

Jean-Paul Martinon, “Daniel Buren: Grafts, Repetitions and Polymorphous Bodies,” in Robert Woof, ed., *Voile Toile Toile Voile* (Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust, 2005, 29-44), © The Wordsworth Trust, 2005.

**Introduction:**

*How shall I paint thee? —Be this naked stone  
My seat, while I give way to such intent;  
Pleased could my verse, a speaking monument,  
Make to the eyes of men thy features known.<sup>i</sup>*

The present text accompanies the ninth re-staging of Daniel Buren’s iconic piece, *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* (Sail / Canvas – Canvas / Sail) since 1975.<sup>ii</sup> This ninth re-staging marks the thirtieth anniversary of its creation. This momentous occasion raises a number of questions. What is one to make of this latest “re-activation”<sup>iii</sup> on Grasmere Lake and in the Wordsworth Museum? What does it mean for Buren to allow this piece to be repeated so many times? After nine events, what else is there to say about it? How to add anything to what Buren himself has already said many times, and this, most eloquently about this piece?<sup>iv</sup> In this essay, I will attempt to capture the significance of this momentous occasion by exploring the issue of repetition in Buren’s work and specifically in relation to *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*. The issue of repetition is delicate and problematic because Buren has often insisted that his work is *not* repetitive. However, after 30 years and nine re-activations of *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*, how can one avoid addressing this issue? In order to do so, I will first explore the basic premise of the piece itself: the idea of repeating an event *again and again*. I will then explore how this idea of repetition relates to *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*.

Something important will be missing from this essay: a possible framework in which to understand Buren’s piece *in the context* of the regatta and exhibition organised by the Wordsworth Trust. This omission is deliberate and has two

reasons. The first one is that it would go against the thesis put forward in this essay. Buren's piece lives beyond the specificities of this ninth re-staging. This does not mean that the context in Grasmere is not important or that it has no effect or impact on the piece itself or its interpretation. This only means that the specific meaning that "attaches" itself to Buren's piece in Grasmere is only one amongst many others (past and to-come) and this essay is an attempt to provide an overview of the workings of the piece itself, here in the lake district, but also in its past incarnations. The second reason has its source in modesty. I am simply unqualified to comment on Wordsworth's poetry or its relevance in relation to contemporary art. The number of exegetic discourses on the author of *The Prelude* obviously surpasses that of Buren. To offer even a hint of a comparison between an English romantic poet and a French contemporary artist would simply be a folly, the product of the much-despised "Fancy".

However, in order to give voice to Wordsworth in these pages, I have taken the liberty of placing a number of poems or extracts of poems between some of the arguments put forward in these pages. These extracts—I hope scholars will forgive the violence occasioned by this act—should be seen as possible areas of enquiry for a comparative analysis of the work of these two men. I therefore leave it to the readers and scholars of both Wordsworth and Buren to expand or reject the potential discourses that could arise from these modest juxtapositions. For the sake of clarity, I will however, give at the end three possible common themes between the two artists. These "embryonic" themes should justify the choice of extracts scattered throughout the present text.

*Her only pilot the soft breeze, the boat  
Lingers, but Fancy is well satisfied;  
With keen-eyed Hope, with Memory, at her side,  
And the glad muse at liberty to note  
All that to each is precious, as we float  
Gently along; regardless who shall chide*

*If the heavens smile, and leave us free to glide,  
Happy Associates breathing air remote  
From trivial cares...<sup>v</sup>*

In an interview with Anne Baldassari, Daniel Buren makes the following comment about repetition in his work.

-“If what is neutral is the sign [i.e. the stripes], it must be able to remain neutral in any situation. What I slowly came to realise is that the only task available was to focus on identifying this situation, the site at which the sign takes place. I understood that if the sign was really neutral and impersonal, then the work could become subjective and personal. It’s the placing of the sign that counts and this placing can only be subjective even if the aim of the placing was to obtain neutrality itself. This is the reason why it is so difficult to talk about my work. There is only repetition if one only looks at the sign. There is permanent evolution, invention, dissolution, regression and movement from one to another. One can find all possible forms of relation in time and space because the work itself can never be reduced to the sign that helps to produce it.”<sup>vi</sup>

I would like to take this quotation and unravel its various meanings. Buren makes clear that the re-staging of the same “neutral” sign does not constitute a repetition, but a permanent “evolution, invention, dissolution regression and movement”. How can this be possible? In order to fathom the significance of these words, I will take one aspect of this comment at a time in order to understand this idea of a repetition as a permanent evolution.

