



REBECCA MORRIS AND THE REVENGE OF P&D

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In 1969 Daniel Buren penned his seminal essay “Mise en garde!” (“Beware!”) on the occasion of his inclusion in *Konzeption/Conception: Documentation of Today’s Art Tendencies*, a survey of Conceptual art curated by Konrad Fischer and Rolf Wedewer for the Museum Morsbroich, in Leverkusen, Germany.¹ With more than forty artists, the show was a who’s who of the American and European avant-garde. What better opportunity to express umbrage taken at Conceptual art? An umbrage cloaked as grave reservations, as the title “Beware!” suggests. Pun intended, Buren’s polemic begins straight out of the gate with the infamous quote “Concept has never meant ‘horse.’”² His barbs have yet to dull over time. Take for example this remark about mannerist Conceptual practice: “In order, no doubt, to get closer to ‘reality,’ the ‘conceptual’ artist becomes gardener, scientist, sociologist, philosopher, storyteller, chemist, sportsman.”³ As the artist Joe Scanlan has shown, all you have to do is replace “conceptual artist” with “relational aesthetics artist,” or “social practices artist,” and the essay reads as applicable to the current moment.

But Buren’s barbs are sharp ultimately because he has skin in the game. He developed his in situ method of working through an extremely rigorous line of thinking about the dematerialization of art, which was not to be taken lightly. If anything, “Beware!” expresses his fears about its trivialization. His warning regarding the dematerialization of the object is introduced with the heading *Concept = Idea = Art*:

Lastly, more than one person will be tempted to take any sort of an “idea,” to make art of it and to call it “concept.” It is this procedure which seems to us to be the most dangerous, because it is more difficult to dislodge, because it is very attractive, because it raises a problem that really does exist: how to dispose of the object?⁴

Buren was bothered by the thought of Conceptual art devolving into a trend, a new style of art, at which point it would become “the prevailing ideology.”⁵ The problems the movement sought to address would then be considered solved. These solutions are the new art, which, according to Buren, is simply the old art in a new form. Buren’s work was aimed precisely at the problem of form, specifically its neutralization, which was tantamount to the dematerialization of art. The neutralization of form was a problem that could only be addressed in a sustained fashion, in a manner that would rearticulate rather than resolve the problem. By 1969, Buren had spent four years working “without any evolution or way out.”⁶ However polemical his essay, Buren is equally explicit about his methodology.

The text begins with a call for a painting that is non-illusionistic, in the sense of being not merely abstract, but abstract to the point of being “its own reality.” In other words, it is a call for a purely self-referential painting, one that is staunchly anti-illusionistic in that it does not refer to anything outside of itself:

1 Daniel Buren, “Beware!,” in *Konzeption/Conception*, trans. Charles Harrison and Peter Townsend (Leverkusen, Germany: Staatliche Museum, 1969); reprinted in *Studio International* 179, no. 920 (March 1970): 100–104.

2 *Ibid.*, 100.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

In the same way that writing is less and less a matter of verbal transcription, painting should no longer be the vague vision/illusion, even mental, of a phenomenon (nature, subconsciousness, geometry . . .) but *VISUALITY of the painting itself*. In this way we arrive at a . . . method which requires . . . that painting itself should create a mode, a specific system, which would no longer direct attention, but which is “produced to be looked at.”⁷

Hence the evenly spaced vertical stripes, each band being 8.7 centimeters wide and a single color alternating with white (fig. 2). Colors are deployed in a systematically democratic fashion such that they are equally interchangeable (black = red = green = blue = yellow) from one work to the next. Each work comprises a succession of bands of equal width filling up the painting side to side; thus whatever composition there is to speak of is completely neutral insofar as the part-to-whole relationship is evenly dispersed across the surface area. There is no “contradiction,” only an evenly distributed alternation of equal forms. Without contradiction, by default there is no “tragedy,” to use the term which in Buren’s case is a euphemism for anthropomorphism. The stripes likewise dispense with the horizon line. There are only top and bottom. This succession of bands is a system resulting in a fixed internal structure. The internal structure of the painting is independent of its external dimensions, which are allowed to vary depending wholly on circumstances.

