# OCTOBER

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# The Turn of the Screw: Daniel Buren, Dan Flavin, and the Sixth Guggenheim International Exhibition*

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> *[In the case of Buren's installation] the limits of what was acceptable were exceeded. At that point . . . the tacitly existing rules had to be re-invoked.*
>
> —Thomas M. Messer, April 1971[1]

> *It must be a sinister American "petit-bourgeois" "imperialist" plot to please me. Well, I'll have to check out the latest composite fantasies of French radicalist party lines on American artists and their seasonal comforts with little Buren, if ever again he surfaces in New York.*
>
> —Dan Flavin, June 1971[2]

> *Radicalism in the field of art cannot be an exclusively external (formal) thing but only a fundamental one.*
>
> —Daniel Buren, 1969[3]

In early October of 1970, Thomas Messer, the Director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, sent a letter to twenty-four artists from various parts of the globe. "I am writing to tell you," he said,
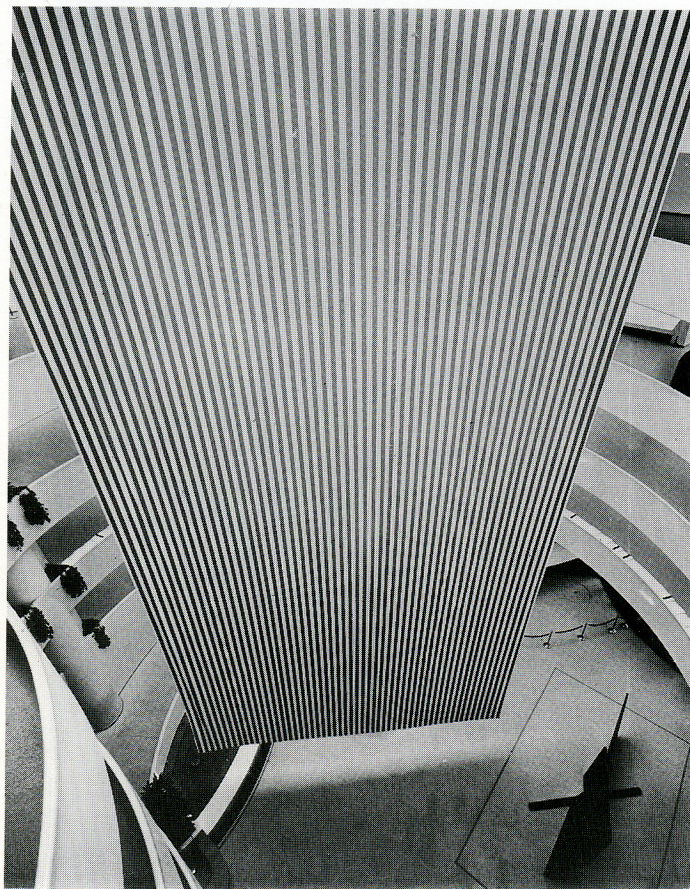
that we would like to extend a cordial invitation to you to participate in the SIXTH GUGGENHEIM INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION which is scheduled to open in this city February, 1971. As you know the

Guggenheim Internationals are periodic reviews of the current state of art. . . . My colleagues, Edward Fry and Diane Waldman, both Associate Curators of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, have travelled through many parts of the world to search for artists and works that would be in harmony with our aims.[4]

Twenty-one artists agreed to participate—among them, the young French artist Daniel Buren.

4.    Thomas M. Messer, letter to artists invited to participate in the 1971 International, October 20, 1970, in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Archives (hereafter cited as SRGM Archives). The artists who accepted the invitation from Messer were Antonio Dias (Brazil), Hanne Darboven (Germany), Mario Merz (Italy), Richard Long and Victor Burgin (Britain), On Kawara (Japan), Jiro Takamatsu (Japan), Jan Dibbets (The Netherlands), Daniel Buren (France), and the Americans Carl Andre, Walter De Maria, Dan Flavin, Michael Heizer, Donald Judd, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Robert Ryman, Richard Serra, and Lawrence Weiner.

In the following months, the Guggenheim Museum sent out press releases to an international array of newspapers to publicize the event. Anticipating the positive reception previous Internationals had received, the Guggenheim invited a broad range of art critics to preview the show and meet the artists.[5] The prestigious international aspect of this exhibition also warranted the invitation of a multitude of foreign diplomats and United Nations delegates to the opening of this gala affair.[6] Many United States government officials, a large cross-section of senators, congresspersons, and members of the New York Legislative Assembly, were invited to the opening as well.[7] The government was further represented by the United States Information Service, there to make a film about the exhibition for foreign distribution.[8]

It would seem that the officials of the Guggenheim had performed their task admirably in putting together the Sixth Guggenheim International. Yet their efforts were met with virtually unanimous condemnation. An article in the *New York Times* summarized the critical response to this show as "the biggest public thumbdown that staffers can remember."[9]

The first sign that the organizers had miscued occurred the day before the show was scheduled to open. Museum officials removed the work of Buren from the International without the artist's prior consent. On the surface this appeared to be a crisis of an internal nature. However, as will become clear, despite their benign appearance Buren's ensemble of two pieces of striped fabric became the unwitting victim of the exhibition's anachronistic continuation of an idea of avant-gardism that flourished in the United States in the 1950s and into the 1960s.[10]

Emerging in the United States during the 1940s and '50s, this liberal view of the avant-garde was controversial during its ascendency. Politically conservative traditionalists argued that the avant-garde's rejection of traditional forms in art

5.      See the memo "Guests for T.M.M. party," in SRGM Archives.
6.      See the memo "Prior to the opening of the Sixth (6th) Guggenheim International Exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum Feb. 11th 1971," in SRGM Archives.
7.      See the memo "Guest of VIP for GIE Opening 2/11/71," in SRGM Archives.
8.      The SRGM Archives have a 16mm, four-minute film of the 1971 Guggenheim International, made by the United States Information Service (USIS). The Guggenheim Museum had also made arrangements for the Sixth Guggenheim International to travel to modern-art museums in the capitals of various Latin American countries. For this venture, they had enlisted the help of the USIS, probably in the hope that the federal agency would help offset travel expenses. The show was slated to travel to Colombia, Uruguay, and Argentina.
9.      Grace Glueck, "Nay-Sayers," *New York Times*, March 21, 1971, sec. 4, p. 22.
10.     By "avant-gardism," I am referring to that compendium of aesthetic tendencies inextricably bound up with the myriad of political, social, and otherwise historical tensions that constitute modernity. The focus here will be on that facet of the avant-garde imported from Europe to America during the years surrounding and immediately following World War II. Particular attention should be paid to the fact that this importation also constituted a radical transformation of the avant-garde from its original manifestations. Central to characterizing this transformation would be: an overt depoliticization, an overall simplification of aesthetic and philosophical aims, along with a particular focus on newness as the overriding criteria. If the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century claimed that aesthetic innovation could be intimately linked to social transformations, then the neo-avant-garde that developed in postwar America advanced the idea of autonomous aesthetic form as the meat and potatoes of established taste.

proved that it surreptitiously sought to promote chaos and ultimately the downfall of U.S. society in the face of communism.[11] The identification of the avant-garde as the thin edge of the wedge of cultural subversion was exacerbated by the fact that, to many in the United States, the very newness of the avant-garde made it seem conspicuously foreign.

However, following the coming to maturity of the highly practical improvements of liberal reform introduced by the New Deal and the postwar boom of Keynesian capitalism, by the late 1950s the United States had become the world industrial paradigm. Its extraordinary success as an industrial nation was followed by an increased expression of generous feelings, especially toward the nation's poor and underprivileged. Through the mediation of President Eisenhower, even right-wing Republicans accepted the creation of a social welfare system. The era came to be identified as the age of the end of ideology.[12] It was maintained that the need for ideological thinking was past since those small reforms still necessary could best be organized by a scientifically trained elite of policy professionals.[13]

Infused with liberalism, this stellar prosperity was readily translated into the popular belief that the United States was capable of absorbing any cultural tendency regardless of how subversive it may have previously been perceived to be.[14] Evidently in this liberal context the once-dominant traditionalists found that they "had been outmaneuvered by more sophisticated individuals eager to

11.    I am referring here to the bitter attacks on art and artists during the anti-Communist fervor of the McCarthy era. For more on this issue, see William Hauptman, "The Suppression of Art in the McCarthy Decade," *Artforum* 12 (October 1973), pp. 48–52; Jane de Hart Mathews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America," *American Historical Review* 81 (October 1976), pp. 762–87; and Annette Cox, "Abstract Expressionism and Depression Radicalism," *Art-as-Politics: The Abstract Expressionist Avant-Garde and Society* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982), pp. 17–38.

12.    See Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960).

13.    Bell, *The End of Ideology*, p. 297, as cited in Godfrey Hodgson, "The Ideology of Liberal Consensus," *America in Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 75. At the risk of being overly schematic, it is worth emphasizing that the late 1950s and 1960s were characterized by what Hodgson describes as the "liberal consensus"—characterized by a fear of communism abroad, the assumption that counting the costs of improving life was made unnecessary by progress, and the belief that the American political system was above ideology because it functioned in terms of concrete interests formulated in a businesslike way. Hodgson defines the characteristics of the "consensus" as follows: "Confident to the verge of complacency about the perfectibility of American society, anxious to the point of paranoia about the threat of communism—those were the two faces of the consensus mood. Each grew from one aspect of the experience of the 1940s: confidence from economic success, anxiety from the fear of Stalin and the frustrations of power" (ibid., p. 75).