- Text

The first issue is that of the sign. How can one understand this word? I will argue that it is threefold:

First, Buren tells us that his famous trademark, the stripes (*rayure*) constitutes a “sign”. I will argue that this sign corresponds effectively to a *text*, Buren’s main text or main message endlessly re-staged since 1965. In the context of *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*, this text can be transcribed in the following way: *8.1cm wide stripes of nylon of alternate colour sewn together.*<sup>vii</sup> In themselves, these stripes of 8.1cm constitute Buren’s first repetition: white stripe / coloured stripe / white stripe / coloured stripe / white stripe / etc., a repetition *within* the text itself or the text as repetition. It is neutral because of the nature of this repetition: there is nothing *more* to add to these stripes (another stripe?)—Buren’s trademark.

In addition to this first repetition, there is the duplication of identical striped *sheets* (of paper, nylon, linen, etc.) at any one showing. This duplication constitutes the second repetition. Buren does not just exhibit *one* striped sheet; he usually shows a *series* of striped sheets. In the context of *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*, Buren repeats his trademark nine times: eight sails/canvases made up of four different colours (green / white, yellow / white, blue / white, red / white) and one single brown / white sail / canvas. This duplication constitutes a second text that can be transcribed in the following manner: *“nine sheets of nylon made up of 8.1cm wide stripes of alternate colours sewn together”*.

In addition to these two repetitions, there is a further repetition: that of the piece’s re-creation. *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* has been repeated nine times since it was originally shown in November 1975 in Berlin. Although the sites vary, the regattas are different and the order of canvases in the show is never the same, the piece itself does not change. The sails remain the same. The concept “regatta-followed-by-museum-exhibition” is simply repeated again and again. This repetition constitute a third text which says: *“Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile was created in 1975 with nine sheets of nylon made up of 8.1cm wide stripes of alternate colours sewn together and has been shown eight times prior to the event on the lake at Grasmere and at the Wordsworth Museum”*.

These three repetitions constitute Buren's three main texts. What is curious about these three texts is that they say very little. They are purely informative. At this stage of the analysis, the inversion of the title adds very little to this game of repetitions. In French, the resonance of the two words is identical and that sails are given pre-eminence during the event and canvases dominate the concept in the museum. The fact that there are nine sails or that the piece has been repeated nine times since 1975 also says little. It simply adds data to Buren's vast CV. What generally brings the real profusion of commentary is the site in which the event and the exhibition take place. This site constitutes what I would call the *sub-text* to Buren's *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*, a subtext that adds itself to Buren's neutral texts.

*Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point  
With an unswerving line, I fixed my view  
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,  
The horizon's utmost boundary; for above  
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.<sup>viii</sup>*

- Subtext

Buren writes regularly on the importance of the site of (and in) art. In the quotation mentioned above, he says it clearly: "...the only task available [to him] was to focus on identifying... the site at which the sign takes place." In the case of *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*, Buren is happy to delegate this task to others or to encourage others to determine this site. Buren did not choose Grasmere Lake or the Wordsworth Museum. It was chosen by Daniel Sturgis, an artist and a curator. Sturgis effectively added the subtext "Grasmere" to Buren's text. It is a subtext because it *foregrounds* the piece itself. A local inhabitant attending the regatta or a visitor to the Wordsworth museum will not necessarily read Buren's *texts*. They will read the *subtext* "written" (read here curated) by Sturgis and Robert Woof of the Wordsworth Trust. This subtext can only be transcribed by a

series of place names: *Grasmere village, Grasmere lake, Dove Cottage, Wordsworth Museum, Library, 3<sup>rd</sup> W Gallery, Rydal Mount, the Lake District, Cumbria, etc.* It can only be a series of geographical places because a site can never articulate itself into a fully-fledged narrative: the context.

