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The End of Painting

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *October*, Vol. 16, Art World Follies (Spring, 1981), pp. 69-86

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778375>

Accessed: 08/08/2012 16:37

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## The End of Painting\*

DOUGLAS CRIMP

*Painting has not always existed; we can determine when it began. And if its development and its moments of greatness can be drummed into our heads, can we not then also imagine its periods of decline and even its end, like any other idea?*

—Louis Aragon, “La peinture au défi”

*The work of art is so frightened of the world at large, it so needs isolation in order to exist, that any conceivable means of protection will suffice. It frames itself, withdraws under glass, barricades itself behind a bullet-proof surface, surrounds itself with a protective cordon, with instruments showing the room humidity, for even the slightest cold would be fatal. Ideally the work of art finds itself not just screened from the world, but shut up in a safe, permanently and totally sheltered from the eye. And yet isn't such an extremism, bordering on the absurd, already with us, everyday, everywhere, when the artwork exhibits itself in those safes called “Galleries,” “Museums”? Isn't it the very point of departure, the end, and the essential function of the work of art that it should be so exhibited?*

—Daniel Buren, *Reboundings*

On one of those rare occasions during the past decade when Barbara Rose abandoned the pages of *Vogue* magazine in order to say something really serious about the art of our time, she did so to vent her rage at an exhibition called *Eight*

\* This text was first presented as a lecture on February 25, 1981, at the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles under the auspices of the Foundation for Art Resources.



*Daniel Buren. From and Off the Windows. 1974.  
(Photo-souvenirs: Daniel Buren.)*

*Contemporary Artists*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 1974.<sup>1</sup> Although she found the work in the show “bland and tepid” and therefore something “normally one would overlook,” she felt compelled to speak out because this show was organized by our most prestigious institution of modern art and, for that reason alone, it became significant. But the work in the show was bland and tepid to Rose only from an aesthetic standpoint; it was more potent as politics:

For some time I have felt that the radicalism of Minimal and Conceptual art is fundamentally political, that its implicit aim is to discredit thoroughly the forms and institutions of dominant bourgeois culture. . . . Whatever the outcome of such a strategy, one thing is certain: when an institution as prestigious as the Museum of Modern Art invites sabotage, it becomes party, not to the promulgation of experimental art, but to the passive acceptance of disenchanting, demoralized artists’ aggression against art greater than their own.<sup>2</sup>

1. *Eight Contemporary Artists*, an exhibition of the work of Vito Acconci, Alighiero Boetti, Daniel Buren, Hanne Darboven, Jan Dibbets, Robert Hunter, Brice Marden, Dorothea Rockburne, organized by Jennifer Licht, at the Museum of Modern Art, October 9, 1974-January 5, 1975.

2. Barbara Rose, “Twilight of the Superstars,” *Partisan Review*, vol. XLI, no. 4 (Winter 1974), 572.



The particular saboteur who seems to have captured Rose's attention in this case is Daniel Buren, whose work for MOMA consisted of his familiar striped panels, cut to conform to the windows facing the garden, and affixed to the corridor wall facing those windows, and again to the garden wall, with leftover fragments displaced to a billboard and a gallery entrance in lower Manhattan. Impressed though she is by the cogency of Buren's arguments about the ideology imposed by the museum, Rose is nevertheless perplexed that his work should appear in one, which seems to her like having his cake and eating it too. For illumination on this matter, she turns to an interview with William Rubin, the director of MOMA's Department of Painting and Sculpture. In this interview, published in a 1974 issue of *Artforum*, Rubin explains that museums are essentially compromise institutions invented by bourgeois democracies to reconcile the large public with art conceived within the compass of elite private patronage. This age, Rubin suggests, might be coming to an end, leaving the museum essentially irrelevant to the practices of contemporary art.

