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# Preliminary Notes on the Pragmatic of Works: Daniel Buren

JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD

translated by THOMAS REPENSEK

Any work may be read, and there are many ways to read a work. This does not imply that all possible readings may be applied to every work, nor that every reading may be applied to all works. Neither does it mean that the act of interpretation has lost its value. Rather it announces the disintegration of critical typologies, a breakdown in the conventions that separate kinds of interpretation. As the contemporary arts can no longer be organized and identified by Aristotelian categories, so the interpretations brought to bear on them can no longer be distributed among the various types of discourse which have been used to speak in the past. Each of these types has come to be seen not only as a discipline but also as a deficiency: art history, art criticism, aesthetics, the philosophy of art, not to exclude from the field our *homines novi*: the politician of the Left, the semiotician, the psychoanalyst.

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At the same time it does not necessarily follow that because anything may be read and reading may be anything, the work escapes designation, the benefaction of meaning; rather, designation is an inevitable result of reading, obtained through a relentlessly imaginative elaboration and use of letters, words, and syntactical structures. Consider the sophistication of Starobinski's so-called psychoanalytic reading of *Oedipus Rex* with *Hamlet*, or the burgeoning Marxism of Adorno's combination of Schönberg and Stravinsky! Perhaps Adorno didn't know his Freud, nor Starobinski his Marx (nor his Adorno). But we can no longer expect a single view of a collection of works to reveal one complete and exclusive truth. Traditionally the goal of art criticism and theoretical writing in general, this ideal is unable to survive (if it ever truly existed) the dissolution by contemporary artistic practice of the principle of the proper point of view (or audition).

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The arts cannot claim a unified field: not only do they speak numerous languages, but within each language different games are played. Call language all

systems of signs transmitted by means of a specific medium and support: pigment on a two-dimensional surface, light falling on an object, the impression of photons on film sensitive to their movement. While within such a language many "sentences" may be generated, it is possible to group these "sentences" according to categories corresponding to Wittgenstein's language games.

But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?—There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols," "words," "sentences." And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a *rough picture* of this from the changes in mathematics.)<sup>1</sup>

The languages of art may be distinguished according to their material (taken in the immediate sense of medium and support). In a given language, painting for example, many games are possible. If we limit ourselves to the intelligible categories proposed by Wittgenstein for language games, we may imagine

a painting that commands  
 a painting that tells a story  
 a painting that defines  
 a painting that questions and answers  
 a painting that is its own adornment  
 a painting that is its own painting  
 a painting that quotes.

But such a list remains subordinate to the linguistic model. There is no reason whatsoever that an example drawn from language should become a paradigm (in the modern sense).

Reverse the situation then. If anything may be taken to exemplify the game of language, it is literature, poetry, indeed all the linguistic arts including scientific idioms—wherever experimentation takes place. What is literature? That immense laboratory of experience where language games are produced—a conspiratorial formulation against communication. Understood in this way, literature comprises the vernacular as well: to it belongs the invention of slang, argot, jargon, idiolects, "tales." Both the Butor of *Mobile* and the Guyotat of *Prostitution*—each in his own way—defy the communicability of the word.

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For every game (of language, painting, cinema . . . ) there exists a group of

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, New York, Macmillan, 1953, p. 11<sup>c</sup>.

actual or possible effects which constitutes its *pragmatic*. For example, the intradiegetic and homodiegetic properties of the narrative apparatus of Books VIII through XII of the *Odyssey* cannot be described without an analysis of the displacements effected in the position of the narrators (Odysseus, Homer), the audience (the Phaeacians, Homer's audience to which we as readers belong), and the diegesis (what happens to Odysseus among the Phaeacians according to Homer, what happens to Odysseus according to Odysseus before his arrival among the Phaeacians).

An artful game requires not only dismantling the narrative apparatus but also understanding its effect. The pragmatic will provide our terms of analysis.

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Interpretation itself should be reconsidered in this light: whatever its content, it is one effect of a game of visible forms. One result of cinema and contemporary painting is that they give rise to speech, elicit it about themselves. Yet this effect does not necessarily apply universally. If, for example, we were to subscribe to Leroi-Gourhan's theory that figures in paleolithic cave paintings are pictographs, plastic *designata* of gestures accompanying a narrative, then we must not see them as copies or representations of absent objects. The narratives are not about the images themselves, but what they refer to; the figures do not give rise to interpretation, they merely illustrate a story.