With the stripe motif as a constant, repetition became Buren’s starting point. It was the means to highlight the ever-changing context of the venue, whether that was inside or outside the museum or the gallery. Buren’s work could assume a variety of forms and be placed in a variety of settings where it could directly address specific



Fig. 2: Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, *Peinture acrylique blanche sur tissu rayé blanc et rouge*, 1971. Acrylic on woven red and white fabric, 78 ¾ × 78 ¾ × 7/8 in. (200.03 × 200.03 × 2.22 cm). The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, purchased with funds provided by Robert H. Halff

formal and or sociopolitical aspects of its location. By extending, or transferring, the logic of painting's self-reflexivity to its context, Buren would place painting, as opposed to the readymade, at the core of institutional critique.

At the time of the publication of "Beware!," Buren had been producing his signature stripe works for four years. In that time, his stripes had come to exemplify Conceptual art. This, however, would eclipse the fact that Buren had arrived at the stripe in empirical fashion as the paintings over the course of 1964 through 1965 and into 1966 make abundantly clear; observe the appearance of the stripe in 1965's *Enamel paint on cotton canvas* (fig. 3), followed by work in which Buren painted directly on fabric, 1966's *Variable Forms Painting* (fig. 4).

Buren's work perfects the paradigm of an art for art's sake. Here, any formal evolution within painting is replaced by repetition. The emphasis previously reserved for individual paintings is shifted onto a logic of production, or a methodology. This shift corresponds to another shift, namely a shift from the empirical to the theoretical come again as the ideological. For Buren, the ideological assumes the form of a recurring proposition. As such, it is anything but absolute. The transitional works of 1964/1965/1966 are remarkable in that they literally illustrate the perfecting of an art-for-art's-sake paradigm in which the terminating logic of the monochrome is substituted with a generative logic belonging to what else but pattern painting.



Fig. 3, left: Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, *Enamel paint on cotton canvas*, [September-October] 1965. Enamel paint on cotton canvas, 89 ¼ × 75 ½ in (226.5 × 191.5cm)

Fig. 4, right: Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, *Variable Forms Painting*, [May] 1966. Acrylic on white and grey striped cotton canvas, 89 × 75 in (226 × 190.2 cm)

Buren has never shunned the decorative, and should anyone have speculations regarding Daniel Buren as the ultimate Pattern and Decoration painter, I call to the witness stand the 2013 Buren/Louis Vuitton collaboration (fig. 5), in which Buren provided the sets for the spring fashion-week unveiling of Vuitton's line. And continuing to make this case, I wish to juxtapose the Buren/Vuitton collaboration with the performances of a seminal member of Pattern and Decoration, or P&D, Robert Kushner. His performances grew out of a fascination with both movement and costuming, an interest Kushner developed during his early years as an artist in San Diego, having attended the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). Later, he would integrate food into the costumes, as in *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*, performed at both Jack Glenn Gallery, Corona del Mar, California, and Acme Productions, Greene Street Gallery, New York, in 1972 (fig. 6), and Kushner began staging performances that developed into fashion shows, a series of which he would mount in New York throughout the 1970s, including *The Winter and Spring Lines* (1973), *The Persian Line* (1975), and *Sentimental Fables* (1979), this last presented at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

But what about Pattern and Decoration proper? As curator Anne Swartz has detailed in her 2007 exhibition catalogue *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975–1985*, as a movement, P&D began in 1975 over a series of three discrete events. The first was a panel at Artists Space titled “The Pattern in Painting,”



Fig. 5, left: Louis Vuitton runway designed by Daniel Buren, Paris Fashion Week, Spring/Summer 2013
Fig. 6, right: Robert Kushner, *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*, 1975. Performance, Acme Productions, Greene Street Loft, New York

organized by Mario Yrisarry and moderated by Peter Frank. Its speakers included Martin Bressler, Rosalind Hodgkins, Valerie Jaudon, Tony Robbin, and Sanford Wurmfeld. The second and most formative was a series of “pattern meetings” at Robert Zakanitch’s Warren Street loft. Attendees included art historian and critic Amy Goldin, Leonore Goldberg, Hodgkins, Jaudon, Joyce Kozloff, Robert Kushner, Robbin, Miriam Schapiro, Kendall Shaw, Nina Yankowitz, and Zakanitch. The third event was the opening of Holly Solomon Gallery, which debuted with a group exhibition that included nineteen artists, among them Kushner, Kim MacConnel, and Ned Smyth, all of whom were core P&D subscribers. The premiere was followed by a solo show of Brad Davis’s work and shortly thereafter a solo show of MacConnel’s work. A steady stream of panels, meetings, and exhibitions continued unabated over the next two years, culminating in the 1977 survey *Pattern Painting* at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York, curated by art critic John Perreault.⁸

8 See Anne Swartz, “Chronology of Shows and Writings,” in *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975–1985*, ed. Anne Swartz (Yonkers, NY: Hudson River Museum, 2007), 113–19.