Perhaps, looking back 10, 15, 30 years from now, it will appear that the modernist tradition really did come to an end within the last few years, as some critics suggest. If so, historians a century from now—whatever name they will give the period we now call modernism—will see it

beginning shortly after the middle of the 19th century and ending in the 1960s. . . . Perhaps the dividing line will be seen as between those works which essentially continue an easel painting concept that grew up associated with bourgeois democratic life and was involved with the development of private collections as well as the museum concept—between this and, let us say, Earthworks, Conceptual works and related endeavors, which want another environment (or should want it) and, perhaps, another public.<sup>3</sup>

Rose assumes that Buren is one of those artists whose work wants (or should want) another environment. After all, his text, "Function of the Museum," which she quotes, is a polemic against the confinement of artworks in museums.<sup>4</sup> But if Buren's work had not appeared in the museum, had not taken the museum as its point of departure and as its referent, the very issues Rose is pondering would never have arisen. It is fundamental to Buren's work that it act in complicity with those very institutions that it seeks to make visible as the necessary conditions of the artwork's intelligibility. That is the reason not only that his work appears in museums and galleries, but that it poses as painting. It is only thereby possible for his work to ask: What makes it possible to see a painting? What makes it possible to see a painting *as a painting*? And, to what end is painting under such conditions of its presentation?

But Buren's work runs a great risk when it poses as painting, the risk of invisibility. Since everything to which Buren's work points as being cultural, historical, is so easily taken to be natural, many people look at Buren's paintings the way they look at all paintings, vainly asking them to render up their meaning *about themselves*. Since they categorically refuse to do so, since they have, by design, no internal meaning, they simply disappear. Thus, Barbara Rose, for example, sees Buren's work at the Museum of Modern Art only as "vaguely resembling Stella's stripe paintings."<sup>5</sup> But if Rose is myopic on matters of painting, blind to those questions about painting which Buren's work poses, that is because she, like most people, still *believes* in painting.

3. William Rubin, "Talking with William Rubin: 'The Museum Concept Is Not Infinitely Expandable,'" interview by Lawrence Alloway and John Coplans, *Artforum*, vol. XIII, no. 2 (October 1974), 52.

4. Daniel Buren, "Function of the Museum," *Artforum*, vol. XII, no. 1 (September 1973), 68.

5. Rose, "Twilight," p. 569.

*One must really be engaged in order to be a painter. Once obsessed by it, one eventually gets to the point where one thinks that humanity could be changed by painting. But when that passion deserts you, there is nothing else left to do. Then it is better to stop altogether. Because basically painting is pure idiocy.*

—Gerhard Richter, in conversation with Irmeline Lebeer

As testimony to her faith in painting, Rose mounted her own exhibition of contemporary art five years after the MOMA show. Given the forward-looking, not to say oracular, title, *American Painting: The Eighties* (the exhibition was mounted in the fall of 1979), Rose's exhibition expressly intended to show the public that throughout that grim period of the sixties and seventies, when art seemed so bent on self-destruction, intent as it was on those extra-art concerns gathered together under the rubric *politics*—that throughout that period there had been “a generation of hold-outs,” survivors of “disintegrating morality, social demoralization, and lack of conviction in all authority and tradition.”<sup>6</sup> These noble survivors, painters all, were “maintaining a conviction in quality and values, a belief in art as a mode of transcendence, a worldly incarnation of the ideal.”

Now, as it happens, Rose's evidence of this keeping of the faith was extremely unconvincing, and her exhibition was an easy target for hostile criticism. Biased as her selection was toward the most hackneyed recapitulations of late modernist abstraction, the show had the unmistakable look of Tenth Street, twenty years after the fact. Given the thousands of artists currently practicing the art of painting, Rose's selection was indeed parochial; certainly there is a lot of painting around that *looks* more original. Furthermore, favoring such a narrow range of painting at a time when stylistic catholicity, pluralism, is the critical byword, Rose was virtually inviting an unfavorable response. And so, as was to be expected, she was taken to task by the various art journalists for whomever of their favorites she failed to include. Thus, Hilton Kramer's review asked: Where are the figurative painters? And John Perreault's asked: Where are the pattern painters? And Roberta Smith's asked: Where is Jennifer Bartlett? But the point is that no one asked: Why painting? To what end painting in the 1980s? And to that extent, Barbara Rose's show was a resounding success. It proved that faith in painting had indeed been fully restored. For, however much painting may have been in question in 1974, when Rubin was interviewed by *Artforum* and his museum

6. Barbara Rose, *American Painting: The Eighties*, Buffalo, Thorney-Sidney Press, 1979, n.p. All following quotations from Barbara Rose are taken from this text.

staged *Eight Contemporary Artists*, by 1979, the question clearly had been withdrawn.

