

Daniel Buren created eight film works using 8 mm film in 1969 (1) (Fig.1). In one film, typed-up texts continuously run through the screen along with the reading voice. A very brief film shows a person taking an I.D. photo with an automatic camera on the street. Another film chronologically shows famous works in art history, starting with the Lascaux Murals, with narration. Another film is shot in a bus running through a city. Another shows playing cards, with printed faces of famous artists, being placed side by side. These films have unrelated contents and the longest one lasts only several minutes. There is a moment in one film where a man walks by and sees a bottle dryer in the yard and says, "What a magnificent Duchamp you have!" a comical moment using 'ready-made' as a motif. It does not particularly appear to be Buren's work. These films do not have a finished look, however, they inspire our imagination for the artist's excitement to have acquired a new medium for moving images, which present the flow of time. Watching these films, I came to think that it might be possible to reframe Buren's work in terms of "time," instead of "space." In this essay, I would like to discuss his artworks through the framework of "time," using their relations to media, such as television, newspapers, and posters.

In April 1968, Buren carried out a performance of placing his green and white striped posters at approximately two hundred sites in Paris, without any official permission (Fig. 2). This performance was not commissioned by any museum or art gallery. It is considered to be "public" work as it was not a project in a museum or a gallery for "closed exclusive audience", but was carried out on the street, which is open to the public. However, is that true? In 1969, when Buren once again put up his

posters in Paris, this time with gallery owner Seth Siegelau, he limited the period to July to September. However, since Buren's posters covered other posters without permission, they always were at risk of being removed and/or covered by other posters immediately after they were placed. Buren wrote as follows: "It will be possible to see my work for three months, night and day, by anyone, regardless of status. The work itself is nothing special. It gradually disappears by being replaced, by rips and tears, by graffiti and bad weather, etc..." (2) Posters on the streets are continuously covered by new posters, and it is not possible to know when they were covered. As Buren's striped posters did not have any purpose of providing information, they always had a risk of being covered by other posters immediately after being placed. Likewise, because there was no informative purpose, Buren's posters were not limited to certain periods; therefore, they may have stayed on the same walls for a long time. No one could control the period of time for the posters to remain on the street walls. The stripes lived beyond the systems of museums and galleries, and lost the time frames of the exhibition periods. They were ultimately cast to the flow of time.

On the other hand, Buren thought of ways to inform others of his performance of putting up the posters on the street. In 1968, he anonymously mailed a green and white striped piece of paper in an envelope to various people in the art world. In 1969, he advertised the addresses of places where the posters could be seen in the bottom of the column *Notre Temps* (Fig.3), in *Les Lettres Françaises*, a widely distributed weekly paper in France. However, the description was limited to "red and white stripes." The name of the artist and the gallery were not in any way mentioned. Just as the striped posters did not reveal the artist, the advertisement kept its anonymity. Although Buren says that "it is possible to see my work by anyone," his intention is not to create open, public art. In his letter to Siegelau, Buren wrote the reason why he chose *Les Lettres Françaises*: that it was widely

available to anyone and the advertisement cost was low (3). However, its wide availability was not for making the artwork open to the public, but for taking advantage of its large distribution in order to erase his identity and to hide away. This was his way to enhance the criminal nature of his "illegal act" of covering up other posters.

Therefore, putting up striped posters on the street was not a "public" act, even when they were placed in the sites that would attract attention or when Buren chose the most widely distributed newspapers. As it was unpredictable how long the posters would be maintained in the sites and the anonymity of the work was enhanced, the project rather started to form an exclusive community of audience. When people read the advertisement in the newspaper, they would not know who placed it. When some of them would actually go to the advertised sites, the posters might well have been already gone. Therefore, the people who knew about Buren's work and saw the posters would have certain superior feelings of complicity to those who couldn't. Certain people who could see these works in the "public" site, on the street would form an exclusive group.

Publication is a medium to resist such an idea of exclusive communal solidarity and open the work to the public. Such publications not only give meaning to momentary events by showing them in photographs, but also resist the tie flow by maintaining the images, which would otherwise disappear, by keeping the records in libraries. If one gets to know the address where the posters are placed through the newspaper advertisement and later goes to the site, the poster would be probably gone by then. However, there is very little chance that all the printed copies in publications would be removed from all the existing libraries. Publication's reproductive nature of wide distribution significantly contributes to its survival in time. If one library discards the publications or makes them unavailable to the public, there is always the possibility that another library will continue to keep the publication available to the public. Through

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securing the availability of the publication, the closed community of people who saw the work would open up to the public at large.