14.    The analyses of liberalism in postwar America that I found useful in preparing this paper were: William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); James Gilbert, *Another Chance: Postwar America, 1945–1968* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981); and Hodgson, *America in Our Time*. On the relationship between early nineteenth-century utilitarian liberalism characterized by its laissez-faire form (as articulated by Jeremy Bentham, and later by John Stuart Mill, following John Locke), and the American liberalism to which I refer in this paper (which had its origins in Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, through to Harry Truman's Fair Deal, John F. Kennedy's New Frontier, and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society), see Robert Paul Wolff, *The Poverty of Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

capitalize on the fact that avant-garde art and culture exist only in a society that is liberal-democratic (politically) and bourgeois-capitalist (socio-economically)," and further, the rapidity of this identification meant that "by the mid-sixties modern art itself had somehow become inextricably linked with the United States as if only in America could the avant-garde 'spirit' truly flourish."[15] Whatever overt ideological positions the avant-garde initially might have been identified with in its European forms were substituted with a model of the avant-garde that was perceived by many to be nothing more than an implementation of the market principles of capitalist economy.[16] These factors did much to popularize the notion that avant-garde art was in principle indistinguishable from any other range of commodities in capitalist economy and therefore nonthreatening.[17]

This union between liberalism and avant-gardism in the United States, as sanctioned by the laws of entrepreneurial capitalism, was also manifest in Richard Nixon's bid for the presidency in 1968. Nixon campaigned for the White House as a liberal. Arguing that he was a "pragmatic centrist," he pledged that, if elected, he would immediately end the war in Vietnam, foster a "generation of peace," and "seek to encourage and develop individual artistic talent and new concepts in art, just as we do in science and technology."[18]

But the 1970s began with a massive wave of reaction marked by a turn to extremely conservative politics and a pervasive call for traditional values. By the 1970s, much of the optimism that had characterized the previous decade had soured. Himself a refugee from fascism, Herbert Marcuse expressed the increased disillusionment most pointedly in his *Counterrevolution and Revolt*: "The Nixon Administration has strengthened the counter-revolutionary organization of society in all directions. The forces of law and order have been made a force above the law. . . . A vast army of undercover agents is spread over the entire country and through all branches of society."[19]

In retrospect, we can see that Nixon's election symbolized the increasing power of the right in the United States.[20] Soon after he moved into the White House, the principles of "law and order" became the rhetorical theme of the federal administration as it immediately set out to subvert the hard-won civil

15.    Hart Mathews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America," p. 780.
16.    It is sufficient for our purposes here to recognize that a general utopian, hence revolutionary, political teleology permeates European ideologies of avant-gardism. These utopian ideologies must be dispensed with when an ideology of avant-gardism is formulated in the United States because, as Harold Rosenberg notes in "Twilight of the Intellectuals," they are anathema to existing American ideology: America already esteems itself as a utopia (*Dissent* 5 [Summer 1958], p. 228).
17.    See Hart Mathews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America," p. 780.
18.    See Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, p. 381; Lawrence S. Wittner, *Cold War America: From Hiroshima to Watergate* (New York & Washington: Praeger, 1974), pp. 334, 343; and Richard Nixon, "Richard Nixon," *Arts* 43, no. 2 (November 1968), pp. 5–6.
19.    Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 24.
20.    On the increasing power of the Right during the 1960s, see Joshua B. Freeman, "Putting Conservatism Back into the 1960s," *Radical History Review* 44 (Spring 1989), pp. 94–99.

rights legislation passed in the 1960s.[21] Also subverted were many of the liberties guaranteed to individuals by the U.S. Bill of Rights.[22]

In early 1970 the Nixon administration began secret B-52 bombing missions in Cambodia, falsifying official reports to make it appear that the attacks were occurring elsewhere. When the news that American involvement in Indochina was increasing beyond Vietnam into neighboring countries was finally made public, it touched off the most widespread unrest on campuses in U.S. history. By 1970, however, tolerance of dissent had worn out for a large segment of the U.S. establishment, and across the country the National Guard was called upon to quench campus demonstrations.[23] It was Attorney General John Mitchell who most succinctly summed up the hawkish mood that was growing. Speaking to a reporter that summer about the administration's political agenda, Mitchell candidly noted that "This country is going so far right you are not even going to recognize it."[24]

By that fall it was evident that the Nixon administration had also placed liberalism on its hit list of "political enemies." In September of 1970, for example, when several Democratic senators were up for reelection, Nixon sent Vice President Spiro Agnew on a cross-country campaign portraying liberals as radical extremists who refused to support "law and order." In a way that recalled another Republican demagogue, Joseph McCarthy, Agnew stated that the "great question" before the nation was: "Will America be led by a President elected by a majority of the American people or will he be intimidated and blackmailed into following the path dictated by a disruptive radical and militant minority?"[25]

The turn to the right spread across the no-longer-silent American majority, leading *Los Angeles Times* columnist William Shirer to comment in the spring of 1970 that "we may be the first people to go Fascist by the democratic vote."[26] Following a large demographic survey, *The Real Majority* reported that Americans were increasingly nervous about the breakdown of tradition brought about by successive liberal governments.[27]

21.   On the Nixon administration's theme of "law and order," see Wittner, *Cold War America*, pp. 348, 590; and Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, p. 381.
22.   As was subsequently revealed during the 1973 Watergate investigation, the President himself authorized a campaign of political espionage, including break-ins, wiretappings, eavesdropping, and opening the mail of citizens the administration deemed as possible threats to "internal security." See Jonathan Schell, *The Time of Illusion* (New York: Knopf, 1976), pp. 39–44; Wittner, *Cold War America*, pp. 335–39; and Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), pp. 413–14.
23.   In response to the student uprisings, National Guard units were mobilized on twenty-three campuses in sixteen states. See Gitlin, *The Sixties*, p. 410.
24.   John Mitchell, as cited by Schell, *The Time of Illusion*, p. 124.
25.   As cited in Wittner, *Cold War America*, p. 353. Just before the congressional election of 1970, Nixon himself went on the campaign trail to assail American liberalism for having allowed a "creeping permissiveness—in our legislatures, in our courts, in our family life, in our universities." See Schell, *The Time of Illusion*, p. 131.
26.   William Shirer, *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 1970; as cited in Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, p. 25.
27.   Richard Scammon and Benjamin Wattenberg, *The Real Majority* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970), p. 44.

The demise of an effective liberal politics led to a resurgence of widespread contempt for the avant-garde. By the early 1970s, the idea of avant-garde culture in the United States was again being rejected from most quarters. Nowhere was this so evident as in the events surrounding the 1971 Guggenheim International, the focus of this analysis. Having presented the public with an ill-received swan song for the avant-garde, the Guggenheim International series proceeded to make the ultimate statement on the relationship between contemporary America and avant-garde culture: it rolled over and died to accommodate the new conservatism.

*The Nobel Prize of Art*

> *The Guggenheim Internationals are attempts to gather the best recently produced works of art from available sources.*
>
> —Thomas M. Messer [28]

The Guggenheim International series, the oldest of its kind in New York, focused on the latest avant-garde trends. From the inception of the series in 1956, the aim of these exhibitions had been to find "one painting or sculpture of greatness . . . that could be accepted and acclaimed by knowledgeable critics throughout the world."[29] According to the administrators, the $10,000 first prize—the largest offered by any of the international art series operating at the time—would provide "an important manifestation of international goodwill," and become as prestigious and coveted as the Nobel Prize.[30]

The establishment of this International Award was regarded favorably by the government. The parallel between the cultural ideology of the Guggenheim Museum and that of the Eisenhower administration's internationalism was highlighted when, in early 1956, the President instituted the presentation of the International Awards at the White House on an ongoing basis.[31] Also promoted was the image of the United States as a devoted patron of high culture, and in particular of advanced art.[32]

28.    Thomas M. Messer, "Preface," *Guggenheim International Exhibition 1967: Sculpture from Twenty Nations*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1971), p. 10. Like the promotion of "international goodwill," emphasis on "the best" was also a recurring theme in this International series.
29.    Harry F. Guggenheim letter to H. H. Arnason and Thomas M. Messer, February 7, 1964, in SRGM Archives.
30.    Harry F. Guggenheim, as quoted in the press release, "The Guggenheim International Awards," March 9, 1956, in SRGM Archives.
31.    Harry F. Guggenheim, press release, March 9, 1956, in SRGM Archives: "The President's interest in art, manifested in his report to Congress, which has been a great inspiration for art in the United States, led me to hope that he would look with favor on establishment of this International Award, which he has done."
32.    Given that such a paranoid attitude toward culture as was manifest under McCarthyism could coincide with the Eisenhower administration, it stands to reason that such an administration would be

Over the years the format of these exhibitions changed somewhat. The first prize was converted into a purchase prize and the international juries were abolished. But through to the final International in 1971, what was purportedly being sought was still the best contemporary avant-garde art. This concept of the best of avant-garde art evinced a belief that the same evaluative criteria could be applied to art regardless of where it was from. This type of supracontextual aesthetic theory was made emphatic by director Thomas Messer in the catalogue for the Fifth Guggenheim International in 1967. According to Messer, national characteristics and by extension all social and economic factors are superfluous and must, of aesthetic necessity, be "transcended" when evaluating a work of art. And this socially and nationally nonspecific criterion then became the shibboleth for all would-be entrants in the Guggenheim Internationals.[33]

Unlike previous Internationals, however, the Sixth was dominated by U.S. artists. No less than thirteen of the twenty-one artists included in this exhibition were local.[34] In their attempt to justify the domination of Americans, the show's

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at the very least apprehensive regarding those cultural expressions that it chose to sanction. Should one doubt the veracity of claims citing a contiguity between the politics of the Eisenhower administration and the politics of the American avant-garde, it is well worth asking what is the likelihood of the Eisenhower administration sponsoring a culture that was in any way antithetical to its own political ambitions.