*Thus oft amid those fits of vulgar joy  
Which, through all seasons, on a child's pursuits  
Are prompt attendants, 'mid that giddy bliss  
Which, like a tempest, works along the blood  
And is forgotten; even then I felt  
Gleams like the flashing of a shield; —the earth  
And common face of Nature spake to me  
Rememberable things; sometimes, 'this true,  
By chance collisions and quaint accidents  
(Like those ill-sorted unions, work supposed  
Of evil-minded fairies), yet not vain  
Nor profitless, if haply they impressed  
Collateral objects and appearances,  
Albeit lifeless then, and doomed to sleep  
Until maturer seasons called them forth  
To impregnate and to elevate the mind.<sup>ix</sup>*

- Context

The word “context” comes from the Latin *contexere*, which means to weave together the part of a discourse that surrounds a word and throws light on its meaning. How can one understand the *context* of Buren's piece? In order to answer this question, it is necessary first to dispel a few myths:

Firstly, a context has nothing to do with the site itself. The site on its own is not the context. The Wordsworth Trust or the lake at Grasmere says *nothing* about

Buren's work. The context is created by the *juxtaposition* of piece and site. The context is therefore the discourse generated by two events taking place simultaneously, one created by Buren or on behalf of Buren and the other created by Nature (the lake) and the museum in Grasmere.

Secondly and consequently, a context does not exist in some ethereal world peculiar to Buren, in things he or his assistants has or have read or researched or in the mind of Sturgis, the curator. Nor does it linger *with* the piece itself. A context never stands *prior* to the work in some previous or imaginary history or consciousness. Although the piece has been repeated nine times already, the context of Buren's *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* is each time the *event* occasioned by a new staging and its many socio-cultural and geographical resonances.

Thirdly, a context is never placed in a relation of opposition or asymmetry: one can never say: here lies the artwork and here lies the context: one necessarily feeds the other. This explains the fact that one simply cannot look at Buren's striped sails by themselves. On their own, they mean nothing. They are neither beautiful nor meaningful. In the Museum, Buren's work only makes sense if one takes in consideration a number of factors relating to the event itself (weather on the lake or exhibition space in the museum, for example). All these factors show that the context can never be distinguished from the work.

Fourthly, a context is never a final. A context is never a conclusive statement that bring together all the circumstances that make a work of art. *Toile / Voile – Voile / Toile* precisely exposes this fact: the piece can be restaged and re-interpreted. The next performance of the piece will *not* make *more* sense than the event at Grasmere. One can even speculate that there will never be a "last word" or a final exegesis on Buren's piece, the sum total of all empirical and scholarly observations. This is due to the fact that the piece is effectively always open to re-staging and re-interpretation.

Finally, at the time of the event, the context is never singular; there is not *one* context to a work of art. In most of Buren's pieces, the context is at least dual. On the one hand, there is the context of the production of the work of art (The Wannsee and the Akademie der Künste in Berlin) and on the other; there is the context of its reception (the viewer's positive, negative or indifferent reactions to the piece). This last context is probably the most important one: A work of art *cannot* exist outside the circumstances in which the viewer views the work whether it is shown on a lake or in the gallery. The viewer is the main creator of the context for an artist's work, not the artist him or herself. As is well known, there is no longer any author as such, but a "multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."<sup>x</sup> In other words, stimulated by the initiative of the artist and / or the curator, the viewer *creates* the context of the artwork, therefore gives it its meanings, by reading and participating in the event.

*Where lies the Land to which yon Ship must go?  
Fresh as a lark mounting at break of day,  
Festively she puts forth in trim array;  
Is she for tropics suns, or polar snow?  
What boots the enquiry? —Neither friend nor foe  
She cares for; let her travel where she may,  
She finds familiar names, a beaten way  
Ever before her, and a wind to blow.<sup>xi</sup>*

The viewer obviously does not create the context *ex-nihilo*, by simply looking at the piece or considering the various aspects of the gallery event. He or she relies on and depends upon a supplement or a mediation that is usually attached to the piece: its commentary (the label, the press release, this text). To write about this supplement or this mediation in the context of a commentary is always difficult because it challenges the endeavour itself. In order to avoid catching myself in the act of commenting on the idea of commentary, I will simply quote a remark



made by the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in the context of a previous exhibition by Daniel Buren. He wrote that a commentary is a text that comes to add itself onto the text put forward by the artist and this makes the work disappear: “Only the interpretation is present. Presenting the work and presenting the effect of the work [its reception], the recipient [the viewer] receives not the message, but the reception of the message through the intermediary of a primary recipient [curator or critic].”<sup>xii</sup> A viewer therefore does not understand the work *ex-nihilo*, he or she understands the piece through the mediation of texts written by curators, critics and museum directors. This does not mean that the viewer cannot understand the piece by him or herself or that there is no empirical or sensuous perception possible. This means that beyond sensuous impressions, there is only interpretation. There is no such thing as a self-contained work of art “with a message”. There are only interpretations and the viewer, by looking at the work, deciphers not the work, but the interpretation.

