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Translator: Phoebe Clarke

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Texte original extrait de : Riout, Denys. « Chasse au trésor », *Portes closes et œuvres invisibles*, Paris : Gallimard, 2019, (Art et artistes), p. 107-114

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Le monochrome¹, la peinture et ses déploiements les plus fascinants sur fond de modernité, « l'ombre des images »², le faux³ et la valeur de l'art ou encore l'immatériel constituent quelques-uns des sujets favoris abordés par l'historien, critique et essayiste Denys Riout depuis les années 1980 dans le champ de l'art contemporain. Dans la lignée de ses travaux aux confins de l'art, *Portes closes et œuvres invisibles* propose cette fois d'exercer le regard en misant sur les œuvres « invisibles » (en appelant parfois aux autres sens que la vue, ou bien inaccessibles, dématérialisées, langagières, occultées, etc.). Toutes confirment *in fine* l'importance du regard. « L'invisible, pourvu qu'il laisse des traces, est l'une des voies d'accès au mythe », conclut Denys Riout à la toute fin de son livre (p. 301). Le dernier exemple qu'il prend à juste titre à l'appui de sa démonstration est *La Joconde*. L'auteur en relate la disparition en 1911 et sa valeur d'« icône » de l'art mondial pour « une foule qui se presse en permanence » au Louvre pour voir une œuvre qui n'est plus « guère visible [...] sauf de très rares spécialistes » (p. 301). La « Chasse au trésor » que *Critique d'art* s'est proposé de traduire vers l'anglais pour la faire connaître à un lectorat plus largement européen et international rappelle l'épisode d'un « jeu de cache-cache » devenu tout aussi incontournable dans l'histoire muséale et artistique. Le principe du « tableau-cache » mis en place par Daniel Buren en 1977 avec *Les Formes : peintures y retient plus précisément l'attention joueuse d'un*

Denys Riout attentif aux stratagèmes des artistes conceptuels. « A la différence [des] jeux innocents, les tissus délibérément cachés par Buren ne peuvent pas être vus par les visiteurs du musée », confirme l'auteur (p. 113). Et Denys Riout de nous ramener à l'interrogation majeure : « que convient-il de regarder ? » dès lors que le visible et l'invisible constituent l'œuvre elle-même. L'ouvrage fourmille d'autres exemples d'œuvres invisibles dénichées à la croisée de l'art moderne et contemporain (Gustave Courbet, Yves Klein, Robert Barry, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jochen Gerz ou Claudio Parmiggiani, etc.). Il n'y a qu'à pousser la porte et ouvrir grands les yeux !

Sylvie Mokhtari

Notes :

1.- Voir par exemple : Riout, Denys. *La Peinture monochrome : histoire et archéologie d'un genre*, Nîmes : Jacqueline Chambon, 1996, (Rayon Art) ; mais aussi Yves Klein : *l'aventure monochrome*, Paris : Gallimard, 2004, (Art et artistes)

2.- Riout, Denys. « L'Ombre des images », *Eric Rondepierre*, Paris : Léo Scheer, 2003, p. 39-45

3.- Voir par exemple : Riout, Denys. « Par-delà le vrai et le faux : Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni », *De Main de maître : l'artiste et le faux*, Paris : Musée du Louvre ; Hazan, 2009, p. 347-366 ou plus récemment, « Un usage pédagogique du prix », *La Valeur de l'art*, Paris : Beaux-arts de Paris éditions, 2018, p. 181-213