33.     Contrary to official claims made by the museum, the workings of these Internationals were anything but above ideology. From the time this series was launched, the International Broadcasting Division of the United States Information Agency (USIA) was recording interviews with artists and writing feature stories in many different languages (including German, French, Japanese, Polish, Yugoslavian, Greek, and Spanish) for foreign radio broadcasts, thus ensuring that the United States' interest in modern culture was communicated abroad. The exhibitions were also filmed by the USIA's motion picture service, News of the Day, to be distributed to libraries and news services abroad. (See the "Guggenheim International Award 1960 Press Preview Data: Background Based on GIA 1958," and "Guggenheim International Awards: Press Review" [1960], in SRGM Archives.)

Indeed, the role of the International series in the Cold War arsenal was not missed by New York art critics. Reviewing the Fourth Guggenheim International in January 1964, *New York Times* art correspondent Grace Glueck noted the tactfulness of the museum in awarding one of its large prizes to the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam for his "Tropic of Capricorn" (Grace Glueck, "At the Guggenheim International, They Know What They Don't Like," *New York Times*, January 26, 1964, sec. 2, p. 22). The Guggenheim's cooperation with the "Voice of America," a pirate radio station operated by the USIA, would ensure that the message was communicated over Cuban airwaves.

The aggressiveness of the Guggenheim's internationalism was particularly evident in the ideological construction of the Fifth Guggenheim International Exhibition in 1967. This show, which focused exclusively on sculpture, was billed as presenting the best works by artists of three generations. One section of the show was composed of artists born before 1910, and included sculptures by Pablo Picasso, Henry Moore, David Smith, Jacques Lipchitz, and others. A second section was made up of artists born between 1910 and 1925, such as Cesar, Pol Bury, Anthony Caro, and Eduardo Paolozzi. The third section included artists such as Jean Tinguely, George Segal, Claes Oldenburg, and Robert Morris, who were born in the period after 1925. By awarding the top award to Morris, who was then associated with the Minimalist group of artists, the 1967 International served to validate this New York–based avant-garde. In fact, not only did it legitimize Minimalism, but by placing it in a historical context at the long end of modernist sculpture, and singling it out as "the best" art being produced at the time, it crowned the New York–based avant-garde as the epitome of high culture.

34.     The 1971 International was at best ambiguous with regard to the nationality of a number of participants. A case in point is On Kawara, who, although a representative of Japan according to the exhibition catalogue, had resided in New York for a number of years.

organizers argued that the ideas and premises operative in the work of the U.S. artists in the later 1960s were crucial to the continuation of avant-garde art across the globe.[35] In particular, assertions about "the strength of the United States in the present art balance" were supported by singling out the causal role played by Minimalism, a New York–based art movement, in the emergence of earth art, Conceptual art, process art, and other avant-garde trends of the late 1960s.[36]

The organizers of the 1971 International tried to connect the participating artists with the Minimalist avant-garde in two ways. First, by requesting that the invited artists produce a site-specific work that used the context of display as a point of departure, the museum linked the art works in the International with an artistic practice closely identified with Minimalism. It is noteworthy, too, that site specificity provided a means by which the museum could institutionalize some of the new avant-garde trends that Messer ironically called "creative evidence no longer presentable in a museum."[37] By asking earth artists and Conceptual artists to produce a site-specific work, the organizers of the International could effectively circumscribe these new art forms within the same object-oriented lexicon of the New York avant-garde.[38]

The second way in which the 1971 International affiliated the new works with Minimalism was by identifying them with the same formal concerns. In the catalogue, Diane Waldman argued that the "so-called Minimalists: Andre, Judd, Flavin, Morris and LeWitt" had "provided the major impetus for subsequent developments in Europe and the United States."[39] In particular, Judd's work and criticism provided "an important impetus for the younger artists to develop work that refused to conform to either pictorial or three dimensional conventions but which felt free to take advantage of both where necessary."[40]

And yet in direct contrast to these claims, the centrality of New York avant-gardism prominent throughout the late 1950s and 1960s was beginning to

35.    As Messer wrote in the 1971 catalogue: "The preponderance of Americans in the selection obviously carries with it assumptions about the primacy of U.S.-made art throughout the late 1960s—the period covered by this Sixth Guggenheim International." See Thomas M. Messer, "Preface," *Guggenheim International Exhibition: 1971*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1971), p. 11.
36.    "The strength of the United States in the present art balance" is from Messer, "Preface," *Guggenheim International Exhibition: 1971*, p. 11. See also Diane Waldman, "New Dimensions/ Time-Space: Western Europe and the United States," ibid., pp. 15–24. As the press release for the show explicitly stated, "The overwhelming artistic development of the last five years which the exhibition serves to establish . . . [is] rooted in the premises established in the middle 1960s by the minimalist sculptors Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris and Sol LeWitt" (press release, "Sixth Guggenheim International Exhibition Opens February 12," dated January 29, 1971, p. 2, in SRGM Archives).
37.    Messer, *Guggenheim International Exhibition: 1971*, p. 9. According to Messer, museums, "which, after all, were made for objects," had found themselves in a serious predicament in the late 1960s as the object was rapidly receding from view (p. 9).
38.    In Thomas M. Messer, "Impossible Art—Why It Is?" (*Art in America* 57, no. 3 [May/June 1969], p. 31), the Director of the Guggenheim complained that the new art trends seemed to deny the "machinery consisting of dealers, critics and museums."
39.    Waldman, "New Dimensions/ Time-Space," p. 15.
40.    Ibid.

crumble by the early 1970s.[41] The focus of the art scene was increasingly turning to more international trends, many of which seemed to de-center the art object. The international character of this general tendency was made evident in the various surveys of the new art assembled in Europe during the late 1960s. Although these international shows included U.S. artists, for the first time in over a decade they were neither the majority nor the most dominant, but equal with other groups who shared a similar agenda.[42] New York's cultural institutions were late to acknowledge this phenomenon.

By 1970, however, large avant-garde exhibitions in which American artists did not figure prominently began to be held in New York.[43] In the catalogue for the "Information" show, the largest of these exhibitions, curator Kynaston McShine explained that the new art had transcended New York, making for a situation that was open "and certainly less parochial than even five years ago."[44] McShine and various other players in the New York art world whose aesthetic agenda was characterized by a pursuit of the new, regardless of where it was from, were not averse to the decentralization of avant-garde art production. According to this constituency of the New York intelligentsia, the avant-garde was not a threat to the interests of the established order. Quite the opposite, the avant-garde's insatiable search for the new was seen as part of its perpetual effort to seek the attention and patronage of the bourgeoisie.[45]

Apart from the contrasting positions of internationalists like McShine and the parochialism of the Guggenheim, there was another type of response to the avant-garde trends in 1971 that should not be overlooked in this context. This reaction was characterized by conservative traditionalists who argued that the perpetual aesthetic innovation of the previous decade had allowed the "anti-bourgeois" values of the historical avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century to permeate American culture. In the early seventies, some of the most virulent of these attacks came from New York critic Hilton Kramer, who

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41.     Even in New York itself, people were beginning to acknowledge that the city's cultural hegemony showed signs of decline. See, for instance, Harold Rosenberg, "Ecole de New York," *New Yorker* 45 (December 6, 1969), pp. 171–84.

42.     Between 1968 and 1970, various international exhibitions of the new avant-garde art were organized in Europe, including "Art Povera" in Genoa (1967–68); "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form," which began at the Bern Kunsthalle (1969) and traveled to Amsterdam and London; "Op Losse Schroven" at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1969); "Prospect '69" at the Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf (1969); and "Konzeption/Conception" at the Stadtische Museum, Leverkusen (1969).

43.     These included "Information," The Museum of Modern Art, July 2–September 20, 1970; "Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects," New York Cultural Center, April 10–August 25, 1970; and "Software," the Jewish Museum, September 16–November 8, 1970.

44.     Kynaston L. McShine, "Introduction," *Information*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), p. 209.