The rhetoric which accompanies this resurrection of painting is almost exclusively reactionary: it reacts specifically against all those art practices of the sixties and seventies which abandoned painting and coherently placed in question the ideological supports of painting, and the ideology which painting, in turn, supports. And thus, while almost no one agreed with the choices Barbara Rose made to demonstrate painting's renaissance, almost everyone agrees with the substance, if not the details, of her rhetoric. Rose's catalogue text for *American Painting: The Eighties* is a dazzling collection of received ideas about the art of painting, and I would submit that it is only such ideas that painting today knows. Here, then, is a litany of excerpts from Rose's essay, which I think we may take as provisional answers to the question: To what end painting in the 1980s?

. . . painting [is] a transcendental, high art, a major art, and an art of universal as opposed to topical significance.

. . . only painting [is] genuinely liberal, in the sense of free.

[painting is] an expressive human activity . . . our only present hope for preserving high art.

[painting] is the product exclusively of the individual imagination rather than a mirror of the ephemeral external world of objective reality.

. . . illusion . . . is the essence of painting.

Today, the essence of painting is being redefined not as a narrow, arid and reductive anti-illusionism, but as a rich, varied capacity to birth new images into an old world.

[painting's] capacity [is] to materialize an image . . . behind the proverbial looking-glass of consciousness, where the depth of the imagination knows no bounds.

Not innovation, but originality, individuality and synthesis are the marks of quality in art today, as they always have been.

. . . art is labor, physical human labor, the labor of birth, reflected in the many images that appear as in a process of emergence, as if taking form before us.

The liberating potential of art is . . . a catharsis of the imagination.

. . . these paintings are clearly the works of rational adult humans, not a monkey, not a child, or a lunatic.

[the tradition of painting is] an inner world of stored images ranging from Altamira to Pollock.

For Rose, then, painting is a high art, a universal art, a liberal art, an art through which we can achieve transcendence and catharsis. Painting has an essence and that essence is illusion, the capacity to materialize images rendered up by the boundless human imagination. Painting is a great unbroken tradition that encompasses the entire known history of man. Painting is, above all, human.

All of this is, of course, in direct opposition to that art of the sixties and seventies, of which I take Buren's work to be exemplary, which sought to contest the myths of high art, to declare art, like all other forms of endeavor, to be contingent upon the real, historical world. Moreover this art sought to discredit the myth of man and the ideology of humanism which it supports. For indeed these are all notions that sustain the dominant bourgeois culture. They are the very hallmarks of bourgeois ideology. But if the art of the sixties and seventies sought to contest the myth of man as an eternal essence, with its open assault upon the artist as unique creator, there was another phenomenon which had initiated that assault in the arts at the very founding moments of modernism, a phenomenon from which painting has been in retreat since the mid-nineteenth century. That phenomenon is, of course, photography.

*You know exactly what I think of photography. I would like to see it make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable.*

—Marcel Duchamp, in a letter to  
Alfred Stieglitz

“From today painting is dead”: it is now nearly a century and a half since Paul Delaroche is said to have pronounced that sentence in the face of the overwhelming evidence of Daguerre's invention. But even though that death warrant has been periodically reissued throughout the era of modernism, no one seems to have been entirely willing to execute it; life on death row lingered to longevity. But during the 1960s, painting's terminal condition finally seemed impossible to ignore. The symptoms were everywhere: in the work of the painters themselves, each of whom seemed to be reiterating Reinhardt's claim that he was “just making the last paintings which anyone can make,” or to allow their paintings to be contaminated with such alien forces as photographic images; in minimal sculpture, which provided a definitive rupture with painting's unavoidable ties to a centuries-old idealism; in all those other mediums to which artists turned as they, one after the other, abandoned painting. The dimension that had always resisted even painting's most dazzling feats of illusionism—time—now became the arena in which artists staged their activities as they embraced film, video, and performance. And, after waiting out the entire era of modernism,



photography reappeared, finally to claim its inheritance. The appetite for photography in the past decade has been insatiable. Artists, critics, dealers, curators, and scholars have defected from their former pursuits in droves to take up this enemy of painting. Photography may have been *invented* in 1839, but it was only *discovered* in the 1970s.