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Monochromes¹, painting, and the latter's most fascinating developments against the backdrop of modernity, "the shadow of images"², falsehood³, the value of art and the immaterial - these are some of the favorite subjects the historian, art critic and essayist Denys Riout has been discussing since the end of the 1980s in the field of contemporary art. In the wake of his work on the limits of art, *Portes closes et œuvres invisibles* [Closed doors and invisible artworks] offers to exercise the reader's gaze by considering "invisible" artworks (which either appeal to the other senses, or which are inaccessible, dematerialized, linguistic, obscured, and so on). They all confirm, however, the importance of the eye. "As long as it leaves a trace, the invisible is one of the ways to access the mythical", concludes Denys Riout at the very end of his book (p. 301). The last example he uses in support of his demonstration is, quite rightly, *Mona Lisa*. The author evokes its disappearance in 1911 and its "iconic" value for "a crowd that forever throngs" to the Louvre to see a work that "is barely visible [...] except for a very few specialists" (p. 301). The "Treasure Hunt" that *Critique d'art* has decided to translate into English to make it known to a wider European and international audience, evokes a "game of hide-and-seek" that has become just as canonical for art and museum history. The principle of the "cache-painting" created by Daniel Buren in 1977 with *Les Formes : peintures* focuses Denys Riout's playful attention on the stratagems of conceptual artists. "Unlike [the] innocent game, the fabric hidden by Buren cannot be seen by the museum's visitors", confirms the author (p. 113). Denys Riout takes us back to the major issue: "what should we be looking at?", when it is given that the visible and the invisible constitute the work itself. The book teems with examples of other invisible artworks unearthed at the crossroads between modern and contemporary art (Gustave Courbet, Yves Klein, Robert Barry, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jochen Gerz, Claudio Parmiggiani, and so on). All you need to do is to push the door and open your eyes wide!

Sylvie Mokhtari

Notes :

1.- See for example: Riout, Denys. *La Peinture monochrome : histoire et archéologie d'un genre*, Nîmes: Jacqueline Chambon, 1996, (Rayon Art); as well as Yves Klein : *l'aventure monochrome*, Paris: Gallimard, 2004, (Art et artistes)

2.- Riout, Denys. « L'Ombre des images », *Eric Rondepierre*, Paris : Léo Scheer, 2003, p. 39-45

3.- See for example Riout, Denys. « Par-delà le vrai et le faux : Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni », *De Main de maître : l'artiste et le faux*, Paris: Musée du Louvre; Hazan, 2009, p. 347-366, or more recently, "Un usage pédagogique du prix", *La Valeur de l'art*, Paris: Beaux-arts de Paris éditions, 2018, p. 181-213

1 As customs evolve, various Western fine art museums now boldly exhibit paintings which remained modestly hidden when they were privately owned. But in order to encounter artworks which are deliberately concealed by their author, yet nonetheless offered up to be admired – or at any rate discussed – one should visit contemporary art museums or international events. Just as monochrome painting started proliferating shortly after Yves Klein's death in 1962, the questioning of fine art's visual nature gradually spread. As soon as visualness was no longer an absolute requirement, or that the share of what was visible could be reduced to its smallest expression, artists started inventing new ways, or using proven methods, of shielding their works from viewers' gaze.

2 The concept of the painting as cache was reused by Daniel Buren in this way, without the connections with its forerunners being mentioned either by him or by art critics, for one of his "Works¹", *Les Formes : peintures*, which were bought by the Centre Pompidou the year it was inaugurated, in 1977. With this *in situ* installation, the artist exemplified his conviction that "one painting always hides another²". In order to detect the artwork, the viewer must first read the labels which may have aroused his or her interest as there are two of them, one above the other, although only one artwork seems to be hung on the wall. For instance, next to *Vertical Planes I* (1912) by František Kupka, and beneath the label that one expects in connection to the abstract painting, a second label, whose presentation is absolutely identical to the first, states:

Daniel Buren
Boulogne-sur-Seine, 1938
Les Formes : peintures, 1977

3 An unusually long text for a label follows, written in a smaller typeface:

Under KUPKA's "Vertical Planes", is a 156 x 99,5 cm piece of fabric with black and white vertical 8,7 cm stripes, whose first white band on the left is covered with white acrylic paint. 4 paintings, all of the same kind, are behind four other works in the Museum. Acquired by the Centre Georges Pompidou, 1977 AM 1977 – 662.