In this way, the *context* of an exhibition such as *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* is, like the artwork itself, a *text* and this context is always written by the viewers and is effectively always to-come.

- Graft

We usually perceive artists as if they were the sole creators of their work. Buren knows that this is not true. The task of the artists is simply to join together an already constituted text (“*nine sheets of nylon made up of 8.1cm wide stripes of alternate colours*”) with another set of texts (in our case, *Grasmere, Romanticism, Wordsworth poetry* – in general, *conceptual art, site-specificity, institutional critique, the evolution of painting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, etc.*) and the combination of these texts constitute the piece itself. This act of joining disparate elements together is effectively an act of grafting, that is, an act of transplanting a discourse onto another discourse. Buren’s trademark, the striped canvases is here, obviously, the prime example. By bringing with him his trademark, Buren

effectively transplants or grafts a previous element already used in many other occasions onto a new one. Buren is effectively someone who spends his time grafting a dialogue (stripes) onto already constituted dialogues (in our case the rural environment of the lake district already laden with romantic *signification*, therefore with texts). The verb “to graft” is important. To graft comes from the Latin *graphein*, which means “to write”. Artists “write” or graft a text or a discourse within an already constituted text, discourse or event.

*The immortal Mind craves objects that endure:  
These cleave to it; from these it cannot roam,  
Nor they from it: their fellowship is secure.*<sup>xiii</sup>

All art (from the purest of poetry to the most immaculate abstract painting) is an act of grafting. There is no such thing as something proper or original, all is caught up and constrained within the act of grafting, an act that is *at once* corrupting (of that which is grafted upon) and creative (the changes brought upon by the new graft). If you take a piece of skin from a donor area and place it on a defective or denuded area, you will have transformed the skin forever. At the start of his career, Buren admitted of having “stumbled upon” the famous striped material in a Parisian flea-market. The fact that he appropriated it is a way of acknowledging that the striped material was already *there* in the world. By subsequently using it in most of his work to date, Buren shows not only his fidelity to a single donor, but also his understanding that no creative gesture is original. All artistic gestures are always an appropriation of a previous reading or vision, a monstrous graft, never new or truly innovative.

In the case of *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*, this grafting is not limited to the site (subtext) chosen by the curator or its context. The grafting process takes place at *all stages* of the creative process, from conception to event, from exhibition to criticism. A review by a local newspaper, for example, can constitute a graft placed on Buren’s already immense body of criticism available on his web site. A

few years after Buren's death, this review—this graft—will end up being either discarded or taken in consideration in order to evaluate the importance of Buren's oeuvre in the context of a "final" *catalogue raisonné*.

What this process of grafting is telling us is that there is never any stable ground from which *to begin* a discourse. The artwork or the commentary is always-already there, in nature or in the urban environment. The artist or the critic has only to render it meaningful by grafting it, that is, by provoking *a displacement of meaning* within or between already constituted discourses. The same is true of *this* writing—never original, always-already amidst an already written sentence, that of Buren or that of previous critics.

*When will she return, and whither? She will brook  
No tarrying; where She comes the winds must stir  
On went She, and due north her journey took.<sup>xiv</sup>*

The last aspect of this act of grafting (or writing in a Derridean sense<sup>xv</sup>) is that if the graft is not rejected by the host body (and this has happened several times in Buren's career<sup>xvi</sup>), the artwork or the discourse effectively undertakes what could be called "a life of mutations" that knows no rest. This endlessly mutating life is particularly acute in the case of *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*, because here the grafting process is effectively never-ending. The event in Grasmere is only *one* graft amongst many on a body already laden with many previous grafts. *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* is really a monster who will now live *forever* with a British graft called "Grasmere / Wordsworth Trust" transplanted onto its polymorphous body. No further regatta or exhibition and no further interpretation could possibly ignore it. To do otherwise would be to not do justice to Buren's extraordinary work.