But “What’s All This about Photography?”<sup>7</sup> Now that question is asked again, and in the very terms of Lamartine, also nearly a century and a half ago: “But wherein does its human conception lie?”<sup>8</sup> Lamartine’s argument is rehearsed this time by Richard Hennessy, one of Rose’s American painters of the eighties, and published in *Artforum*, the very journal that had so faithfully and lucidly chronicled those radical developments of the sixties and seventies which had signaled painting’s final demise, and which more lately has given testimony that painting is born again. Hennessy against photography is characteristic of this new revivalist spirit:

The role of intention and its poetry of human freedom is infrequently discussed in relation to art, yet the more a given art is capable of making intention felt, the greater are its chances of being a fine, and not a minor or applied, art. Consider the paintbrush. How many bristles or hairs does it have? Sometimes 20 or less, sometimes 500, a thousand—more. When a brush loaded with pigment touches the surface, it can leave not just a single mark, but the marks of the bristles of which it is composed. The “Yes, I desire this” of the stroke is supported by the choir of the bristles—“Yes, *we* desire this.” The whole question of touch is rife with spiritual associations.<sup>9</sup>

Imagine the magnitude of that choir, bristling so with desire as to produce a deafening roar of hallelujahs, in the particular case of Robert Ryman’s *Delta* series, paintings which employed

... a very wide brush, 12 inches. I got it specially—I went to a brush manufacturer and they had this very big brush. I wanted to pull the paint across this quite large surface, 9 feet square, with this big brush. I had a few failures at the beginning. Finally, I got the consistency right and I knew what I was doing and how hard to push the brush and pull it and what was going to happen when I did. That’s kind of the way to begin. I didn’t have anything else in mind, except to make a painting.<sup>10</sup>

Juxtaposed against Hennessy’s prose, Ryman’s words sound flat indeed.

7. This question is the title of an essay by Richard Hennessy in *Artforum*, vol. XVII, no. 9 (May 1979), 22-25.

8. Quoted in “Photography: A Special Issue,” editorial in *October*, no. 5 (Summer 1978), 3.

9. Hennessy, p. 22.

10. Robert Ryman, in Phyllis Tuchman, “An Interview with Robert Ryman,” *Artforum*, vol. IX, no. 9 (May 1971), 49.

There is in his language, as in his paintings, a strict adherence to the matter at hand. His conception of painting is reduced to the stark physical components of painting-as-object. The systematic, single-minded, persistent attempt to once and for all empty painting of its idealist trappings gives to Ryman's work its special place during the 1960s as, again, "just the last paintings which anyone can make." And that is, as well, their very condition of possibility. Ryman's paintings, like Buren's, make visible the most material of painting's conventions: its frame, its stretcher, its supporting surface, the walls on which it hangs. But more significantly, his paintings, unlike Buren's, make visible the very mechanical activity of laying on the brushstrokes, as they are manifestly lined up, one after the other, left to right, row after row, until the surface is, simply, painted.

The revivalism of current painting, which Hennessy's text so perfectly articulates, depends, of course, on reinvesting those strokes with human presence; it is a metaphysics of the human touch. "Painting's quasi-miraculous mode of existence is produced . . . by its mode of facture. . . . *Through the hand*: this is the crucial point."<sup>11</sup> This faith in the healing powers of the hand, the facture that results from the laying on of hands, echoes throughout Rose's catalogue text, which pays special homage to Hennessy's attack on photography. The unifying principle in the aesthetic of her painters is that their work "defines itself in conscious opposition to photography and all forms of mechanical reproduction which seek to deprive the art work of its unique 'aura.'" For Rose, elimination of the human touch can only express "the self-hatred of artists. . . . Such a powerful wish to annihilate personal expression implies that the artist does not love his creation." What distinguishes painting from photography is this "visible record of the activity of the human hand, as it builds surfaces experienced as tactile."