45.     As Harold Rosenberg noted, the strenuous requirement of the avant-garde that it attract the attention of the bourgeoisie inevitably scuttled whatever critical value such a work might have had ("The Avant-Garde," *Quality: Its Image in the Arts*, ed. Louis Kronenberger [New York: Atheneum, 1969], p. 430).

warned that "politics . . . has finally penetrated the New York art world."[46] In a series of articles for the *New York Times*, Kramer rallied support against the new, "subversive" avant-garde trends, which supposedly dealt "crushing blows to bourgeois tastes and values."[47] This was the nature of Kramer's argument in January of 1970, when he pleaded to all of those New Yorkers "who believe in the very idea of art museums—in museums free of political pressures—to make our commitments known, to say loud and clear that we will not stand for the politicization of art that is now looming as a real possibility."[48]

The correlation between the avant-garde and the breakdown of tradition suggested by Kramer was an increasingly common theme not only in art criticism but in a substantial amount of the social criticism written at the time. In particular, this issue was taken up by a group of disaffected former liberals who in the early 1970s came to be known as "the neoconservatives."[49] In a series of articles that began to appear in the New York–based journals *Commentary* and *The Public Interest* in the fall of 1970, Daniel Bell, one of the most influential members of this group, blamed the integration of avant-garde culture into the American psyche for the erosion of traditional values. Much like Kramer's conflation of aesthetics and politics, Bell's central thesis postulated that the "open field of view" of the liberal ideology had provided no resistance to the avant-garde, which he saw as "an adversarial culture" antithetical to the maintenance of a stable social system.[50] According to Bell, this adversarial culture sought to undermine the legitimacy of bourgeois norms and the resources of bourgeois tradition by integrating radical ideas into "the fields of manners, morals, and ultimately politics."[51] Bell went on to argue that the increased social unrest and disavowal of traditional values that characterized the United States in the 1960s was proof that "the avant-garde [had] won its victory."[52]

Altogether, then, it was a highly volatile time when the Guggenheim Museum began preparations for its Sixth International. On one side curators of major museums, like Kynaston McShine, accepted outright the new, more international avant-garde trends with a lack of any kind of judgment. The only criterion employed was that whatever was being integrated by the culture be new and up-to-date. Contrary to McShine, people like Kramer and Bell tried to resuscitate a controversy between avant-gardism and traditionalism similar to that which was commonplace during the late 1940s and into the '50s.

46.  Hilton Kramer, "Art and Politics: Incursions and Conversions" (1970), reprinted in *Age of the Avant-Garde: An Art Chronicle of 1956–1972* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), p. 528.
47.  Ibid.
48.  Hilton Kramer, "Do You Believe in the Principle of Museums?" *New York Times*, January 18, 1970, sec. 2, p. 25.
49.  See Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).
50.  Daniel Bell, "The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism," *The Public Interest* 21 (Fall 1970), p. 18.
51.  Ibid.
52.  Ibid.

In the midst of this maelstrom the officials of the Guggenheim Museum, promoted their International in a way that would occupy a middle ground. Following a concept of avant-gardism that was fundamentally New York–centric, museum officials did not accept the new art trends without discrimination. But as an institution of modern art, the Guggenheim was also concerned not to dismiss the new avant-garde in the way critics like Kramer were calling for. Instead, it attempted to engage the new trends by restructuring them to make them consistent with its own interests. As part of this effort, the museum officials argued that the challenges of avant-garde art were confined to the aesthetic realm, and directed only toward attacking and critically dismantling the assumptions inherent in preceding art trends.[53] This was indeed Messer's position whenever he had occasion to discuss the avant-garde.[54] However, the efforts of the International to chart a fine line between the significantly different positions of people like McShine and Kramer were thrown off balance as a result of a series of events that took place the day before the opening. Suddenly the officials of the Guggenheim found themselves in the rather awkward position of trying to negotiate with French artist Daniel Buren for permission to modify substantially his installation for the show. These negotiations concluded with Buren's refusal to allow his piece to be altered in any way, and the Guggenheim administrators' decision to censor his work. The censorship was particularly curious considering that the organizers had previously fully approved of Buren's installation, which he had described to them in detail.[55] The paradoxical nature of the Guggenheim's decision was further emphasized by the official explanation provided for the removal of Buren's work. According to the officials of the Guggenheim, the same authorities that identified avant-garde art as work that "questions previous art styles, particularly those that directly preceded them" (as Waldman wrote in the exhibition catalogue) were now "eliminating" Buren's installation because it was "in direct conflict with the work of other artists in the exhibition."[56] The irony of this explanation is doubled when one considers the reaction of the vast majority of the other artists. A petition expressing disapproval of the censorship was immediately circulated and signed

53.    See Waldman, "New Dimensions/ Time-Space," p. 15.
54.    In a 1969 article Messer defended the avant-garde as follows: "Subversiveness in the creative sense, however, has little to do with revolutionary intentions and a great deal with the formulation and materialization of ideas powerful enough to challenge—through their mere existence—prevailing assumptions" ("Impossible Art—Why It Is?" p. 31).
55.    See Diane Waldman, letter to Daniel Buren, January 6, 1971, in Daniel Buren Archives, Paris. See also Buren, in "Round and About a Detour," p. 246; and Buren, "The Guggenheim Affair: Reply to Diane Waldman," *Studio International* 182, no. 934 (July/August 1971), p. 5. In a telephone interview with the author (February 21, 1989), Edward Fry, one of the two curators of the 1971 International, acknowledged that the museum had been fully aware of what Buren's work would consist of ahead of time. When I researched the 1971 International at the Guggenheim Museum Archives, however, these documents were missing from the files, and I was told that Diane Waldman had them in her office because they were "confidential."
56.    See Diane Waldman, "Statement by Diane Waldman," *Studio International* 181, no. 933 (May/June 1971), p. 248; and Thomas M. Messer, "'Which is in fact what happened,'" p. 37.

by all but five of the twenty-one artists in the International.[57] And Carl Andre withdrew his work from the show "in protest against the suppression of Buren's work."[58]

What was the nature of the conflict that caused the administrators of the museum suddenly to find Buren's work so offensive? How are we to understand the complicated interaction between Buren's work and those of the relatively established leaders of the Minimalist movement? And what if any are the implications of our findings for the interpretation of cultural politics in New York in the early 1970s? As I will show, the abrupt censorship of Buren had more to do with the Guggenheim's efforts to protect their International from drifting into the midst of the avant-gardist/traditionalist controversy that was beginning to flare up again in New York than with the complaints of other artists. To understand properly what brought this deeper cultural conflict to the surface, however, we must examine the ways in which Buren's work and that of the Minimal artists who took issue with it are peculiarly similar, yet crucially at odds.

### A Peculiar Type of Conflict

*I have a lot of complaints. Most of these are about attempts to close the fairly open situation of contemporary art.*

—Donald Judd[59]

Buren's Guggenheim International installation was yet another manifestation of the motif he had used to analyze both the nature of painting and the politics of cultural institutions over the preceding five years. This installation consisted of an ensemble of two nearly identical pieces of cotton canvas woven in alternate vertical stripes of blue and white. Each stripe was 8.7 centimeters wide, and the two white stripes on the edges of both sides of each canvas were coated with white

57. The petition, in Daniel Buren Archives, Paris, reads: "We want to be showing the [*sic*] Daniel Buren's work in the GIE as it was installed before the opening." It is signed by all of the artists in the exhibition except for Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, and Joseph Kosuth, who refused to sign.

58. Carl Andre, "Letter to the Editor," *Studio International* 182, no. 935 (July/August 1971), p. 6. Andre's letter was in response to Diane Waldman's allegation ("Statement by Diane Waldman," *Studio International* [May/June 1971]) that he had withdrawn his piece from the Sixth Guggenheim International Exhibition "largely because he was dissatisfied with his work in the show" (p. 247). Andre retorted: "Daniel Buren's assertion that I removed my work from the Sixth Guggenheim International solely in protest against the suppression of his work is true. Diane Waldman's assertion that I removed my work because of any dissatisfaction with it is not true." For another unequivocal refutation of Waldman's claims, see Sol LeWitt, "Letter to the Editor: Guggenheim 2," *Studio International* 183, no. 936 (September 1971), p. 61.

59. Donald Judd, "Complaints: Part 1," *Studio International* (April 1969), in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Halifax & New York: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design & New York University, 1975), p. 197.
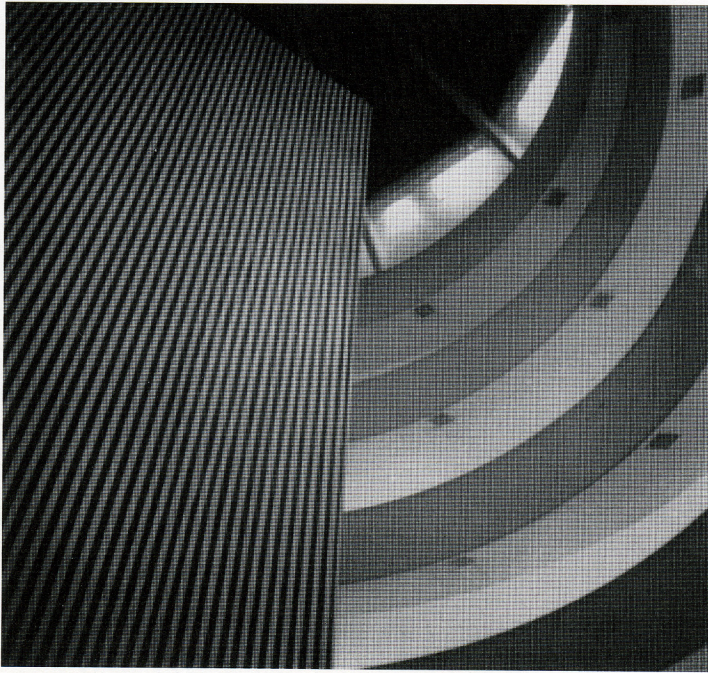
*Daniel Buren.* Untitled. *1971.*

paint. The first canvas was 1.5 meters high by 10 meters wide and hung across Eighty-eighth Street. The second was 20 meters high and 10 meters wide, and was suspended in the axis of the museum's central shaft. This huge canvas spanned from just below the museum's skylight, down the depth of the central well of the spiraling galleries, to a point several yards above the floor.