P&D is not a feminist movement in my view, yet it is inconceivable without feminism, which lent it a critical platform as well as a means of networking. As for the latter, relationships between P&D’s key female members (Jaudon, Kozloff, Schapiro) were cemented a few years earlier through their involvement with the women’s movement on both coasts. The feminist collectives that formed throughout the United States were self-determined groups, and P&D was no different. In calling to order a “pattern meeting,” Zakanitch consciously wanted to build a movement around overtly decorative work. As for how to do this, Zakanitch could not have picked a more ideal role model than Schapiro, to whom he turned for advice. Early on, Zakanitch told Schapiro that he wanted to start a movement and asked her, “How do you do that?” Schapiro, who had considerable experience in starting a movement—feminist art—answered his question with a question: “Well, how did the Cubists do it? How did the Impressionists?”⁹

9 See Arthur C. Danto, “Pattern and Decoration as a Late Modernist Movement,” in Swartz, *Pattern and Decoration*, 8–9.

As far as lending P&D a critical platform, over and above redeeming the decorative and celebrating it as a form of women’s work, feminism gave P&D an oppositional edge. Feminism’s emergence within the visual arts is concurrent with the rise of Minimalism, which ideologically speaking is a purely self-referential art and thus a zenith of modernism. Referring to nothing outside of itself, it is an art predicated on the exclusion of history, memory, biography, race, and gender. This would prove anathema for women and people of color actively engaged in the struggle to find voice and political agency. As a result, feminism had no choice but to be anti-modern insofar as modernism was anti-feminine. The anti-modernism endemic to feminism was part and parcel of P&D. A prime example is Kozloff’s 1976 two-part manifesto, printed in the pamphlet accompanying the exhibition *Ten Approaches to the Decorative* at Alessandra Gallery (and reproduced in this volume). The first section is titled

“Negating the Negative (An Answer to Ad Reinhardt’s ‘On Negation’)’ and the second is titled “On Affirmation.”

P&D’s oppositional position to a large extent overshadows its heterogeneity as a movement. All of the P&D artists embraced pattern and ornament well before it was a movement, arriving at their own artistic conclusions for different reasons, scarcely any of which could be said to be reactionary. MacConnel and Kushner were students at UCSD when they fell under the sway of Islamic art. Goldin’s tutelage was key to their exploration of non-Western art, an investigation that formed out of a passion for Asian and Middle Eastern art and artifacts. Zakanitch cites autobiographical sources for his turn toward ornament: “In my grandparents’ house, ornamentation was everywhere. They had embroidered tablecloths and armrests. They used stencils to paint flower patterns on their walls, which gave me an affinity for stencils. My grandparents refused to live in bleak empty rooms and decorated everything.”¹⁰

10 Zakanitch, quoted in *ibid*, 7.

Jaudon’s work draws from architectural ornamentation. But the work belongs as much to a hard-edge geometric abstract tradition as it does to P&D. The same is true of Robbin. All of this is to say that despite the oppositional tone of P&D as a movement, its tributaries were hardly reactionary. The sources from which these artists drew their inspiration, even when they were modernist sources, were revered. This is important in that P&D, no matter how anti-modern, was never ironic. That this was so is no small feat for what many acknowledge as postmodernism’s first movement, with Peter Halley’s Neo-Geo being a very close second.

Los Angeles-based painter Rebecca Morris is a child of post-modern irony. That said, Morris’s commitment to abstraction lies somewhere between the poles of fierce and rabid; commitment of this kind is a prerequisite for coping with a pluralism arising not only across disciplines but from within the discipline of painting itself. Abstraction is now a given, an option that is taken for granted as one chooses rather than fights to become an abstract painter. It is a choice, however, within a discipline that itself has become a field of specialization by virtue of taking on the characteristics of a language. If the closure of modernist painting is taken as the closure of painting itself, then under the aegis of postmodernism, painting’s history is a finite collection of styles readily offering itself up for quotation. In other words, paintings are read in and through reference to other paintings: this fact raises the question, Once abstraction has acquired this kind of legibility, is there such a thing as an abstract painting? (The shorthand for this is an understanding of abstraction as an allegory for modernism.)