To silence all the euphoria over photography's reemergence, Hennessy finally offers *Las Meninas*, which he sees as a "description of the photographic process, in which we become the camera." We are to understand, although it is stated ever so subtly, that we pay homage to this particular painting for its celebrated facture. Hennessy tells us of Velazquez that "he looks at us, almost as if we might be his subjects" as "his hand, hovering between palette and canvas, holds"—what else?—"a brush." Hennessy describes this painting with the most dazzling of metaphors, tropes of which he and Rose are particularly fond, for they consider painting essentially a metaphorical mode. He says, for example, that it is "a gift we will never finish unwrapping," "a city without ramparts, a lover who needs no alibi" in which "the play of gazes, in front, behind, past and toward us, weaves a web about us, bathing us in murmuring consciousness. We are the guests of the mighty, the august, in rank and spirit. We stand at the center of their implied world, and are ourselves the center of attention. Velazquez has admitted us into his confidence."<sup>12</sup>

11. Hennessy, p. 23.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

*Diego Velazquez. Las Meninas. 1656.*



Stripped of its fatuous metaphors and its sanctimonious tone, Hennessy's description of *Las Meninas* might remind us of the rather more persuasive discussion of this painting which comprises the opening chapter of *The Order of Things*. As Michel Foucault describes it, this is indeed a painting in which the artist, on the one hand, and the spectator, on the other, have usurped the position of the subject, who is displaced to the vague reflection in the mirror on the rear wall of Velazquez's palace studio. For within the seventeenth century's theory of representation, these parallel usurpations and displacements were the very ground of representation's possibility.

It may be that, in this picture, as in all the representations of which it is, as it were, the manifest essence, the profound invisibility of what one sees is inseparable from the invisibility of the person seeing—despite all mirrors, reflections, imitations, and portraits. . . .

Perhaps there exists, in this picture by Velazquez the representation, as it were, of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us. And, indeed, representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being. But there, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation—of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject—which is the same—has been elided. And representation, freed from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form.<sup>13</sup>

What Foucault sees when he looks at this painting, then, is the way representation functioned in the classical period, a period which came to an end, in Foucault's archaeological analysis of history, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when our own age, the age of modernism, began. And, of course, if this era of history came to an end, so too did its modes of understanding the world, of which *Las Meninas* is a very great example.

For Hennessy, however, *Las Meninas* does not signal a *particular* historical period with its *particular* mode of knowledge. For Hennessy, *Las Meninas* is, more essentially than anything else, a painting, governed not by history but by creative genius, which is ahistorical, eternal, like man himself. This position is the very one that Foucault's enterprise is determined to overturn, the position of an entrenched historicism. From such a position, painting is understood as an eternal essence, of which *Las Meninas* is one instance, the marks on the walls of

13. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York, Pantheon, 1970, p. 16.

Altamira another, the poured skeins of Jackson Pollock another. "From Altamira to Pollock": that phrase encapsulates the argument that man has always had the impulse to create paintings; how, then, can it even be thinkable that he could stop in 1965?

But what is it that makes it possible to look at a paleolithic cave painting, a seventeenth-century court portrait, and an abstract-expressionist canvas and say that they are all *the same thing*, that they all belong to the same category of knowledge? How did this historicism of art get put in place?

