insisted for years afterward (according to him, it was the critic Otto Hahn who got it all wrong by homogenizing the individuals into a false group identity). Another provocation by denial was staged during the second public performance of BMPT, also on that January 3. After producing their work in situ for eight hours during the Salon de la Jeune Peinture under a banner bearing their surnames in large print, at 6 PM the artists tacked up a second banner trumpeting that Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, and Toroni "do not exhibit." And a third contradiction, inherited from Dan Flavin and the Minimalists, BMPT's disavowed confreres in New York, was the claim that their design idioms were programmatically exchangeable, anonymously produced, and had no proprietary affiliation with any particular artist in the group. Even more *faux choc*, the work could be repeated by anybody anytime. But, in fact, with one exception—a show Buren, Mosset, and Toroni mounted at Galerie J in Paris in

* Buren conceived of the collaboration in September 1966; Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni's first appearance was on December 25, 1966 (in the form of a letter sent to museums, galleries, magazines, etc.). The last time all four members of the group exhibited together was in September–October 1967, at the Biennale de Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.



It will be one of the questions for our decade to ponder why the spaces and practices of contestation and critique that Buren (and Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, et al.) opened at the end of the '60s were—or so it seems now, at least—irredeemably hijacked by corporate clowns designing handbags.

December 1967—Buren never painted Toroni's signature imprints of a no. 50 brush repeated at regular intervals of thirty centimeters, let alone entered the vicious circles of Mosset's single-minded, or single-handed, idea. And only with a signed certificate of authenticity could buyers prove legal ownership of a work by Daniel Buren.

Another, equally important reason for the indifference of the philosophers was undoubtedly a certain asynchronicity of knowledge (painfully evident, for example, in Foucault's naive "breakthrough" reading of Manet in Clement Greenberg's terms in 1968). Buren synthesized the foundational—and therefore seemingly unbridgeable—chasm that had marked twentieth-century artistic production. One side of that chasm was coded by Buren as the "good" father, defined by the positivist self-reflexivity of modernism that had based its interrogations on an increasingly reductive empiricist analysis of perceptual experience. This lineage, Buren claimed, had originated with Cézanne and led through Mondrian, Barnett Newman, and Frank Stella right up to himself. On the other side of the chasm was Marcel Duchamp and his readymade. These were coded by Buren as the negative father image and the bad object, leading him to write one of the most stringent critiques of the Duchampian enterprise (disavowing, of course, his deep indebtedness). After all, it had been the readymade that had focused first on the hidden legitimizing powers of institutional and discursive frames. Buren's almost compulsive insistence on demarcating his ready-made awning material as "painting" by adding a handpainted band of white acrylic on the outermost stripes of each unit was thus more than merely a phobic defense against the revelation that all reductivist canvases confront when crossing the threshold into objecthood—that they have themselves become a readymade, as Greenberg's famous remark about the "tacked-up canvas" had prognosticated.

In the space between the positivist claims for empiricist modernism and the collective conditions of object production, there was no longer any room for authorial identity. That annihilation had been practiced (after Duchamp) most saliently by Warhol, before it was preached by Barthes. It is not accidental, however surprising, that a literal citation of Warhol's strategies would appear at the center of BMPT's *Manifestation No. 4* in the Fifth Biennale de Paris, at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in September 1967. Here, four identically sized square canvases (each defined by the individual logo of one of the nonauthors) were accompanied by a large, billboard-type construction. In classic Parisian '60s language, it announced a "*manif*" (short for *manifestation*) over serialized mug shots of the artists identified by their last names, reverberating with Warhol's "Thirteen Most Wanted Men," 1964, which had been exhibited by Ileana Sonnabend in her Paris gallery earlier in 1967 (and of course, it echoed once again Duchamp's 1923 portrait of the artist as a criminal and fraud in a wanted poster that listed among his pseudonyms Hooke, Lyon, and Cinquer).

When Buren stepped out on his own in 1968 and engaged professional

sandwich men to carry his striped signs in front of the Palais de Tokyo, these contradictions took on an almost programmatic challenge: Had we arrived at the point where artistic practice has to mimic the mass-cultural forms of advertising (and a strangely obsolete and primitive version at that, one literally subjecting its carriers) if it is to remain at all visible in whatever residual (or mythical) public spaces are left to us? At what precise historical moment will artistic practice have declined to such an extent as to fully fuse with the very mechanisms of ideological suture that it supposedly critiques? That decline was at first hesitantly, and then enthusiastically, embraced by Buren in his transition from conceiving spatial structures as analytical and phenomenological situations for the viewer's self-determination to thinking instead of spatial experience as an art consumer's celebratory disco design.

Toroni, by contrast, remained obstinately, almost idiotically loyal to modernist pictorial mark making. And the self-reflexive positivist signal of a merely iterative facture acquired, in contrast to Buren's ever-expanding empire of decoration, a strangely resistant dimension. As though the very materialist trace of the serialized and regularized deposit of pigment, in its seeming inanity, was more impervious to fetishization and spectacularization, and as if its anonymous intimacy granted its viewers a last gasp of what painting might have had to offer.

It will be one of the questions for our decade to ponder why the spaces and practices of contestation and critique that Buren (and Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, et al.) opened at the end of the '60s were—or so it seems now, at least—irredeemably hijacked by corporate clowns designing handbags. One partial answer to that question would have to recognize that it takes a modicum of delusion to adhere to the concept of oppositionality within cultural practices. Another partial answer would be that critical opposition is ultimately, perhaps, less efficiently erased by ideological and social repression than by cynical affirmation.

That affirmation has become the default identity of a new generation's chosen artists (chosen by culture-industry capital), and the curators and critics who devote themselves breathlessly to commodification's colonizing impulses have made the world of artistic production one of the most glamorous and profitable branches of the culture industry. As Broodthaers stated in one of his "Open Letters" (dated June 27, 1968), "correcting" a letter he had published on the occasion of Valerie Solanas's attempt on Warhol's life: "In my letter of June 7, '68, it should not read: 'You don't have to feel that you sold out before having been bought.' Rather, it should read: 'You don't have to feel that you sold out after having been bought.' This is only to content everybody's ass and everybody's father. My friends, who is Warhol?" □