4 Now this striped fabric, partially painted over, is entirely hidden by Kupka's painting. Since 1965, Daniel Buren has used a "visual tool" whose formal features are simple enough for everyone to be able to effortlessly remember them. Buren's *stripes* – which is what the general public calls them – consist of alternate bands, always white and coloured, with identical widths (8,7 cm ± 3 mm), and arranged vertically. The term *visual tool* indicates how vain it would be to cast one's gaze on the stripes alone, devoid as they are of any aesthetic interest or autonomous meaning. To consider them for themselves would be, according to Buren, foolish, or a mistake.³ The "bands" which Buren placed behind the paintings in the museum are easy to imagine for anyone who has seen them before, and actually looking at them would not be particularly

interesting. Knowing they are there without being able to access them visually is far more intriguing. This is why everyone wonders whether they really are there. Particularly suspicious visitors move closer to the wall and tilt their head in order to try and see the edge of the fabric.⁴ And it is indeed sometimes possible to confirm their presence, betrayed by a conveniently loose thread.

5 Curiosity encourages the viewer who just read one of Buren's five labels to embark on a new tour of the museum. Reconnecting with the joys of treasure hunts, viewers bestow a different kind of attention on the exhibited works, because they are looking for the double labels affixed near the four other cache-paintings behind which the black-and-white striped fabric are concealed. In 1979, during the first installation of the "Work", viewers would encounter, besides the Kupka, and in no particular order:

- 6 - Maurice Utrillo, *Le Jardin de Montmagny* (circa 1908-1909).
- 7 - Théo Van Doesburg, *Composition* (1920).
- 8 - Amedeo Modigliani, *Tête rouge* (1915). In this case, the label relating to Daniel Buren's work was installed above the one relating to Modigliani's. This faulty installation can help us better understand why the "Buren label" should have been fixed above the cache-painting: the logic it exemplifies makes this isomorphism didactic.
- 9 - And lastly: Francis Picabia, *L'Œil cacodylate* (1921). The play on meanings is particularly pleasing here, as what is evoked is not only an eye but, what's more, a sick eye, which is even more striking as the association between ophthalmia and modern painting is one of the *clichés* used by art criticism ever since the Impressionists. It so happens Picabia started his (truly successful) career as a painter with paintings inspired by Impressionism, before breaking off with his dealer and style in 1909. Moreover, Francis Picabia is an artist Daniel Buren is fond of.

10 *Les Formes: peintures*, remained hung in this way for a few years, before being stored. Later, it was shown again, but this time in a different configuration: instead of the painting by Van Doesburg, Malevich's *Black Cross* (1915) acted as a cache; and Kupka was replaced by Jackson Pollock's *Painting* (1948). In 1997, part of the National Museum of Modern Art's collection was exhibited at the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art while the Centre Georges Pompidou was closed for renovation work. The initial layout was used again, except the painting by Utrillo, which was replaced by another one of his works, *L'Impasse Cottin* (1910-1911). Despite these changes, Daniel Buren's work remained unchanged. All that mattered was:

- 11 That the five elements were present.
- 12 That the striped fabric, whose first white band on the left should be covered with white acrylic paint, and which should be cut to fit the format of the "top'/ covering up" painting, were placed under five works chosen by "the museum authorities (curators, directors)⁵". The selection criteria are independent from the potential play on meanings that could possibly emerge: it is enough that the dissemination reveals a diversification. Some of the selected criterion were: important works in the collection, the general public's favourite paintings –which vary–, various styles, periods, formats.⁶
- 13 That the labels were in place.
- 14 The formal permanency of the work is linked neither to the chosen paintings nor to the striped fabric whose first white band on the left is covered in white paint. For each new presentation, if one cache-painting is replaced by another, Daniel Buren supplies the

museum with a piece of fabric with the right dimensions and has the previous one destroyed, as it is now irrelevant. This arrangement proves, if proof was needed, how little the striped fabric actually matters. What does matter is that it should be present, and even more so, perhaps, that there should be a possibility for visitors to visualise the shape described by the text on the label in their mind's eye. Although *Les Formes : peintures* seem to do away with one of the major imperatives of any work of art – visibility–, this “work” also has a perfectly visible element as it integrates the labels, which are exhibited in order to be read. This arrangement is quite atypical, as labels are generally extraneous to the works they provide information on. However, Buren states:

- 15 The labels connected to the works entitled: “Les Formes : peintures” are obviously part of the work in question.⁷
- 16 This status is crucial, but everything contributes to the fact that it should not be noticeable, because we are so used to considering labels as museographic elements which are by no means artistic, that should be read but not contemplated. Acting as *trompe l'œil*, Buren's labels, which he explicitly chooses and programs, imitate museum labels without for all that merging with them, as they are in no way extraneous to the works on display.
- 17 In this way, the work is even less invisible, or un-visible, than one may at first assume. Buren hides his “visual tool” behind the pictures in the museum, and shows us a text we read without looking at its medium. What is invisible is not where we think it is. The issue of the visible and the invisible is subtly raised by the artist, and rests on the obvious frustration of not seeing, as well as on the massive import, in this work, of the blinding dimension of the invisible. Some members of the acquisition committee balked, as Jean-Hubert Martin recounts: “Doubts were expressed as to whether a museum could acquire a work that was invisible to the public”.⁸ This question was legitimate, but it concealed another, more important, one, which appears to have seldom been asked about this work, although it appears in the article Benjamin H.D. Buchloh wrote for the catalogue which was published on the occasion of its first presentation at the National Museum of Modern Art, in which he wrote:

The ambiguity of the presence of all these elements, which are featured in the exhibition as known pictures without being seen, dramatically alters our perception of the paintings which are actually shown and visible [...].⁹
- 18 If they had been hung in full view next to the other pictures in the museum, the pieces of striped fabric would not notably disrupt their perception. We have acquired the habit of moving from one work –and one preoccupation– to the next, and we know how to wander through these more or less autonomous universes, which, like haughty monads, are sometimes mutually exclusive. Such perceptual and intellectual virtuosity can be spellbinding or surprising. However, as soon as Buren's modest pieces of fabric are placed under various pictures, they collide with them and notably disrupt our aesthetic perception. Although we are able of moving from one interest to the next, it is a lot more difficult to simultaneously imagine two dissimilar universes. The painting that innocently offers itself up to the visitor's gaze in the museum, and with which it is possible to enter into a direct relationship, immediately changes status when we see it as a cache and even as an obstacle, which is particularly ironic as we also know that it is hiding a piece of fabric with no real visual value.

- 19 Buren had already experimented with these kinds of disruptions. His participation in Documenta V (Kassel, 1972), for instance, included six walls in five different sections, white picture rails on which he placed his visual tool –discreet but perfectly visible white on white striped paper– before the works of the other artists were hung on them. This intervention slightly disturbed the perception of the other artworks. For example, an American *Flag* by Jasper Johns with horizontal stripes was hung over Buren's vertical stripes, and one can only wonder at the candour –or on the contrary the self-confidence– of the painter, who accepted such a display for his work. A few years later, Daniel Buren concluded on his intervention at Documenta V:

By "painting" under and around the work, you get pretty much the same result as if it had been painted on. You transform it. The transformation here is a little subtler, but it exists nonetheless.¹⁰

- 20 A distinction should be made between what is hidden and cannot be seen, but yet remains theoretically perfectly visible, and strictly invisible truths.¹¹ The idea of hiding is pleasing, as proven by the game of hide-and-seek, which everyone has enjoyed at some point. But in order to feel this pleasure, one has to *play along*, meaning that whoever hides must do so in order to be found within a reasonable time limit, and whoever is seeking must not discover the hiding place and its guest too soon, in order to make the pleasure last longer. But unlike this innocent game, the fabric hidden by Buren cannot be seen by the museum's visitors. Only their hiding place is visible, inasmuch as its presence is signalled. On the other hand, the artist, and several people working within the institution, have seen or will see the pieces of fabric during their installation or removal, or in the storage space where they are left when the work is not being shown. In these circumstances, they don't seem much to look at, as if they were orphaned, deprived of any kind of artistic value. They acquire a critical meaning and prompt a more direct jubilation when they are in the right situation, contextualised without being visible. The structural relationship developed by the artist between the stripes and their installation in a given place raises, for art lovers, a seemingly very simple question: what should we be looking at? In this way, what is visible – or to be more precise, the visible quality which constitutes the work of art – far from being obvious, becomes the heart of the issue. *Les Formes : peintures* opens a maieutics of the gaze.