- Repetition, evolution, invention, dissolution, regression and movement

This brings us back to the issue of repetition. As mentioned above, the project has been repeated many times, each time with an added graft. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July 2005, the Art of Sailing (*L'Art de la Voile*) was staged on Grasmere Lake. Later that day, Canvas De-Sailed (*La Toile Dévoilée*) was installed in the Library of the Wordsworth Museum. The event on Grasmere Lake differed from all the previous regattas: Wannsea (1975), Lake Geneva (1979), Lake Lucerne (1980), Lake Thun (1983), Lake Villeneuve d'Ascque (1998), Lake Villeurbanne (1999), the Tel Aviv Marina (1999) and Seville (2004). On Grasmere Lake, for example, there was no need for a motorboat as on the Wannsea in Berlin, a gentle breeze helped young English sailors to complete their race. Unlike in all previous museum displays, the canvases were shown this time snuggling together. How does one make sense of these differences amidst all these repetitions?

Repetition usually means to retain a central concept and to re-present this concept again and again. However, repetition is really *the introduction of difference* within a central concept. To repeat a decorative motif, for example, is to introduce instability or disequilibrium into the original pattern. To create rhymes in poetry, to take another example, is to include a difference between two words and inscribe that difference at the heart of a repetition. In relation to *time*, there are two crucial aspects to the act of repetition. The first one is that all repetitions in time always exist *simultaneously* in the present. It is always from the point of view of the present that the past coexists with the present. As the philosopher Gilles Deleuze remarked, "It is from [the] point of view of the present that the second is said to resemble the first."<sup>xvii</sup> The second crucial aspect is that repetition in time always lies in the imagination. It is the role of the imagination to draw something new from repetition, to draw difference from it. In the context of the Grasmere event, these two aspects are all too clear. Firstly, it is always from the present that we acknowledge the existence of the repetition of *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*. Secondly, if one has not witnessed all previous incarnations of the piece, it is only in the imagination that one can address the case of Buren's

repetition. What these two aspects mean is that there can never be a repetition without difference.

This repetition with difference shows that *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* can never be recovered as a stable, identifiable project “dated 1975”. As he himself remarked, “In a way, there is and there will be no original staging for this piece.”<sup>xviii</sup> The event in Grasmere is as primary *and* as secondary as the event that took place “for the first time” on the 20 September 1975 at 4.30pm on the Wannsee in Berlin. Buren’s work is always a movement open to the differentiation brought in by repetition.

*Alas my journey, rugged and uneven,  
Through prickly moors or dusty ways must wind;  
But hearing thee, or others of thy kind,  
As full of gladness and as free of heaven,  
I, with my fate contented, will plod on,  
And hope for higher raptures, when life’s day is  
done.*<sup>xix</sup>

The repetition with difference of *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* also tells us that, curiously, the piece has no *single* author. No one could reasonably state that there is a person called Buren who could be identified as the author of this work. Because the piece brings together a multiplicity of voices or grafts, it can never be identified as originating from a single author. This does not mean that there is no authorship. *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* is obviously signed Daniel Buren. This only means that, with this piece, there is always the possibility of *another* author who will add another meaning to the piece. In Grasmere, this other author is obviously Daniel Sturgis who revealed, perhaps for the first time, Buren’s Romantic side. In another 50 years time, a curator might want to stage *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* on an artificial lake in an air-conditioned theme park, thus grafting onto Buren’s piece a signification that did not exist originally. This

possibility prevents any attempt to pin down the real *author* of the piece and consequently its true meaning.

To emphasise the impossibility of locating an author is not to put forward an idealistic interpretation that would attempt to expose *what cannot be exposed*, some ethereal movement that makes artistic creation possible. The repetition of *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* is not an attempt to show the underlying *truth* of all discourse. To emphasise this impossibility is also not an attempt to expose a con artist whose work can *never be identified*. Buren is not a conceptual artist putting forward concepts that can never be fixed or that always call for further conceptualisation. *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* is not locked in a masturbatory autism in the style of Duchamp. Buren's work, on the contrary marks the infinity of the conceptual operation. He does not put forward work that calls for interpretation; he produces work that is effectively *about* the *possibility* of interpretation, therefore *about* the future. As he once observed: "my main activity is tied to the ambition of making visible the 'not-yet-seen'"<sup>xx</sup>. The text (sails that also happen to be canvases) does not exist in a snug airtight identity to itself. Because it is a movement of dissemination, evolution, invention, dissolution and regression, *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* is simply, but most strictly, *an opening to what is not known*: future races, futures shows.