Judging from Morris’s work, the answer is a resounding “Hell yeah.” Hers remains a rudimentary language of shape, line, color, gesture, surface, and composition that quotes so as to reduce its references to an alphabet. In this respect, her paintings function as an ur- or protolanguage of abstraction through which one can discern the compositional logic of Frank Stella’s Black Paintings, an isolated Pollock-like splatter, or a Hans Hofmann-esque approach to the

discreet juxtaposition of color. Morris's early paintings feature her signature device of layering a shape that is an undifferentiated hybrid of square and circle. Executed flat on the floor, these paintings look as though they have emerged, faceup, from a boiling cauldron of protozoan possibilities dating back to the Flintstones. Between works such as *Level 5* (1977; fig. 7) and her paintings consisting exclusively of lines, such as *Untitled* (2000; fig. 8), her early vocabulary was indeed one of sticks and stones. When not registered as a scrubby stain or a series of wavering, spray-painted lines, her touch consists of a redundant slathering of viscous paint that builds in thickness, going from *painting* as a verb to *painting* as a noun. On stretchers deeper than required for paintings of their size, these canvases assert their objecthood so literally they become rhetorical. Fracture is determined by gravity and the drying properties of oil, which contracts as it congeals, forming a skin with an unctuous, hive-like wrinkling that seems to emerge from within the paintings. With a life of their own, the works become susceptible to disease and aging, forms of corruption well beyond any irony.

Morris's early paintings could hardly be said to escape such irony, which is endemic to any and all questions of legibility. Whatever irony may be attributed to her intent, however, corresponds to history's larger irony, which was already well in effect. To submit abstraction to a process of quotation that reduces stylistic specificity to very basic and general features is to craft a generic abstraction, one that cannot fail to signify abstraction's utter ubiquity. Little wonder, then, that these early paintings resemble a species of abstraction found in transient public spaces—fast-food dining courts, airport terminals, the DMV. Once considered an ideal complement to public spaces because of its universal appeal, abstract art came to be read as a gratuitous effort to beautify impersonal spaces of rote functionality. These spaces, with their accepted levels of vagrancy and dereliction, often resulting from the public's very absence, were in effect non-spaces. Abstraction spoke for no one, becoming a vacant language. Referring to figurative elements lacking a place within abstract paintings, Clement Greenberg coined the infamous phrase "homeless representation." If the dialectical pendulum of history made a complete swing, then it is safe to say Morris's early paintings are species of "homeless abstraction."

Morris's predilection for a scathed abstraction is a way of welcoming abstraction and its subsequent fate, with arms open wide. As for an attendant irony, let there be no mystery as to what she would say: "Bring it on!" For painters who share Morris's commitment to abstraction, the challenge is to reinvent on terms that are relevant and relative the spirit and dialectical conditions that make abstract painting urgent and necessary. For the better part of the twentieth century, this struggle was defined by a dialectical tension between abstraction and figuration. In Morris's case, the conflict is defined by an irony residing exclusively within the domain of abstract painting. In short, abstract painting has nothing to overcome but itself. This is an irony Morris is bold enough to instigate and even bolder for transcending, as her paintings, over the past decade, have increased