Suspended as banners, both the verso and the recto of each canvas were identical, and integral parts of the whole. Since the stripes of white paint that Buren applied to each side of the two canvases did not conceal the underlying blue-and-white motif woven into the fabric by the manufacturer, the paintings themselves revealed their own processes. Thus, the work emphasized the canvas and the painting, both linked yet different, and addressed the simultaneous process of the death of the canvas and the birth of a painting that occurs when paint is applied.

In this respect, Buren's pursuit of a stripped-down visual language is similar to the neutral, non-affective writing Roland Barthes called "zero degree writing." For Barthes the zero degree was a means by which literature struggles against "literature" and its presumptions of meaning and order. Similarly, Buren's paintings at the zero degree question themselves and the conventions by which they are deemed to be coherent. Such an exploration of language and critique of inherited codes implied by paintings at the zero degree of form not only signals a utopian and interrogative impulse, but brings to the viewer's attention a diffuse but powerful second level of meaning—a second-order signification that, following

Barthes, we may call "myth." Myth is a form of communication, a language, but also a delusion. Avant-garde works, for instance, have first-order meanings as visual signs, but they also have mythical meaning: such as fine art as a sign of critical thought. And yet, as I will show in a moment, Buren's paintings at the zero degree of form go beyond analyzing and dismantling myths, toward an attempt to destroy the sign itself.

It should also be noted that the two paintings did not employ the traditional wooden support that stretches the canvas, and instead used their particular context as a support/stretcher: two city buildings outside, the architectural order of the museum inside. Accordingly, the support/stretcher was not, as is usually the case, concealed. Rather, it was plainly exposed.

In this connection it is difficult to overemphasize the manner in which Buren's installation dealt with the problems inherent to exhibiting a piece inside the Guggenheim Museum, particularly those of the organizational function of the architecture itself.[60] Buren was obviously acutely aware of the fact that the architectural forces in the interior of Wright's building are so powerful that they tend to reduce what is in the gallery space to mere decorative embellishments.[61] Basically, I interpret the means by which the architectural dynamics of the Guggenheim Museum overpower whatever is installed within it as threefold. First, since the museum is constructed along an extended spiral ramp, the installed works are not spatially distinguished from one another. It follows then that a group show inevitably produces a confusing jumble of signs, resulting in the uniqueness of the spectacular building itself becoming the most significant art work. Second, the architectural order of the building is essentially authoritarian in nature. Just as a standard motion picture of film prescribes a particular sequential perception where the viewer/spectator normally does not control the projectory apparatus, the singular seven-story-high spiral ramp allows the spectators no real choice as to how they will view the works. Thus, the museum's organizers are significantly empowered to orchestrate or otherwise construct narrative from the works on exhibition.[62] Third, the museum is itself a spectacle. The works on exhibit are in constant competition with the grandeur of the omnipresent gaping vortex. This

60.    Two days prior to the opening of the 1971 International, Buren informed Grace Glueck, the first critic to preview the show in the local press, that "[The Guggenheim Museum] really kills a piece of art, primarily because it's a work of art itself" (Grace Glueck, "Museum Presents Wide Media Range," *New York Times*, February 10, 1971, sec. 4, p. 26).
61.    Indeed, I would go further and claim that this was Wright's ultimate goal. For it seems evident that the museum was designed less to display particular aesthetic objects on its walls than, through its very size and architectural dynamics, to prevent anything installed within it from detracting from the uniqueness of the architect's own project.
62.    Although the power of the Guggenheim to convey ideological meaning through a symbolic structuring of visitors' experiences is made emphatic because of its architectural plan, it is characteristic of most museums. The devices that museums employ to order the visitor's perceptions are vast, and include arrows that direct people through the building, guide manuals that are usually the only thing in museums distributed at no cost, and, more recently, taped tours that lead the spectators on a regimented path through the galleries.

effect is amplified by the Guggenheim's continually spiraling walls, which, like the curvilinear motion of a whirlpool that is directed toward the center of the axis of rotation, attract the viewer's eye inward toward the void where the building celebrates itself. The building's centripetal forces, accentuated by the lowness of the parapet, draw the viewer's attention away from what is installed in its gallery spaces and render those installations, whether they be paintings, sculptures, or other objects, ambient and confined to the fringes of the imperiously grand experience offered by the interior of the building.[63]

What makes these observations all the more significant is that they highlight how, by installing one of his huge paintings in the center well of the Guggenheim, Buren tapped into the structural flow of the architecture and prevented his work from being overpowered by the dynamics of the building. It is noteworthy too that placed in the center of the museum, the large painting emphasized the pomposity of the space that, as Buren subsequently put it, "is a perfect example of architecture which although enveloping and welcoming, in fact excludes what is exhibited there (normally) for the benefit of its own exhibition."[64] From the bottom floor of the museum to all seven levels of the ramp, Buren's banner was persistently in the spectator's field of view. As such, the work effectively detoured Wright's attempt to prevent his masterpiece from being surpassed by anything installed within it. At the same time, the magnetic quality of the painting in the central space also exposed the futility of those works that were conceived in terms of a contextually neutral setting and neglected to take the dynamics of the architecture into account.

Having insisted on these points, which I regard as fundamental, I now want to suggest that it was precisely because they were confronted with a critique that powerfully exploited the dynamics of the Guggenheim's structure and revealed the inadequacy of their own site-specific installations that some of the artists involved in the International reacted adversely to Buren's painting. Instead of conceding the shortcomings of their own works that had been uncritically submitted to the spectacular architecture of Wright's building, several artists in the International complained to the museum's officials that Buren's huge blue-and-white-striped fabric visually obstructed their installations—an accusation that was, in the main, false.

For a succinct illustration of this point we have only to consider Michael Heizer's complaint. His installation, *Actual Size*, featured a projected photographic slide of an aesthetic alteration of the natural landscape: a rock, measuring 23 by 17 by 35 feet, with a human figure standing in front of it. In order for the projection to function properly, Heizer's display necessitated a darkened site. It

63.      On the dynamics of the architecture of the Guggenheim Museum, see Buren, "Round and About a Detour," pp. 246–47; and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Formalism and Historicity," in Anne Rorimer, *Europe in the Seventies: Aspects of Recent Art*, exhibition catalogue (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1977), pp. 102–3.
64.      Daniel Buren, "Notes on Work in Connection with the Place Where It Is Installed," *Studio International* 190 (September 1975), p. 175.

*Michael Heizer.* Actual Size. *1971.*

was thus set up in the museum's High Gallery, an enclosed viewing space at the top of the Guggenheim's first ramp. Since Heizer's installation was isolated from the space in which Buren's painting was displayed, his imputation was clearly not based on visual compromise, but rather on the fact that Buren's work was over-shadowing his, both intellectually and symbolically.