*Relic of Kings! Wreck of forgotten wars,  
To winds abandoned and the prying stars,  
Time loves Thee!*<sup>xxi</sup>

This explains why there is never a propitious time or location for *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*. If one is only there for the regatta, one misses the event in the museum. If one only sees the canvases in the museum, one has missed the regatta. Even if one sees both events, one is still dependent on memory or imagination for the piece to become meaningful. Our time (the time of our visit) and the location in which one views Buren's piece, is always the *wrong one*. The

piece forces the viewer to join up the two times and spaces in their mind. “This is what took place then on the lake and this is what takes place now in the museum.” This spatial and temporal disjointedness is perfectly—and famously—encapsulated in the doubling and inversion of the title of the piece: the time and space of *Voile / Toile* can never match the time and space of its inverted staging: *Toile / Voile*.

By disjointing the space and time of viewing, Buren does something that no other artist has done before. With *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*, Buren effectively exposes *the event of art itself*. On the one hand, (as it were) there is the spacing occasioned by the piece. This spacing *goes* from sail to canvas. On the other, there is the timing of the piece. This timing *stretches* from the event of the regatta to the event in the museum.<sup>xxii</sup> This coming and going, this spatio-temporal movement, from lake to museum, from regatta to exhibition exposes the temporal and spatial mechanisms *of all art*. When one has the privilege to witness both the regatta and the sails in the museum, one is effectively going through the various “steps” of the creation of art, from studio or lake *to* museum. This is the true beauty of Buren’s iconic piece: it disjoints the space and time of art and this disjointedness reveals art *as event*. Is it not precisely, what fascinates us in this piece and makes us want to restage the regatta *repeatedly*? Do we not always want to see art as it moves, as it sails, always coming, never final?

- Wordsworth, Romanticism, Buren

So what of Wordsworth? What is one to make of the event *in Grasmere*? I promised to finish by giving a few common themes between the two artists in order to justify the choice of extracts scattered throughout the present text. These “embryonic” themes will be *my grafts*, tiny implants that will either be accepted by the host body or simply discarded as irrelevant to either Buren’s or Wordsworth’s scholarship.

—Nor, perchance—  
If I should be where I no more can hear  
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these  
gleams  
Of past existence—wilt thou then forget  
That on the banks of this delightful stream  
We stood together; and that I, so long  
A worshipper of Nature, hither came  
Unwearied in that service: rather say  
With warmer love—oh! with far deeper zeal  
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget  
That after many wanderings, many years  
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,  
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me  
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!<sup>lxxiii</sup>

Microscopic Graft 1: A first “embryonic” theme would be the typically modern quest for self-determination. It would be wrong to think that Romanticism, whether in England with Wordsworth or Coleridge, or in Germany with Schlegel or Novalis or later in France with Chateaubriand or Lamartine, was an irrational *counter-current* to the project of rationalism put forward by the Enlightenment. Romanticism did not rebel against the Enlightenment’s famous motifs, such as, for example, the Cartesian Cogito, Locke’s empiricism or the systematicity of Kantian philosophy. On the contrary, Romanticism should really be seen as the necessary underpinning structure that sustains the idea of rationality and progress. Irrationality, instead of being a negative force against rationality, is in fact what *regenerates* the process of rationalisation of the modern world. This regeneration (or this sublation — Hegel’s *aufhebung*) is based on the realisation that all human creations are no longer an attempt to organise Nature, but to participate with Nature in an evolutionary process of self-realisation. In this way, Romanticism opens the path to the Modern world and its infinite quest for self-



identity. Whether it is Wordsworth's *Prelude* or Chateaubriand's *Memoires d'outré tombe* or Schlegel's *Athenaeum*, the path of self-questioning and self-discovery is opened, thus inaugurating the premises for all our modern human sciences: from anthropology to psychoanalysis.