If interpretation is an effect of the work, and if the interpretation is itself a work, the theory that guides interpretation may be seen as a filter, a transforming agent or operative placed between the work and its effect, that is, between the interpreted work and the interpretation. This agent has the obvious effect of transforming the receiver of the work of art into the sender of the interpretation of that work. It also transforms the sentence which constitutes the work into a quote, the image of the work within the sentence constituted by the commentary.

These two results are so elementary that they seem to be inevitable no matter what theory may be at stake in the interpretation, that is, whatever meaning may be promoted by a particular reading. They must exist, although their specific nature may vary. They depend on the operational apparatus (theory) inserted between the work and its interpretation, allowing passage from the plastic work to the discursive work which interprets the former. Interpretation here becomes a language game that functions in relation to a plastic game; it is the nature of this correlation that articulates the question, what do we do when we speak *about* a work? We do not assign meaning to the work; we transform it.

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Since interpretation is a pragmatic effect, the work, by being reduced to its own effect, may be said to be its own interpretation. The work ought perhaps to be

present at least as the absence to which the interpretation refers. But it is in fact only the interpretation that is present (and not only for Art & Language). Presenting the work and presenting the effect of the work, however, are not the same thing. In the presentation of the effect of the work, the recipient receives not the message, but the reception of the message through the intermediary of a primary recipient. Is it not the initial reception that is at issue here? In this case, the work can be said to have no efficacy in and of itself, but through its effect: the interpretation which finally replaces it. This efficacy to the second power is such that the recipient himself becomes a metarecipient, and the pragmatic of the work a metapragmatic.

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Adorno repeatedly states that modern art was made possible by the decline of metaphysics: Schönberg and Beckett in Hegel's vacant succession. Is the incorporation of the pragmatic of the work into the work itself a result of this crisis of metaphysics? The pragmatic escapes signification if it is true that it concerns the meaning that a sentence may lose when it is described, still remaining intact by virtue of its signification. This aspect of meaning determines that I stand up when someone says to me "Stand up"; yet disappears when I read the sentence "He said, 'Stand up'"; or, what amounts to the same thing, when I assume that the command was not addressed to me. Does art, by giving pride of place to its pragmatic, reveal how little it is concerned with what a work means? In any case it declares its interest in those situations which call forth the efficacy of the work.

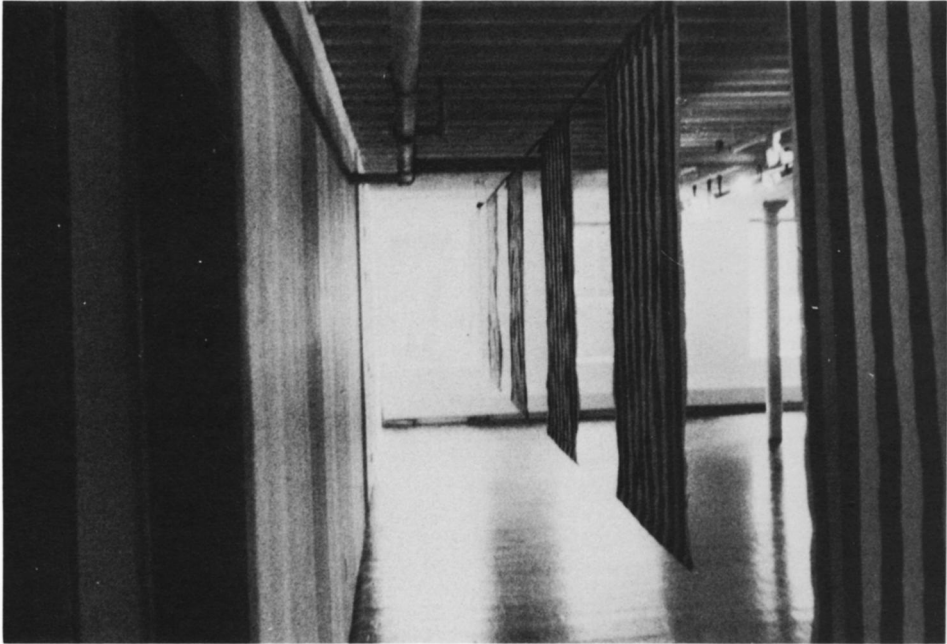
Daniel Buren uses the same material in all his works: canvas or paper with alternating colored and white vertical stripes of equal width. It is at the periphery, however, that Buren carries on his experimentation with the pragmatic condition of the work: on the reverse side of the canvas, its material and moral supports, the artistic confines of the museum and gallery, and what Buren calls the cultural limits. Each of his works from the last ten years is an attempt to reveal a pragmatic moment in the efficacy of the work. By pragmatic moment I mean operational devices such as the following:

*figure/ground*: the same striped paper taken as a ground for other works and/or as the work itself (*Documenta 5*, Kassel, June-October 1972);

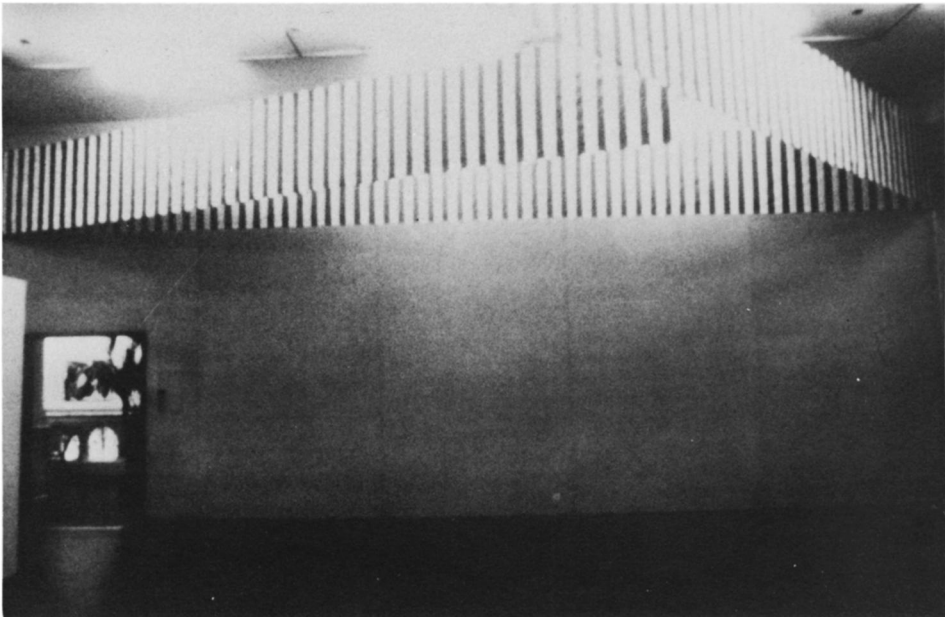
*inside/outside*: the part of a roll of striped canvas hung indoors taken as the work; the part extended out a window and suspended across a neighboring street taken as an advertising or indeterminate sign (New York, October 1973);

*present/absent*: the same piece of striped cloth placed in exactly the same position relative to the North Pole in three different museums (Otterlo, Amsterdam, Eindhoven, May-June 1976).

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*Daniel Buren. Within and Beyond the Frame. 1973.  
(Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren.)*



*Daniel Buren, Fragment of Ici, Désormais, Ailleurs.  
1976. (Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren.)*



We would be mistaken to assume that the metapragmatic function of contemporary works of art is the critique of ideological superstructures, the calling into question of institutions, and other critical strategies of that order. Buren, who once held such a position, concludes one of his recent texts as follows:

The work in progress has the ambition, not of fitting in more or less adequately with the game, nor even of contradicting it, but of abolishing its rules by playing with them, and playing another game, on another or the same ground, as a dissident.<sup>2</sup>

The function of the work of art, therefore, is not reconciliation, enlightenment, or veracity, but the invention of another language game, another artifice.

In a certain sense every work, insofar as it is placed within an artistic context, is dogmatic: it teaches how to see and to understand a work of art. In this sense, the museum and the gallery are the new Academy prescribing the discourse of knowledge. Here the metapragmatic functions as a didactic. In Buren's work, however, the paradox of a nondogmatic art is assumed.

Buren uses the metapragmatic in another way. His art is the exposition of the hidden pragmatic of art, veiled by the context of exposition. But since the pragmatic is covered over, almost invisible, its exposition must be so as well. "Any work attempting so ambitious an undertaking," he writes calmly in the text cited above, "obviously doesn't get seen or if it does, it is attacked, sometimes censored, always disavowed, which is normal under the circumstances."<sup>3</sup> For Buren, support, context, and ideology are all the more emphatic when they are not directly perceived; and the same may be said of their exposition. We are not dealing here with education but with the refinement of the strategies that give efficacy to a work of art. But to what purpose if not to be seen? What is the pragmatic of this metapragmatic work?