*There was a time when, with few exceptions, works of art remained generally in the same location for which they were made. However, now a great change has occurred that, in general as well as specifically, will have important consequences for art. Perhaps there is more cause than ever before to realize that Italy as it existed until recently was a great art entity. Were it possible to give a general survey, it could then be demonstrated what the world has now lost when so many parts have been torn from this immense and ancient totality. What has been destroyed by the removal of these parts will remain forever a secret. Only after some years will it be possible to have a conception of that new art entity which is being formed in Paris.*

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,  
*Propyläen*

The new art entity that was to be formed in Paris, which Goethe foresaw as early as 1798, was the art entity we now call modernism, if by modernism we mean not only a canon of art works but an entire epistemology of art. Goethe foresaw that art would be seen in a way that was radically different from his own way of understanding it, which would in turn become, for us, a secret. The great art entity that was symbolized for Goethe by Italy, which we might call art-in-situ, simply no longer exists for us. And this is not only because, from Napoleon to Rockefeller, art was stolen from the places for which it had been made and confined in the art museums, but because for us, the art entity is held in another kind of

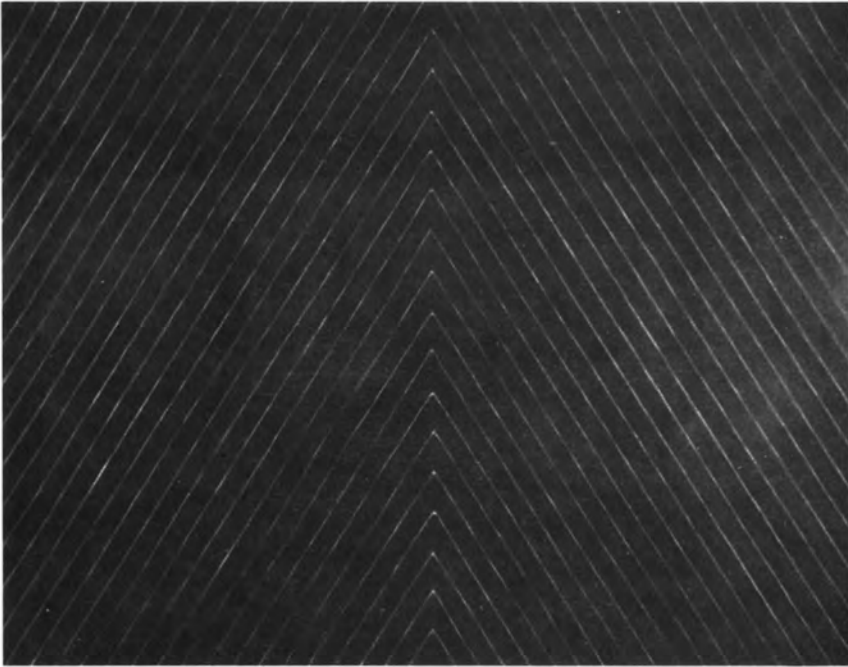
museum, the kind that André Malraux called *Imaginary*.<sup>14</sup> That museum consists of all those works of art that can be submitted to mechanical reproduction and, thus, to the discursive practice that mechanical reproduction has made possible: art history. After art history, the art entity that Goethe called Italy is forever lost. That is to say—and this must be emphasized because from within an epistemological construct, even as it begins to be eroded, it is always difficult to see its workings—that art as we think about it *only came into being* in the nineteenth century, with the birth of the museum and the discipline of art history, for these share the same time span as modernism (and, not insignificantly, photography). For us, then, art's natural end is in the museum, or, at the very least, in the imaginary museum, that idealist space that is art with a capital *A*. The idea of art as autonomous, as separate from everything else, as destined to take its place in *art* history, is a development of modernism. And it is an idea of art that contemporary painting upholds, destined as it too is to end up in the museum.

Within this conception of art, painting is understood ontologically: it has an essence and an origin. Its historical development can be plotted in one long, uninterrupted sweep from Altamira to Pollock and beyond, into the eighties. Within this great development, painting's essence never changes; only its outward manifestation—known to art historians as style—changes. The discourse of art history ultimately reduces painting to a succession of styles—period styles, national styles, personal styles. And, of course, these styles are unpredictable in their vicissitudes, governed as they are only by the individual choices of painters expressing their “boundless imaginations.”