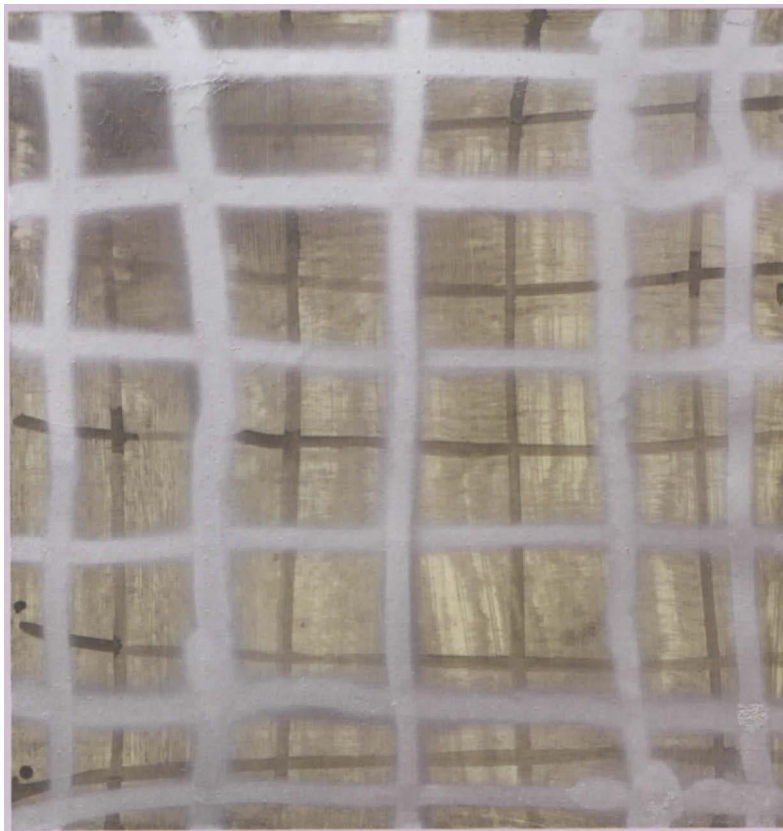


Fig. 7, top: Rebecca Morris, *Level 5*, 1997
Oil on canvas, 28 × 27 in. (71.12 × 68.58 cm)
Fig. 8, bottom: Rebecca Morris, *Untitled*, 2000.
Oil on canvas, 31 × 29 in. (78.74 × 73.66 cm).
Private collection

in scale and complexity on every front—palette, paint handling, and composition, including Morris's notable forays into crafting deep space—and are thus robust enough to dispel any question of whether they insist upon painting for painting's sake.

The struggle from one generation to the next might be different, but the goal of making paintings of which nothing is asked other than that they be paintings remains the same. Indeed, Morris's paintings are anachronisms. Her method of reducing any attributable stylistic specificity to rudimentary painterly concerns negates the idea that abstract painting would, could, or should evolve. Her sticks-and-stones period could just as easily serve as a paean to Wassily Kandinsky's 1926 book *Point and Line to Plane* as it could be said to reference the New York School. Although the advent of pure abstraction is a thing of the past, it was not marked as belonging exclusively to the early years of the twentieth century or to the New York School. Abstraction now belongs to the ages, which problematizes any claims to contemporaneity made on its behalf. Hovering outside a historical dialectic, abstraction operates at its own speed. At times, it has been ahead of its present, and at others behind. Several of Morris's paintings circa 2000 might recall the 1980s better than a painting actually executed during that decade ever could. And now she seems to be working her way further back, her work having skirmishes with P&D; compare, for example, Morris's *Untitled (#17-15)* (2015; fig. 9) and Schapiro's *Tapestry of Paradise* (1980; fig. 10), each exemplifying the framing, or bordering, that is a consistent feature of Pattern and Decoration.

It is easy to be ironic about P&D. It can be hard to look it in the eye and even harder to avail oneself to a course of painterly exploration in which you don't choose your bedfellows. Such is the case with Morris. This is what happens when you relinquish irony. You are subject to any way the wind blows. To rub shoulders with P&D, however, is to reanimate an empiricist pre-stripe Daniel Buren. If anything, I would argue that P&D—and *only* P&D—holds the keys to Buren's *Mosaïque aux éléments composites* (fig. 11). And this is work with which Morris sees eye to eye (fig. 1, p. 172).





Fig. 9, top: Rebecca Morris, *Untitled (#17-15)*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 95 x 97 in. (241.3 x 246.38 cm). Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Museum purchase, International and Contemporary Collectors Funds, 2017.9

Fig. 10, bottom: Miriam Schapiro, *Tapestry of Paradise*, 1980. Acrylic, fabric, glitter on canvas, 60 x 50 in. (152.4 x 127 cm). Brooklyn Museum of Art, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, gift of Robert Sugar

Fig. 11, opposite: Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, *Mosaïque aux éléments composites*, [January-May] 1965 (detail). Site-specific work, Grapetree Bay Hotel, Saint Croix, Virgin Islands, US