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In a group exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, January 8 to February 3, 1974, eight of Buren's blue-and-white striped canvases, each measuring two and one-half by five meters, were hung horizontally beneath the glass roof of three connecting halls of the museum. Buren's canvases remained in place until June 1975 without alteration, except for two periods of one month each when they were taken down. From July 1975 to June 1977 occurred a second "developmental" phase, during which the canvases were modified and rearranged in various ways. Finally, on September 6, 1977, for two hours, from 6 to 8 PM, the canvases were reexhibited in their original arrangement, this time unaccompanied by the

2. Daniel Buren, *Reboundings*, trans. Philippe Hunt, Brussels, Daled & Gevaert, 1977, p. 73.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

work of any other artist. In all, a forty-four-month experiment, some three and a half years.

The outcome was a booklet produced by Buren entitled *PH Opera* (*PH = peinture horizontale*), bound in red, in which all the stages of the work (26 + 1) are described. Photographs, diagrams, and graphs illustrate the text which is preceded with an introduction by the Director General of the Société des Expositions, K.J. Geirland. Inserted separately on green paper chosen to complement the color of the cover is a commentary by Birgit Pelzer.

Although the work merits detailed analysis, the following points may be noted provisionally:

1. Buren shapes the medium: dyes and paints were used in the alterations effected in the second and following stages.
2. Buren shapes the support: the canvas was hung not vertically but horizontally like a tent.
3. Buren shapes the subject: although there was no visible subject, the subject is logically conceivable—the visibility of the painted work. The subject is a question that bears on the entire pragmatic.
4. Buren shapes the space: the museum (in other instances, the gallery) is part of the pragmatic of the visibility of the work.
5. Buren shapes the time of exposition: the duration of the exposition properly speaking, that is, the reexposition, was short (two hours), that of the unperceived exposition immeasurably long. From experience we know that the time of exposition forms a part of the cultural limits of vision. It may be necessary to conceive of various temporal axes: the duration of the event, its periodicity, its order.

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*Work* is to be understood here as a set of strategies brought to bear on an aesthetic. This is not a transcendental aesthetic. Is it anti-ideological then? I am afraid that the word, formerly used by Buren, is a comfortable reversion to the opposition between ideology and criticism. By locating the problem in the confines of the senses, Buren's work does not take issue with artistic theory, but with the sensible presence of the work of art, and for this reason his is an aesthetic in the Kantian sense, occurring *before* an analytic or dialectic. In like manner his work is not critical in the sense of Brecht, Adorno, Marx, or even Kant.

Buren's work is not Marxist since Marxist critical theory and practice oppose the irrational surface of things with an underlying rationality attempting to emerge. I assume that today Buren, like his contemporaries worthy of the name, would want to know just what this rationality of the visible is that is being stifled by its perceptual framework (pigment, frame, support, exhibition space, etc.) and from which it is attempting to free itself. For Buren there is no primary view in a hierarchy of vision. Nor does he recognize a priori categories of space and time.

Today's cinematic spatiotemporal vision—binocular, intermittent, serial—differs radically from the optical order represented by Alberti and Dürer: we could hardly allow ourselves to see in a Cézanne (I am thinking of Merleau-Ponty), or a Buren, the transcendental givens of vision.

What is lacking today is a concept of nature that would make possible the formation of an aesthetic, and yet the need for an aesthetic is felt, an aesthetic not grounded in a reality of the senses.

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*Painting game* and *language game* are only analogous terms. This does not mean that painting speaks nor that language chromatizes. Yet it does suggest that artists today are engaged not in the deconstruction of significations but in extending the limits of sense perception: making visible (or audible) what now goes unobserved, through the alteration of sense data, perception itself. The same question may be asked of sense perception that is asked of language: when may we say that it is complete?

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By incorporating its pragmatic, even producing it, the work reveals how it says something, or how it is made to say something. The only message the work must convey is how it conveys its message. Of course this metamessage in turn may become the object of devotion, belief: a new faith in processed information, renewed hope in communication.

A work of art may perhaps be called *bad* whenever it elicits belief; then it is not of its time. Even if it incorporates its pragmatic, it remains merely amusing. It does not communicate how to communicate but the inverse: how to believe in communication. The work says, "You will not understand me"; or perhaps only, "It will take time to understand me"—an aspect of the alteration that it necessarily imposes on temporal form.