- 21 Like all artworks which are invisible or hardly visible, *Les Formes : peintures* is less conspicuous than the artist may think. In the 1980s, I sometimes accompanied groups of schoolteachers who had come to visit the National Museum of Modern Art as part of their in-service training. These recurring experiences have led me to believe that non-informed people rarely take the time to read Buren's labels. On the other hand, as soon as their attention was attracted to their content and they were given a small amount of information, these pieces of striped fabric which could not be seen drew all the attention. Visiting the museum became a "treasure-hunt". Everyone was trying to find the other "cache-paintings", conscious all the while that there would be almost nothing more to see. The trust placed in the written word was not questioned. Fives caches did indeed conceal five pieces of fabric. What was more remarkable, moreover, was that a few weeks later, when the visit to the museum was brought up again, Buren's work was the most prominent in their memories. What could not be seen seemed to have almost completely eclipsed what was visible. What drew interest, in fact, was the questioning it caused, because it shook up certainties and awakened emotions hidden in our common

memory. Everyone knows or senses that the dialectics of what is invisible was and still is a constituent part of our relationship to the world.

NOTES

1. Daniel Buren, like many others artists from his generation, uses the term "*travail*" [work] to discuss what was previously known as an "*œuvre*" [work of art]. Therefore, one of his texts is entitled: "Les Formes : peintures, Travail in situ de Daniel Buren" (1979) (my emphasis); see *Les Couleurs : sculptures Les Formes : peintures*, edited volume, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou ; Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, n.d., 1981, inserted errata sheet.
2. Buren, Daniel. "Les Formes : peintures" (1979), reproduced in *Les Couleurs : sculptures Les Formes : peintures*, *Op. cit.*, p. 62 (also featured, in an almost identical version, on the inserted errata sheet).
3. The artist makes fun of those who confuse his *in situ* work with his visual tool: "They have fallen into a trap, their own trap. They remind me of the famous Chinese saying: 'The finger points at the moon, the fool looks at the finger', which could be translated as the *visual tool* points at the space, the art critic looks at the tool", Daniel Buren, *Au sujet de...*, interview with Jérôme Sans, Paris: Flammarion, 1998, p. 110.
4. Daniel Buren implicitly wants the presence of the fabric to remain perceptible. In the note he wrote on this work, he specifies: "[...] When you read the label, you realise that there is something you cannot see at first glance (but that you can glimpse by being on the side or near the edge of the frame), but which does, however, exist." (See *Les Couleurs : sculptures Les Formes : peintures*, *Op. cit.*, p. 62).
5. Daniel Buren uses this formulation in "*Les Formes : peintures 1977* (Indications à lire comme une description d'un travail à voir)", see *Les Couleurs : sculptures Les Formes : peintures*, *Op. cit.*, p. 62.
6. On the reasons behind the choice of "*caches*" for the first hanging of the work, see: Martin, Jean-Hubert. "Flottant et caché", *Les Couleurs : sculptures Les Formes : peintures*, *Op. cit.*, p. 48.
7. Buren, Daniel. "*Les Formes : peintures, 1977* (indications à lire comme description d'un travail à voir)", *Op. cit.*, p. 62
8. Martin, Jean-Hubert. "Flottant et caché", *Op. cit.*, p. 48
9. Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. "Le musée et le monument", *Les Couleurs : sculptures Les Formes : peintures*, *Op. cit.*, p. 18
10. Buren, Daniel. *Rebondissements*, Brussels: Daled & Gevaert, 1977, p. 37
11. Jean-François Lyotard distinguishes the visual – which necessarily includes an invisible, or not-visible part – from the visible: that which is exhibited, shown. Therefore, the visual includes currently non-seen, or unseen, aspects. (See: Lyotard, Jean-François. "Faire voir les invisibles, ou : contre le réalisme", *Les Couleurs : sculptures Les Formes : peintures*, *Op. cit.*, p. 26 sq.).