It is equally difficult to understand how Buren's banner visually obstructed the works that Walter De Maria, Joseph Kosuth, and Donald Judd exhibited in this show. For instance, in keeping with the circularity of the building, Judd's installation consisted of two cylinders of sheet metal. These were separated by a nine-inch interval. One was fifteen feet in diameter, and the other was placed inside the first. Taking into consideration that the museum's interior walkway is a three-degree circular plane, Judd's two rings exploited the tilt of the ramp upon which they were placed. The outer circle, twenty-four inches high on its uphill side and thirty-two inches on its downhill side, leveled the slope of the ramp and maintained the horizontal plane, while the inner circle paralleled the slope of the ramp. Judd's piece thus acknowledged the concentricity, the slope and spiral quality of the location, and played the level base of the building off the ascent of its ramps. By counterpoising the circular plane and the incline plane of the building's ramps, Judd had neatly accommodated his installation to the museum's architectural structure. But since the height of the work echoed the height of the parapet-like walls which serve as a protective railing, Judd's installation revealed itself primarily as the spectator approached that part of the ramp where it was set
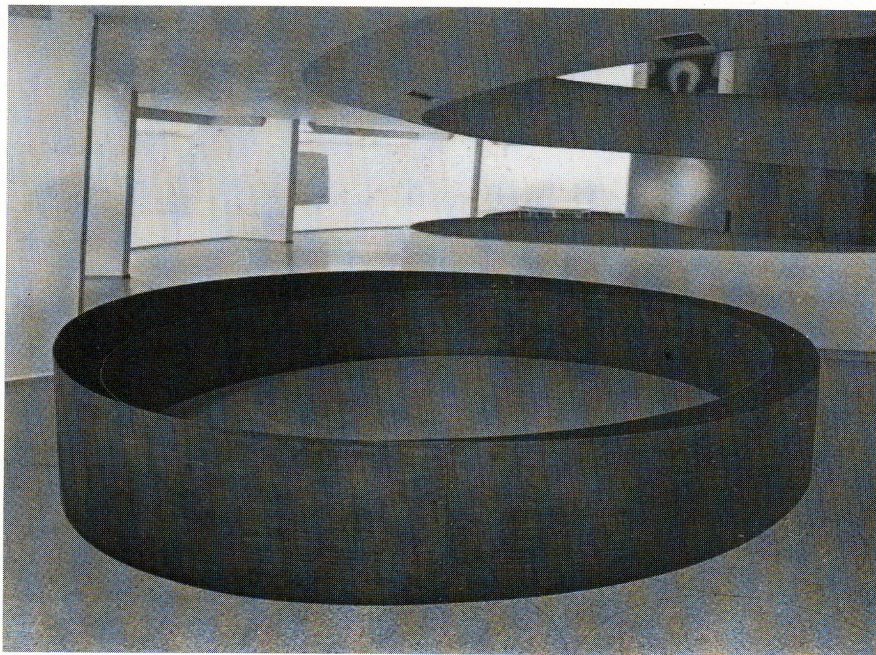
*Donald Judd.* Untitled. *1971.*
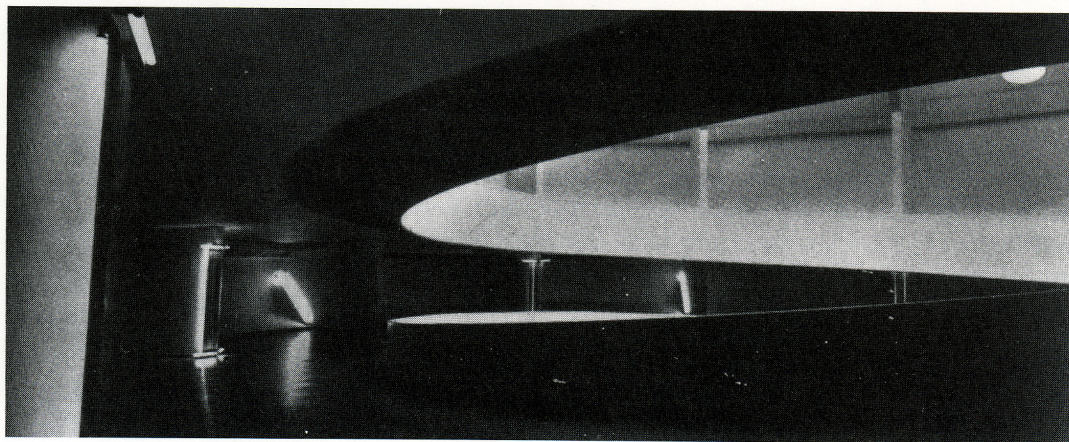


*Dan Flavin.* Untitled. *1971.*

up. In this regard, his claim that a banner placed in the central well of the museum visually obstructed his work was clearly unfounded.

In fact, Dan Flavin was the only artist to protest Buren's work with a somewhat plausible complaint. His untitled installation consisted of a site-specific system of thirty-two fluorescent light fixtures.[65] Sixteen of these were fitted with white bulbs each twenty-four inches long; the other sixteen were fitted with colored bulbs (four each of pink, green, yellow, and blue) each ninety-six inches long. Flavin chose the entire sixth ramp of the museum (comprising nine niches, or galleries) for his installation. Through a strategic arrangement of the fluorescent fixtures, he constructed a kind of light sculpture that explicitly adapted to the architectural detailing of the building by focusing light from the leading edges of the upright walls separating the niches and throwing it inward. The cool blue and green lights installed alternately inside the niches mixed with the warm yellow, pink, and white lights placed on the protruding walls that partitioned the galleries. The synthesis of radiating light thereby joined each niche with those adjacent to it and combined to produce a large multicolored arrangement, transforming the white walls of Wright's architecture. Due to the sheer expanse of Flavin's installation, then, Buren's banner suspended in the central well of the building would have obscured some of its vantage points. It should be noted at once, though, that Flavin's installation itself flooded a vast expanse of space with emanating colored light and compromised its surroundings, including the works that were adjacent to it as well as Buren's painting suspended from the building's dome. Indeed, as one critic lucidly observed, "An elaborate light piece by Dan Flavin flooded Frank Lloyd Wright's exhibition spaces with washes of pure colour in such a way that just for this once the space became the picture and no picture had to be added."[66] Thus, the same objections Flavin had to Buren could have been legitimately leveled against himself.

Clearly there was something besides visual obstruction at the root of opposition to Buren's work. That museum officials sided so swiftly against Buren only compounds the enigmatic character of the controversy. In order to confront these issues as fully and cogently as possible, it is necessary to consider the complicated generational interaction evinced by Buren's aesthetic theories and his chief antagonists, the Minimalist artists Judd and Flavin. The latter's work in particular provides a fine contrast to Buren's, for not only was Flavin the ringleader of the dispute against the young French artist's installation, but his work was to be awarded the top prize as well. All the while, however, I want to keep the Guggenheim's political role as mediator of this curious debacle in the foreground.

65.    Flavin's installation was untitled. It had a lengthy dedication, however, which read: "to Ward Jackson, an old friend and colleague who, when, during Fall, 1957, I finally returned to New York from Washington and joined him to work together in this museum, kindly communicated."
66.    John Russell, *The Times*, London, March 20, 1971.

*Generation Gap*

*I have never encountered such miserable nonsense
as yours.*

—Dan Flavin, letter to Daniel Buren[67]

Although he did not write as programmatically or systematically as did Judd
and Robert Morris, Flavin was an integral figure of the Minimal art movement. In
various ways his installations, which he referred to as "proposals," epitomize the type
of work Judd called for in his "Specific Objects" (1965), which perhaps more than
any other text gave Minimal art its definition. For one thing, Flavin's employment of
ready-made fluorescent fixtures parallels Judd's argument that products of mass
fabrication are absolutely neutral and that works using these prefabricated
materials would have a consistency and stability that all previous plastic arts had
lacked. For another, Flavin's fluorescent light installations are in effect a new
hybrid of painterly and sculptural objects, thus seeming successfully to create a
complex synthetic category that has none of the anthropomorphic projection or
rational compositional characteristics Judd found so reprehensible in the
European tradition at large. Indeed, I am convinced that when Judd opens
"Specific Objects" by stating that "the best new work in the last few years has been
neither painting nor sculpture," he is thinking primarily of Flavin's installations
with ready-made fluorescent fixtures.

In a further sense too, there is a parallel between Flavin's work and Judd's
claim that "the new work obviously resembles sculpture more than it does
painting, but it is nearer to painting." Nothing could be more characteristic of
the operations of painting than Flavin's investigations of the dynamics of color;
it is as though Flavin quickly recognizes that since color is lightweight, luminous
matter that emanates in particles, it can be deployed in its most natural, obvious,
and technically defined form, namely as a more or less infinite emission across
space enabled by the employment of chromatic light. Of course, a feature of the
spatial expansion of color beyond the framework of the conventional pictorial
parameters is an implicit questioning of painting, and in particular of the validity
of containing color within a circumscribed pictorial field, as painting has tradi-
tionally done.

It is important to recognize as well that Flavin's emphasis on placement and
on site-specific location eliminates the possibility of a work's transcending its
temporal and local specificity. As Dan Graham observes in one of the earliest
essays written on Flavin, "The components of a particular exhibition upon its
termination are re-placed in another situation—perhaps put to a non-art use as
part of a different whole in a different future."[68] In other words, the fluorescent

67.    Dan Flavin to Daniel Buren, February 19, 1971, in Daniel Buren Archives, Paris.
68.    Dan Graham, "Dan Flavin," from *Dan Flavin: Pink and Gold,* exhibition catalogue (Chicago:
Museum of Contemporary Art, 1967), n.p.

light fixtures are introduced into a space where they perform specific operations for a period of time, only to be dismantled after use and either returned to the hardware store from which they were rented, or utilized for some other, more mundane function. At the same time, of course, the capacity of Flavin's proposals to tint or color the entire spatial surroundings also accents the relationship between the work of art and its institutional support structure. For not only does the site specificity of the work make the question of intrinsic aesthetic significance moot, but there is also a sense in which by transferring ordinary hardware store lamps into the architectural context of a museum or gallery, Flavin draws attention to the function of the institution of art in prescribing meaning to the works it houses.