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However, the people who happen to see the striped posters on the streets and the people who saw these aforementioned publications still remain completely divided. This division was even planned by the artist. So, is it possible to bridge the division between the public nature of the posters subject to the actual flow of time and the public nature of the publication, which freezes time? Let us see the possibility, in another work by Buren, of applying the repetition of time as a motif. In January 1969, the following year from the time Buren had put up the striped posters on the streets of Paris, he had a solo exhibition at Wide White Space Gallery in Antwerp. A horizontal continuation of green and white striped posters were put on the wall, with the bases being approximately 20 cm above the floor of the gallery. They continued into the Victor Horta style art nouveau entrance door, bending onto the outside wall. What was different in the works in Antwerp from the posters placed on the streets was that the posters in the gallery were given the framework of time, the exhibition period, and maintained in the flow of time. Although the posters were physically discarded after the exhibition period, if any of them were damaged during the exhibition period, they were presumed to be reconstructed. In this sense, even the posters that were placed on the street outside of the gallery space were inside of the system of the museum/gallery.

Ever since then, Buren's solo exhibition was held once a year, for five consecutive years, at the same gallery: May 1971, June 1972, June 1973, March-April, 1974. Red stripes were exhibited at the second exhibition. Blue stripes were exhibited at the third exhibition. The color of stripes was changed but the location and the

way the posters were placed remained almost the same. It seemed that in the first exhibition, the installation was made out of Buren's spatial interest in continuation from the inside of the gallery to the outside on the street. However, since the second exhibition, his main interest became repetition and the differences from the previous exhibitions. In order to understand this aspect, the exhibitions from the past have to be referred as a whole, instead of separately viewing each exhibition. The photographic records of the exhibition were separately shown in a book published in 1988(4), chronologically showing Buren's works. A large encyclopedia-style catalogue(5) published for the retrospective at Centre Georges Pompidou in 2002, showed photographs of exhibitions taken from the same angles just like successions of moving picture films on a two-page spreads(Fig. 4). In a publication published in 1988, the photographs show the proper direction of exhibited posters(Fig. 5). In the catalogue from 2002, one photograph is printed from a reversed film. Having right and left reversed, the viewers perspective goes into the right side, stressing repetition beyond the framework of several years of time.

I wrote in the above text that this repetition had begun since the second exhibition. In fact, the first exhibition is given a different significance through the repetition of the exhibition after. In 1999, Buren released the work, entitled *Colors* (6) on the Internet as a project commissioned by the Ministry of Culture and Communication. This project used the materials of photographic works from the past five exhibitions including successive shows in Antwerp. People who accessed this site could choose the colors of the stripes. On the website, the colors instantly change, as if ignoring the five years of the successive exhibitions. Furthermore, the first exhibition and other exhibitions were treated equally and there was the possibility of rearranging the order. As opposed to books that have fixed orders, such right and left page, or the first and last page, or a film that has a certain flow of time, the Internet opened the possibility of

changing orders. As the second exhibitions and after were created in relation to the colors of the first exhibition, the meanings of the first exhibition were influenced and were presented with ongoing equal significance to the following exhibitions.

Another important factor is that this interchange could be eternally continued. Although the fifth exhibition became the last one (because the gallery moved to another location) the Antwerp solo exhibitions, in principle, had possibilities to be repeated six or seven or more times. Such repetition can be seen in the film work of the same title, *Colors*, made for DVD (7) at the time of the retrospective in 2002(Fig. 6). This sixteen-minute work, another version of the work created in 1984, shows several dozens of layered striped posters printed in various colors, shot with a fixed camera from directly above. From the top of the screen, a man's (probably Buren's) hand appears and strokes, straightens, and slightly moves the top sheet. With the rustling sound of papers, the different colored stripes appear from below. When the top paper is removed and the paper below appears on the surface, it is again moved a little, and sometimes is ripped and the color below again comes to the surface. This repetition is continued. The one long shot without editing shows the changing of the colors. Although this work is sixteen minutes long, it is a repetition of the same actions. Therefore, it is not necessary to watch it from the beginning to the end. For the same reason, in principle, it would have been possible to have made a 30-minute long film. In this sense, just as the pattern of stripes can be repeated and expanded in space, the film has an eternal nature, without any beginning or ending.