How does Buren's work relate to this famous romantic motif? Is Daniel Sturgis telling us that Daniel Buren is a romantic at heart? A possible answer would be that Buren's art is indicative of a type of endeavour—modern, contemporary, cutting-edge—that somehow faithfully maintains the ideals of Romanticism. His renunciation of figurative representation in favour of abstraction, his quest for a type of art unsoiled by expressionism, his attempt to reach “the degree zero of painting”, his use of simple, ordinary and functional objects (striped sheets), his desire to take art back to Nature or into the vibrant life of the urban sphere, his quest to create a work of art that is beautiful because of its “perfect internal functioning”, his relentless desire to free art from all the constraints of the museum apparatus, etc. clearly show that Buren belongs to the great tradition of modern art, one for which art realises itself outside of all societal ideologies. Buren is no post-modern artist. He does not believe that art has been subsumed to mass visual culture. He believes that art invites not a casual glance, but a meaningful encounter. He believes that art should not be locked in a self-reflexive language, that the world and nature feed the development of art. In this way, Buren remains faithful to what constitutes the Romantic foundations of our modernity: art's ability for self-determination, one in which regeneration in the urban or natural environment is crucial. In the context of *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*, it is the irrationality of nature (wind, for example) and the enthusiasm of children that regenerates the cultural process taking place in the museum. In this sense, and perhaps in this sense only, *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* belongs to Romanticism.

Microscopic Graft 2: Another theme would be the importance given to an authentic approach to Nature. Romanticism's main obsession was to arrive at an

understanding of humanity as close as possible to Nature. This understanding necessarily implied an appreciation of Nature as unconstrained by socio-cultural boundaries or regulations. Wordsworth's well-known view that the best education for a child is to be close to Nature and outside of societal prejudices is here a good example. The main emphasis in this approach is a certain form of naiveté. For Romanticism, naiveté is not ignorance or error, it is not the opposite of Reason. A naïve person is someone who trusts human nature not as a result of inexperience or because he or she lacks sophistication or critical judgement, but because he or she *puts faith* in Nature. As such, naiveté is the condition of all authentic understanding of Nature. For Wordsworth, Nature was not something to be analysed or studied. Human responses to Nature should always be untaught and spontaneous, unprompted by others, by books or conventions.

This pre-eminence given to an authentic approach to Nature, in which feeling is unmediated by analytical reasoning is also present in Buren's work. *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* indeed begins with the children-led event of the optimist race and not with the adult world of the museum exhibition. Buren therefore starts with an ingenuous and uncomplicated entertainment: a regatta. By showing the sails in the museum, Buren clearly indicates that what counts *first* is the child-like event on the lake, an event that does not need any form of rationalisation. Consequently, the canvases in the museum represent a simple way of bringing fresh air, that is, an innocent and enjoyable moment, into the solemn process of rationalisation operated by and in the museum. This explains why it would be wrong to think that, in this piece, Buren is trying to marry Nature (the bucolic *Voile / Toile*) with Culture (the museified *Toile / Voile*). Not unlike Wordsworth's ability to bring together antinomies such as, for example, spontaneity and self-control, stasis and mobility, Buren also juggles with contrasts in order to expose a true experience of art, one which is neither learned nor innocent, but simply human.

Microscopic Graft 3: A third “embryonic” theme would be that of always evading the possibility of presence. Wordsworth was famous for his attempt to show the movement between actor and spectator, between poet and reader. This movement between interiority and exteriority is particularly evident in cases in which Wordsworth doubles or, as Coleridge remarked, “ventriloquizes”<sup>xxiv</sup> the figure of the poet. *The Prelude*, for example, puts forward the poet in a situation where he meets or apostrophizes a number of characters. Each of these characters presents in miniature a reflection of Wordsworth himself. These reflections prevent the possibility of characterising Wordsworth himself. In this way, and not unlike Rousseau’s *Confessions*, *The Prelude* exposes the ever-changing temporality of human consciousness. The confessional narrative of *The Prelude* shows how, for Wordsworth, the mind shapes the material it absorbs, working and re-working them. This need to never concretise a presence and to emphasise constant change clearly shows that Wordsworth’s work is one always turned towards the future, towards the next development.

This is not only central to Buren’s work but it is also a key feature of *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* in the manner it emphasises the movement between exteriority (nature) and interiority (museum) in a process of sublation. *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* represents a movement that knows no rest because neither the Art of Sailing nor Canvas Desailed can exist by themselves, they need not the other, but the process of regeneration that the other brings to the ensemble. The fact that there is never rest shows that nothing can be reduced to the simplicity of presence in Buren’s iconic piece. This restlessness is perhaps what brings these two radically different artists together: neither of them can accept being recuperated as “the same”, something museified, academicized, in a word deadened. Poetry and Fine Art need regeneration. In the case of Wordsworth: this regeneration would take place in Nature—never Sublime, always superior to God, *a source of inspiration*. In the case of Buren: this regeneration would be Art—never an Object, always an event, *permanently differed*. Both establish the human power of creativity as a quasi-divine property of near limitless application.