But still more is at stake in Flavin's proposals. For there is a clear sense in which Flavin goes beyond the work of his fellow Minimalists in developing a type of protoconceptualist critique that, as he put it in 1966, "press[es] downward toward no art."[69] Which is to say that if for Judd there had always been an element of creative expression in picking up a telephone and ordering objects to be built according to his particular specifications, then Flavin went even further in eliminating significant decision making from his installations by consistently using the medium of ready-made fixtures. His formal evolution thus came to an abrupt halt in 1962 when he began to use these industrial products. It is in this context that Flavin's statements gain resonance: "I sense no stylistic or structural development of any significance within my proposal—only shifts in partitive emphasis—modifying and addable without intrinsic change. . . . It is as though my system synonymizes its past, present and future states without incurring a loss of relevance."[70]

And yet, at the same time that Flavin's proposals dismantle the concept of formal evolution and the notion of an autonomous art object with an inherent aesthetic structure, they nonetheless posit a transcendental realm. For the reference of Flavin's installations to their architectural surround is only compositional, in relation to the interior architectural structure of the gallery, the latter functioning as yet another material to be manipulated by the artist. The result is a work that is located halfway between the decorative and the supramundane, often incorporating both. Thus Flavin argues that "art is shedding its vaunted mystery for a common sense of keenly realized decoration," while simultaneously relating his art to the Kantian Sublime.[71]

But the ambivalence of Flavin's proposals is nowhere more apparent than in the manner in which the works address the viewer. If on the one hand the work provides the foundation for a complex and profound redefinition of

69.     Dan Flavin, "some remarks . . . excerpts from a spleenish journal," *Artforum* 5, no. 4 (December 1966), p. 27.
70.     Ibid.
71.     Ibid. Flavin discusses his proposals in relation to the Kantian Sublime in ". . . in daylight or cool white," *Artforum* 4, no. 4 (December 1965), p. 24.

viewer participation, by placing its viewers in a position of extreme self-awareness of their own performative and phenomenological involvement with the aesthetic object, on the other hand there is a sense in which the role of the spectator encountering a work like this and becoming engulfed by the pools of fluorescent light is one-dimensional. Needless to say, as the viewer walks into the work "as if through a colonnade in a dream," the experience is hardly enlightening, but phantasmal and spectacular.[72]

Similar to Flavin, who continuously used the same industrially manufactured medium of strips of fluorescent light, it is worth recalling that Buren also consistently employed a mass-produced, ready-made material (namely, prefabricated posters or fabric banners with alternating chromatic and white stripes) whenever he exhibited.[73] Indeed, the structural similarity between the two artists' work is striking, which only makes the dialogical relationship between them all the more complex. If for Flavin the systematic repetition of fluorescent fixtures served to "remove the look of history" from his proposals, for Buren the repeated use of striped posters and cloth was meant to eliminate "the concept of progress and perfectibility" from his work, and to attain the "total depersonalization of the thing on display."[74] In the process, "the object's quality of being a unique work," as Buren put it, would be effectively and permanently dismantled, and a "neutral form" of artistic practice could be realized.[75] On one level, then, the structural parallels between the work of both artists included the elimination of compositional principles, the annihilation of the concept of the auratic art object, the emphasis on art as an ephemeral structure, the disavowal of formal evolution, and the decentering of the role of the artist as the producer of precious objects. In a further sense too, Flavin's conception of a new hybrid, a new synthesis, of painterly and sculptural objects, as well as his emphasis on placement, on site-specific location, are clearly taken up and appropriated by Buren.

But at the same time that Buren's work is deeply involved with and indebted to the proposals of his Minimalist precursor, I want to suggest that it also antithetically "completes" the work of Flavin by so reading it as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though artists such as Flavin had failed to go far enough. For a succinct illustration of this point, we have only to compare the operation of site specificity in the work each artist submitted to the Sixth Guggenheim International. In Flavin's proposal, both the fluorescent fixtures and their architectural container were meant to be seen as capable of operating in a neutral way—that is, simply as material elements in the constitution of the proposal.

72.     Emily Genauer, "On the Arts," *New York Post*, January 31, 1970, p. 29.
73.     The fabric, commercially produced awning material, is widely used in France on government buildings, which gives it added connotations for French viewers.
74.     See Georges Boudaille, "Entretien avec Daniel Buren: L'Art n'est plus justifiable ou Les points sur les 'i'," *Les Lettres Françaises*, Paris, March 13, 1968, p. 29, and Buren, "Beware," trans. Charles Harrison and Peter Townsend, *Five Texts* (New York: John Weber Gallery and Jack Wendler Gallery, 1973), p. 16.
75.     Buren, "Beware," p. 15.

Moreover, since it was not so much the specific site as the artist's placement of the work within it that concerned Flavin, when the need arose he could easily reconstitute his proposal in virtually any interior, or almost anywhere in that interior. This aspect of Flavin's work was made strikingly clear three days before the International was scheduled to open. When the museum asked him to alter his plan to exhibit in the High Gallery so that Michael Heizer could set up his slide display there, Flavin had no objections. All that was essential to the site specificity of his installation was that the lamps not be affixed to the ceiling where they would assume the standard function and more mundane aesthetic. Therefore Flavin's proposal investigated neither the space in which it was installed, nor the utilitarian objects out of which it was made. Rather, it celebrated the artist's own inventiveness: the artist's own "creative genius."

By contrast, the extreme contextualism of Buren's work in relation to its architectural surround was highlighted just prior to its censorship. In response to the request by the organizers of the International that he alter the canvas installed within the museum, or that he "hang just the outdoor part of the two-part plan," Buren refused on the grounds that any modification of his project would mutilate his work.[76] Clearly, then, Buren's installation was much more dependent on the specificity of the architectural space than that of his Minimalist counterpart.

All this leads me to propose that there is an important sense in which Buren takes the transition from a model of autonomous visuality to a phenomenological definition of visual experience operative in Flavin's work—a definition of visual experience that emphasizes the inextricable relationships between the perceptual, the spatial, and the temporal—a step further into a structuralist model of visual experience. In this connection it should be stressed that unlike the phenomenological roots of Flavin's work and of the generation of Minimal artists at large, the intellectual foundation of Buren's work is located in the growing awareness, typical of 1960s French cultural thought, of the effect that the legitimation of art by the dominant cultural apparatus has not only on the reception of art works but also on the structural possibilities of their production. In particular, Buren was a close follower of the historical materialist critique of culture put forward by the countercultural group of predominantly neo-Marxist theorists known as the Situationists.[77] As is by now well known, for the Situationists the role of culture in the new spectacular society was to collapse the social contradictions of capitalism by transforming all genuine experience into commodities. Art in particular was singled out as a reifying and legitimizing device. Simply put, the Situationists argued that the powerful impact that art which dominates the art market

76.    Waldman, "Statement by Diane Waldman," p. 248.
77.    Buren has on various occasions noted the considerable influence Situationist theory has had on the development of his work. See for instance "A Little Situationism . . . : Daniel Buren Interviewed by David Batchelor," *Artscribe International* 66 (November/December 1986), pp. 51–52, and Buren, *Daniel Buren/ Entrevue: Conversations avec Anne Baldassari* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), p. 24.

inevitably has on the critical intellect of artists in a society of mass production invalidates their role. Accordingly, they pronounced the death of art and argued that the only justifiable action left to "artists" was to expose the ideological workings of the cultural apparatus.

It would be difficult to overestimate the influence that the skeptical view of art advanced by the Situationists had on Buren. This profound apprehensiveness, discernible in his work, is also made explicit in his writings. There he repeatedly argues that in the dialectical relationship between the object at the zero degree and the context in which the object is placed, the means by which the institution of art imbues what is placed within its parameters with value is underscored.[78]

Furthermore, by utilizing the museum exterior itself, in this case by suspending a banner across Eighty-eighth Street, the contradiction between works that were virtually identical yet different on account of their specific site was made manifest. Thus, while inside the museum the striped canvas drew its meaning from its relation to other works of art and its architectural and institutional context, the same motif placed outside of these parameters was merely a banner, without significance as an art object to the uninitiated beholder. The arbitrary nature of art works was thereby dramatized. For the latter were exposed as structured by the systems of code and convention controlled by the institutional framework of the museum. Also exposed, of course, was the museum's political function as a frame.[79]

In sum, by exposing the condition of art as a highly dependent phenomenon, Buren's ensemble was clearly an attempt to criticize and displace the art practice of Minimalist artists such as Flavin who ultimately maintained the idea of their work's uniqueness and of their own originality. But by revealing the underlying reality of the museum as a historical institution serving political, economic, and ideological functions, the work pointedly challenged the myth that posits the museum as "natural."[80] As Buren wrote in "Critical Limits" (1970), perhaps his most trenchant essay of the period, "To pretend to escape from [the precise and definite limits to which art is contained in bourgeois society] is to reinforce the prevailing ideology which expects diversion from the artist. Art is not free, the artist does not express himself freely (he cannot). Art is not the prophesy of a free society. Freedom in art is the luxury/privilege of a repressive society."[81] Put simply

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78.    See, for instance, "Mise en garde" (1969–70); "Repères" (1970); and "Limites Critiques" (1970), all in *Daniel Buren: Les Écrits.*

79.    As Buren notes in "Function of the Museum" (1970), the museum's political function as a frame "selects, collects, [and] protects" only what the administrators find appropriate. "Function of the Museum" (1970), trans. Laurent Sauerwein, *Five Texts,* p. 5.