There is another work of Buren's using repetition in time. In 1982, Buren created a three-week-long piece using the background of a television news program(Fig.7). In a broadcasting studio in Dijon, France called FR3, the back wall shown behind newscasters was divided into six parts. One sixth of the wall was covered by stripes everyday. The first stripes were the same blue as

the original studio wall color and on the sixth day, the wall was completely covered by the stripes. The program was aired six days a week. At the beginning of the second week, yellow stripes began to cover one sixth of the first blue stripes of the wall. In the third (last) week, red stripes were layered on the stripes from the past week. This artwork, utilizing the individual home television screen as a site of creation, employed a program broadcast at certain times everyday. The work consisted of the continuing nature of the news program. One may argue that the viewers did not necessarily watch the same news program everyday. However, in modern times, where mass media have widely become a part of people's lifestyles, the regularity of television programs give certain punctuations to daily life schedules. News programs broadcast on a certain time schedule everyday, with or without significant news, are typical examples of such phenomenon. What ultimately makes any news program public is not its wide broadcasting area but the program schedule and the reliable repetition of the program being repeated at a certain time of the day. Buren's project ingeniously utilized this feature of news programs.

Having different spans of time, such as several seconds, a day, and a year, the film work of *Colors*, the solo exhibitions in Antwerp, and the project using the news program share a common structure: Buren changes colors in the periodically repetitious framework of certain time spans. What are significant in these works are not the spaces where the striped posters existed but "time," which repeats and continues.

Compared to the project utilizing the news program, supposing regular viewers, the five-year-long successive solo exhibitions in

Antwerp had less successive audiences. A few would look at a same poster on the street more than once. However, the people who walked the same route everyday on the way to work for five years would have gradually noticed the changes in the striped posters after a few years, even though they may not have understood their meaning at the beginning of the project. The chances of understanding the meanings of the works were given to at least these people. The repetitiousness of the work thus partially attained a public nature. This repetitiousness, however, was not an initial characteristic of the work itself. What completes the repetition is the repeatedly walked route, as well as the repetitions of the artwork and exhibitions. It is in fact a very particular situation that one would leave home for the same workplace everyday. This repetitious and continuous travel is based on a modern labor system, in which one works for a certain period of time in a certain work place, one that is apart from the home. This system resembles the mass media, which regulates one's daily schedule, in the sense that it breaks the flow of time into segments.

It must be said however that not many people commute the same route for five years. The project partially possesses a public nature in itself though repetitions, compared to the works, in which Buren put up his posters on the streets without permission. The assumed audience would have been the people who knew his artwork through publications by galleries, and the people who later would see the work in photographs. In that sense, the separation between the public nature of the space—the streets of the city—and the public nature of media publication continues to exist.

Buren's posters do not possess a public nature because they are placed in "public" sites such as streets, open to anyone. The streets are not initially "public." The posters are exposed to the actual flow of time. As they are not guaranteed to remain there, they rather lose their public nature and the exclusive community of the people who knew about the artist's work was formed. In that sense, the urban environment is a rather difficult space in which to be public. What brings public nature to the city are institutions like libraries, collective bodies that guarantee continuity.

It is also difficult to grant exhibition spaces in museums a "public" nature. Even within the same exhibition, different viewers do not see the same things. Increased video works have made this tendency more apparent than before. It is physically impossible to see all the video works if several of them are simultaneously shown. Thus, the spaces in exhibitions are also divided by various communities just like out on the street. Therefore, museums, as well as libraries, try to film, photograph, and record many works in and out of their exhibition spaces, which would otherwise become lost in time. Furthermore, some artworks among the unlimited numbers of existing artworks are physically stored in the attempt to retard decay in time. The museums defy the actual flow of time, guaranteeing the possibility of accessing the same information, in order to form a public nature in its space.

Buren has attempted to reveal the principle and the process of formation of such public nature, through defying the flow of time and using the chronological repetitiousness of media.

(Translated by Setsuko Miura)

- (1) These films were shown on Scopitone in the Yvon Lambert Gallery in Paris in May, 1969. Scopitone is a piece of equipment, similar to a jukebox with moving images, which was used in cafes in France in the 1960s.
- (2) Buren wrote an outline of his work and sent to Seth Siegelau on May 28, 1969. Reproduced in Daniel Buren, *Mot à Mot*, Centre Pompidou, Éditions Xavier Barral, Éditions de La Martinière, 2002, p. A08.
- (3) Buren wrote an letter to Seth Siegelau on May 28, 1969. Reproduced in Daniel Buren, *Mot à Mot*, Centre Pompidou, Éditions Xavier Barral, Éditions de La Martinière, 2002, p. A07.
- (4) Daniel Buren, *Photos-Souvenirs 1965-1988*, Art Édition, 1988
- (5) Daniel Buren, *Mot à Mot*, Centre Pompidou, Éditions Xavier Barral, Éditions de La Martinière, 2002
- (6) <http://www.culture.fr/entreelibre/Buren> The data has been lost.
- (7) *Works & Process Daniel Buren*, a.p.r.è.s. & les Télécréateurs, 2002, (DVD)