*The primary imagination I hold to be the living  
Power and prime Agent of all human Perception,  
and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal  
act of creation in the infinite I am.<sup>xxv</sup>*

(Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

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- <sup>i</sup> William Wordsworth, “The River Duddon”, III, composed between 1806-1820, published 1820, in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, edited by Thomas Hutchinson, Oxford University Press, London, [1904], 1953, p. 296.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* first took place on the Wannsee in Berlin and then exhibited at the Akademie der Künste in the same city. Subsequent “reactivations” include: Geneva (1979), Lucerne (1980), Thun (1983), Villeneuve d’Ascque (1998), Villeurbanne (1999), Tel Aviv (1999) and Seville (2004).
- <sup>iii</sup> I use here the preferred terminology of both Daniel Buren and Suzanne and Selman Selvi, the owner of *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*.
- <sup>iv</sup> See Buren’s text in the first catalogue for *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*, Galerie Folker Skulima, Berliner Künstlerprogramm des Deutschen Akademischen Austauschdienst (DAAD), Berlin, 1975. See also the text written on the occasion of the 1979 regatta and exhibition in Geneva and reprinted in *Il est encore une fois : Voile/Toile, Toile/Voile*, Kunstmuseum, Lucerne, May 1980 and the texts written by Buren and Irith Hadar for the poster/brochure published on the occasion of the event on the Tel Aviv Marina and at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1999.
- <sup>v</sup> Wordsworth, “Her only pilot the soft breeze...”, Miscellaneous Sonnets, VII, published 1827, in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, p. 200.
- <sup>vi</sup> Daniel Buren, interview with Anne Baldassari, in *Daniel Buren, Entrevue*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Flammarion, Paris, p. 29, my translation.
- <sup>vii</sup> As is well-known, the width of the stripes for *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile* varies from the usual 8.7cm width used by Buren in all his other works. See Buren, *Voile / Toile – Toile / Voile*, Galerie Folker Skulima, Berlin, 1975.
- <sup>viii</sup> Wordsworth, “The Prelude”, I, 368-372 in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, p. 499.
- <sup>ix</sup> Wordsworth, “The Prelude”, I, 581-596 in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, p. 501-2.
- <sup>x</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, in *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, Harper Collins, 1977, p. 145.
- <sup>xi</sup> Wordsworth, “Where lies the Land...”, Miscellaneous Sonnets, XXXI, published 1807, in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, p. 205.
- <sup>xii</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “Preliminary Notes on the Pragmatic of Works: Daniel Buren”, translated by Thomas Repensek, *October*, Vol. 10, Autumn 1979, p. 62.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Wordsworth, “Those words were uttered...”, Miscellaneous Sonnets, XII, published 1807, in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, p. 209.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Wordsworth, “With Ships the sea was sprinkled far and nigh...”, Miscellaneous Sonnets, XXXI, published 1807, in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, p. 205.
- <sup>xv</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Just to take a famous example, one could mention Buren’s rejection from a group exhibition at the Guggenheim museum in 1971, a rejection vindicated 34 years later with his solo exhibition in the same museum in 2005.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton, Continuum, London, 1994, p. 124.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Interview with Daniel Buren, Wednesday 4 May 2005, Paris.

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<sup>xix</sup> Wordsworth, “To a Skylark –1”, X, Poems of the Fancy, composed 1805, published 1807, in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, p. 126.

<sup>xx</sup> Daniel Buren, “Why Write?”, in *Art Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 2, Words and Wordworks, Summer 1982, p. 108.

<sup>xxi</sup> Wordsworth, “Composed among the ruins of a castle in North Wales”, Miscellaneous Sonnets, VIII, composed 1824, published 1827, in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, p. 216.

<sup>xxii</sup> There is unfortunately no space to explore here another temporal dimension to Buren’s piece: its time in Suzanne and Selman Selvi’s collection.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Wordsworth, “Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a tour”, composed 13 July 1798, published 1798, Poems of Imagination, XXVI, 146-159, in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, p.165.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Scholar Press, Menston, 1971, p. 258.

<sup>xxv</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XIV.