80.    Ibid.

81.    The text continues: "Art whatever it may be is exclusively political. What is called for is the analysis of formal and cultural limits (and not one or the other) within which art exists and struggles. These limits are many and of different intensities. Although the prevailing ideology and the associated artists try in every way to camouflage them, and although it is too early—the conditions are not met—to blow them up, the time has come to unveil them" ("Critical Limits" [1970], trans. Laurent Sauerwein, in *Five Texts,* p. 2).

and assertively, there is a neo-Marxist foundation to the critique of art advanced by Buren, and this locates his work in a political tradition that is significantly at odds with the implications of the work of the American Minimal artists.

On the whole, then, it is hardly surprising that there was a clash at the Sixth International when works such as Flavin's were placed in the same space as Buren's. What also becomes apparent is that the organizers of the International were only looking at surfaces—and none too closely at that—when they invited Buren to New York. Yet the fact that the museum had erred in interpreting Buren's proposal became all too clear when Buren made unequivocal the critique developed by his installation by providing a political language outside of his work. Speaking to *New York Times* reporter Grace Glueck, who had come to preview the International, Buren insisted that he not be referred to as an artist and proclaimed that "both artists and museums in the traditional sense are obsolete."[82] Inasmuch as in and of themselves the banners at the zero degree of form did not offer any information whatsoever to the viewer, their message was completely overdetermined by the critical metalanguage Buren provided outside the frame of the paintings—a metalanguage that rendered unavoidable not only the installation's critique of the function of the other works in the show, but also its *détournement* of the museum itself. Indeed, it is likely that more than anything else it was this statement, which appeared in the largest daily newspaper in the United States the day before the opening, that led Guggenheim officials to decide that it was in their best interests to censor Buren's work.

Although the museum as a liberal institution would not have been averse to some controversy, in this increasingly volatile cultural milieu characterized by an explosive conflation of avant-garde art and radical politics, it is not surprising that following Buren's radical comment to the press his work was removed. This rather dramatic act of censorship was symptomatic of the increasingly reactionary times; it was clearly a method of damage control in an effort to save the other works in the show and the exhibition as a whole. Buren's comments would have provided an increasingly conservative press with ammunition to attack the International. Too much hinged on the success of this exhibition for the museum to risk an overtly negative public and critical response.

But it was too late. Buren's radical comments to Glueck reverberated throughout her preview of the show, as she warned her readers not to use "the dirty word 'artist'" if they went to see the International.[83] Almost all of the New York critics who reviewed the exhibition failed to mention the conflict between the artists, or the absence of Buren's installation.[84] What the critical response to this show does reveal is that the New York art world was once again fully caught up

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82.    Daniel Buren, as quoted by Grace Glueck in "Museum Presents Wide Media Range," p. 26.
83.    Ibid.
84.    Only two New York critics mentioned (in passing) the removal of Buren's installation: Elizabeth C. Baker, "Critics Choice: Daniel Buren," *Art News* 70 (April 1971), p. 58, and John Canaday, "Art: A 'Documentary' at Guggenheim," *New York Times*, February 11, 1971, sec. 4, p. 22.

in the dynamics of the avant-gardist/traditionalist controversy, and the Sixth International floated right into the battle zone.[85]

What most alarmed these critics, though, was that this International was a sign that radical avant-garde ideas had infiltrated the fabric of the New York art world and were being supported by naive liberals in the cultural institutions who were inadvertently allowing U.S. culture to be sabotaged. Denise Green, for instance, in her review of the show for *Art News*, rebuked the patrons of this art for aiding in the radical subversion of existing culture: "Politically, these works are a direct threat to the gallery and museum system. The collector of this type of art subsidizes the artist's life-style rather than a 'piece of goods,' and makes possible the dissemination of culturally radical ideas."[86]

In various instances, the critics' effort to find people to blame for the presence of this type of art in New York bordered on calling for mob rule. A case in point is Emily Genauer's review in the *New York Post,* which argued that the work on view signaled the complete "disavowal of traditional notions" of art and culture by avant-garde artists and was the result of an overly liberal media, government, and academia.[87]

Most reviewers, however, condemned the organizers of the International for promoting the new avant-garde art—a critique that was perhaps most pointedly made by Hilton Kramer. In his overview for the *New York Times,* Kramer informed his readers that what was on exhibit at the Guggenheim represented "an index to the demoralization and bad faith that has overtaken so large a part of the current art scene," and scorned the museum's officials for according these works exhibition status: "As Lenin observed in another (but not unrelated) context, when it comes time to hang the bourgeoisie, they will bid against each other to sell you the rope."[88]

Immanent to much of the response to the International was the idea that, as Kramer put it, "the artistic enterprise and the integrity of the museum" were two things that were essential to maintain. For these critics art was considered to be "a disinterested creative enterprise" that only earned its museological status "by virtue either of its quality or of its special, identifiable artistic characteristics."[89] In late 1970 Kramer summed up the conviction that the continued integrity and health of museums was a function of disinterestedness by calling the museum "one of the few sectors of our culture to have remained more or less free of political interference."[90]

The striking overlap between Kramer's view of art and museums and those held by Guggenheim officials is to be found, then, in the mutual assumption that

85.    On the overwhelmingly negative reception that the Sixth International received from the public and press, see Grace Glueck, "Nay-Sayers," p. 22.
86.    Denise Green, "Sixth Guggenheim International," *Arts Magazine* 45, no. 6 (April 1971), p. 78.
87.    Emily Genauer, "Art and the Artist," *New York Post,* February 20, 1971, p. 34.
88.    Hilton Kramer, "Playing the Gracious Host—But to What?", *New York Times,* March 7, 1971, sec. 4, p. 21.
89.    Kramer, "Art and Politics: Incursions and Conversions," pp. 525, 527.
90.    Ibid., p. 524.

art transcends social and political concerns. However, an important difference does exist between the two, a difference most readily discernible in their assessments of recent events in the New York art scene. For critics like Kramer, as I noted above, the later 1960s had seen various "incursions and conversions" which sought to "politicize" art and museums in the United States.[91] But for the organizers of the International the new art trends, representing "ideas powerful enough to challenge prevailing [aesthetic] assumptions," clearly did not seem politically subversive. Instead, as the tone of the rhetoric they used to describe the recent trends indicates, the Guggenheim officials saw these critiques in a much more romantic light as part of the ongoing, heroic struggle of the avant-garde.

### The New Cultural Conservatism

*Dear Hilton, Your Guggenheim International review and the points you make in it invite some discussion. Would you care to join me for lunch some day next week? I would be glad if you would.*

—Thomas M. Messer,
letter to Hilton Kramer[92]

That so many people during the early 1970s expressed their disapproval of the avant-garde is not surprising when we recognize that for many Americans liberalism had become synonymous with all the social problems that the United States was facing. In fact, this was the argument of the new conservatism that swept the country at the beginning of that decade, cutting across political, social, and cultural spheres.

For those who responded to the rhetoric of "public intellectuals" such as Kramer and Bell, the attacks on the avant-garde became a demand for both cultural and political conservatism. Indeed, the sweep of conservatism was so rapid and so pronounced that by 1972 the journal *Partisan Review* organized a symposium titled "On the New Cultural Conservatism" to discuss this phenomenon.[93]

In this increasingly reactionary environment the idea of avant-garde art once again became emblematic of the forces threatening the safety of the United States. In the process of reaffirming traditional culture, the new conservatism targeted its attack not only on avant-garde art and artists, but also, as conservatives had done in the decade following World War II, on the sophisticated liberals who were promoting the idea of avant-garde culture. In the gallery of subversives,

91.   Ibid., p. 525.
92.   Thomas Messer to Hilton Kramer, March 8, 1971, in SRGM Archives.
93.   See "On the New Cultural Conservatism," *Partisan Review* 39, no. 3 (Summer 1972), for the proceedings of this symposium.

then, it is hardly surprising that sympathizers of the avant-garde such as the officials of the Guggenheim Museum, and artists such as Dan Flavin, who were challenging aesthetic tradition although they posited their work as completely autonomous from politics, became as suspect as artists such as Daniel Buren, who sought to develop a radical critique of capitalist culture.[94] Nor is it surprising that the 1971 Guggenheim International, the last of its kind in a series that began in 1956, was such a disaster in so many important ways.

94.    Following the disaster of the Sixth International, the administrators of the Guggenheim reevaluated their exhibition policy and made a few major revisions. Messer immediately sent a letter to Hilton Kramer (March 8, 1971) asking to meet him for a discussion on what the museum was doing wrong. Their meeting seems to have been fruitful, as the policy of the museum immediately fell into step (one might say lockstep) with the new conservatism of the New York art world. The exhibition slated to follow the International, a one-person show by Hans Haacke who was then producing an institutional critical art, was abruptly canceled. Messer also immediately fired the Associate Curator of the Guggenheim, Edward Fry, an organizer of both the International and the ill-fated Hans Haacke exhibition. In the following years, the Guggenheim Museum stopped emphasizing the "latest" avant-garde trends, focusing instead on avant-garde art that (as per Kramer) "by virtue either of its quality or of its special, identifiable artistic characteristics" had by then been effectively recuperated, such as the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky or of the Abstract Expressionists.