There is a recent instance of such a stylistic shift, and its reception, that exemplifies this art historical view of painting and how it functions in support of the continued practice of painting. The shift occurs during the late 1970s in the work of Frank Stella. Although it could be said that this shift was presaged in every earlier stylistic change in Stella's work after the black paintings of 1959, Stella's move to the flamboyantly idiosyncratic constructed works of the past several years is by comparison a kind of quantum leap, and as such it has been taken as sanction for much of that recent painting which declares its individualism through the most ostentatious eccentricities of shape, color, material, and image. Indeed, at the Whitney Museum Biennial exhibition of 1979, one of Stella's new extravaganzas, which was set up as the spectator's first encounter as the elevator doors opened on the museum's fourth floor, became an emblem for everything else that was displayed on that floor—a collection of paintings which were surely intended as deeply personal expressions, but which looked like so many lessons dutifully learned from the master.

But apart from Stella's imitators, how can the phenomenon of his recent work be accounted for? If we remember that it was Stella's earliest paintings which

14. For an elaboration of this discussion, see my essay “On the Museum's Ruins,” *October*, no. 13 (Summer 1980), 41-57.



*Frank Stella. Point of Pines. 1959. (Left.) Haréwa. 1978. (Right.)*

signaled to his colleagues that the end of painting had finally come (I am thinking of such deserters of the ranks of painting as Flavin, Judd, LeWitt, and Morris), it seems fairly clear that Stella's own career is a prolonged agony over the incontestable implications of those works, as he has retreated further and further away from them, repudiating them more vociferously with each new series. The late seventies paintings are truly hysterical in their defiance of the black paintings; each one reads as a tantrum, shrieking and sputtering that the end of painting *has not come*. Moreover it is no longer even *as paintings* that Stella's new works argue so tenaciously for the continued life of the medium. The irony of Stella's recent enterprise is that he is only able to point at painting from the distance of a peculiar hybrid object, an object which may well *represent* a painting but certainly can not legitimately *be* a painting. This is not a wholly uninteresting enterprise, this defiance of the end of painting, but surely its only interest is in such a reading, for conceived of as renewal, Stella's recent works are, as Gerhard Richter said of painting, pure idiocy.

Nevertheless, it is as renewal that they are understood. Here, for example, is Stella's friend Philip Leider expressing the majority opinion:



In these most recent works, Stella, throwing open the doors to much that had hitherto seemed to him forbidden—figure-ground dichotomies, composition, gestural paint-handling, etc.—has achieved for abstraction a renewed animation, life, vitality, that has already about it something of the sheerly miraculous. One would be blind not to see it, catatonic not to feel it, perverse not to acknowledge it, spiritless not to admire it.<sup>15</sup>

Leider's insistence upon our believing in miracles, echoing that of Hennessy and Rose, is perhaps symptomatic of the real condition of contemporary painting: that only a miracle can prevent it from coming to an end. Stella's paintings are not miracles, but perhaps their sheer desperation is an expression of painting's need for a miracle to save it.

Leider anticipates my skepticism in his apology for Stella's recent work, assuming that, as usual, a major change of style will be met with resistance:

15. Philip Leider, *Stella Since 1970*, Fort Worth Art Museum, 1978, p. 98.

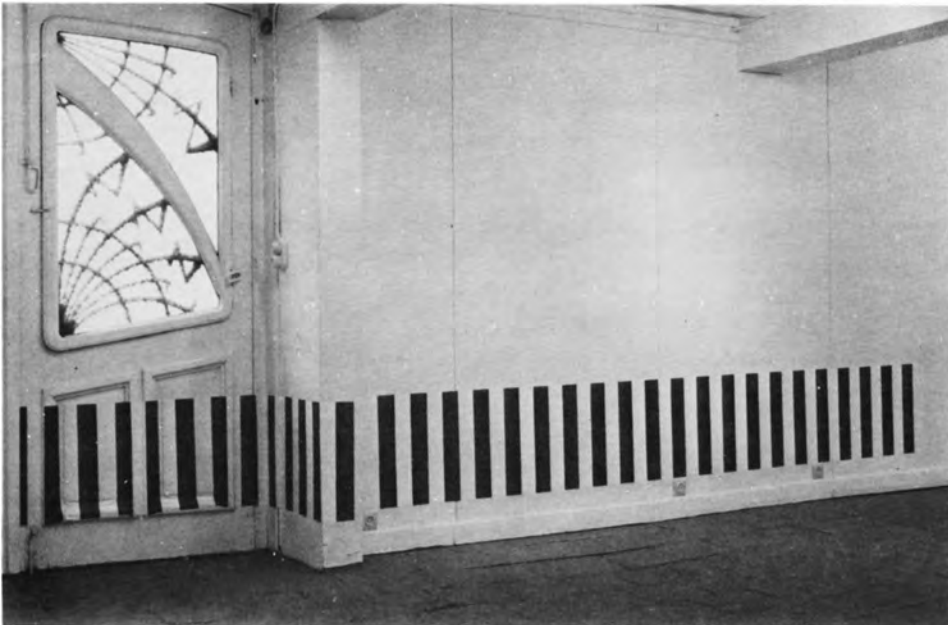


Every artist who hopes to attain a major change in style, within abstraction especially, must prepare himself for a period in which he will have to “compromise with his own achievements.” During this period he can expect to lose friends and stop influencing youth. . . . It is a matter of having taken things as far as possible only to find oneself trapped in an outpost of art, with work threatening to come to a standstill, thin and uncreative. At such a point he must compromise with the logic of his own work in order to go on working at all—it is either that or remain prisoner of his own achievement forever, face those sterile repetitions that stare at us from the late works of Rothko, Still, Braque.<sup>16</sup>

Opinions regarding the late works of Rothko, Still, and Braque aside, sterile repetitions may, under the present circumstances of art, have their own value. This is, of course, the premise of Daniel Buren’s work, which has never, since he began his activities in 1965, evidenced a single stylistic change.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97.

*Daniel Buren. Exhibition at Wide White Space Gallery, Antwerp. 1969. (Photo: R. van den Bempt.)*



*It is no longer a matter of criticizing works of art and their meaning, aesthetic, philosophical, or otherwise. It is no longer a matter even of knowing how to make a work of art, an object, a painting; how to become inserted in the history of art, nor even of asking oneself the question whether it is interesting or not, essential or ridiculous, to create a work of art, how, if you are or desire to be an artist (or if you challenge that word), to fit in with the game so as to play it with your own tools, and to the best of your ability. It is no longer a matter even of challenging the artistic system. Neither is it a matter of taking delight in one's interminable analysis. The ambition of this work is quite different. It aims at nothing less than abolishing the code that has until now made art what it is, in its production and in its institutions.*

—Daniel Buren, *Reboundings*

Buren's work has been exhibited more extensively than that of any other painter in the past decade. And although it has been seen in galleries and museums, as well as in the streets, all over the world, probably by more people than have seen the work of any other contemporary artist, it has thus far remained invisible to all but a few. This paradoxical situation is testimony to the success of Buren's gambit, as well as to the seemingly unshakable faith in painting—which is to say, the code. When Buren decided in 1965 to make only works in situ, always using 8.7 centimeter-wide vertical stripes, alternating colored with white or transparent, he obviously made a wise choice. For just as he predicted, this format has not been assimilable to the codes of art, regardless of how elastic those codes have been in the past fifteen years. As we have seen, even such bizarre hybrids as Stella's recent constructions can easily be taken for paintings, though certainly they are not, and as such they can be understood to continue painting-as-usual.

In a climate in which Stella's hysterical constructions can so readily be seen as paintings, it is understandable that Buren's works cannot. It is therefore not surprising that Buren is widely regarded as a conceptual artist who is unconcerned with the visible (or what Duchamp called the retinal) aspects of painting. But Buren has always insisted specifically on the visibility of his work, the necessity for it to be *seen*. For he knows only too well that when his stripes are seen as painting,

painting will be understood as the “pure idiocy” that it is. At the moment when Buren’s work becomes visible, the code of painting will have been abolished and Buren’s repetitions can stop: the end of painting will have finally been acknowledged.



*Daniel Buren. Exhibition, Rue Jacob, Paris. 1968.  
(Photo: Bernard Boyer.)*