

# Installation: Colour, Space and Environment

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## Abstract

Artists have interpreted and explore the concept of colour, space and environment in variety of different forms of installations to represent various contexts: physically and visually, emotionally and psychologically. Liam Gillick's and Daniel Buren's works especially manipulate colour reflection through the use of coloured panels that arrange in repetitive geometric forms effectively transform the space into a glowing colour reflection environment. By exploring the concept of illusionary planes, Sol LeWitt's installations manipulate viewers' perception and the relationship between colour, space and architecture. Meanwhile, Olafur Eliasson is the artist that explores colours and its effect on space and surroundings within the context of perception and reality. The unique character of each installation has a strong role in influencing a physiological and psychological experience.

**Keywords** installation, colour, space, environment.

## Abstrak

*Para seniman telah mentafsir dan meneroka konsep warna, ruang dan persekitaran dalam pelbagai bentuk karya instalasi yang mencerminkan keadaan fizikal, visual, emosi dan psikologi yang berbeza. Liam Gillick dan Daniel Buren menghasilkan karya-karya yang mengolah refleksi warna melalui penggunaan panel berwarna yang disusun dalam bentuk geometri secara berulang-ulang. Meneroka ilusi permukaan, Sol LeWitt memanipulasi persepsi penonton terhadap kaitan warna, ruang dan seni bina. Olafur Eliasson meneroka kesan warna ke atas persepsi terhadap realiti. Setiap*

*instalasi meninggalkan kesan visual yang kompleks dalam mempengaruhi pengalaman fisiologi dan psikologi.*

**Kata kunci** instalasi, warna, ruang, persekitaran.

## INTRODUCTION

Colour has psychological effects on human beings. They can produce sensation, arouse emotion and create ideas, which repose, excite or provoke sadness or happiness and the effect of colours on us is caused by their energy entering our bodies. Colour naturally effects our perception within the space as well as influence surrounding. 'The power attraction of colour is not only dependent on the colour and its luminosity but also the psychological effects which it automatically produces'.<sup>1</sup> It can affect in quite dramatic ways our emotion and our perception of the world we live in as part of our aesthetic experience. As the colour significantly enabled to produce various visual illusions, many artist has explore this concept to create experiential environment installations that can evoke complex multi-sensory to investigate perception, emotion and psychological reactions.

### The Context

#### Colours: A Psychological Overview

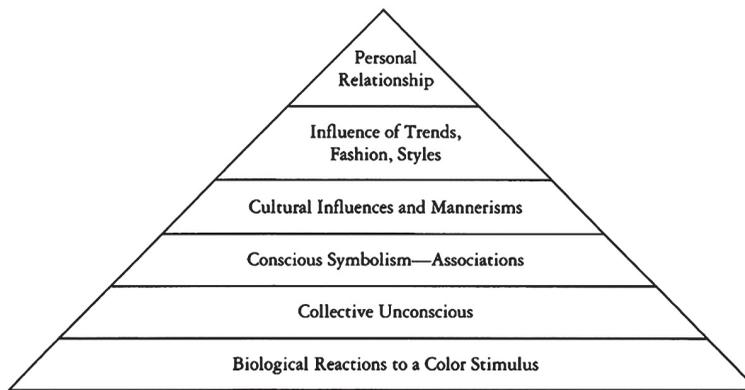
'Nothing is within, nothing is outside, because what is within is outside'.<sup>2</sup>

'Color is life; for a world without colors appears to us as dead'.<sup>3</sup> Colour is an integral fact of our existence and has such a paramount influence in our daily life and plays a very significant role to stimulate the consumer's environment. 'Color lives in the events of the visual process itself, and is a prelude to perception as well as one of its consequences'.<sup>4</sup> Everywhere that we look we find colour, in our clothing, furnishing, food, natural settings and even within our own personalities. Colour is an inescapable element of life; it affects everything we do. 'Color thus has a continuous effect on us even if we pay no attention to it'.<sup>5</sup> It can affect in quite dramatic ways our emotion and our perception of the world we live in.

Colours can be functionally defined by multiple criteria, which are psychological effects, aesthetic effects and visual effects. When a colour's associations relate to the product in a literal or abstract way, this is considered to be functional in the context of psychological effects. For example, green is usually used in the packaging of organic, healthy and natural products because of its association with tree, grass and nature. Pharmaceutical products also use green colour to represent clean, healthy and safe living. In the context of aesthetic effects, colours are composed to be harmonious, attractive and pleasing to the eye. At the same time, in visual effects, human eyes react to colour in many different ways. Some colours combination are advance to grab attention and render text legible, others recede.

Colours influence people and are associated with certain feelings and meaning. William James said, 'From a psychological point of view, the storage of a memory is the function of the number of associations. Each association becomes a fishing-rod

with which we fish by mean of hook in deepest water of the subconsciousness'.<sup>6</sup> Whilst, Le Corbusier urged, 'Color is not descriptive but evocative; ever symbolizing...'<sup>7</sup> and John Gage observed that 'Colour has always lent itself very readily to association and symbolizing...'<sup>8</sup> These associations are defined by six basic interrelated factors that influence the experience, called the 'Color Experience Pyramid'.<sup>9</sup> The pyramid with its levels of association is shown below:



**Fig. 4.1** *Color Experience Pyramid.*

J. C. Wheeler wrote about the associations to the affects and experiences of colour the following way:

Red says: I am bright, hot and loud. I'm used for stop signs and stop light, because people can see me from a long way off. Wear me when you feel full of energy, because I like to move around and make noise. When I am mixed with white, I turn into pink, and that calms me down and makes the girls like me. They use me for lipstick and nail polish, but everyone knows me in tomatoes, strawberries and fire engines.

Orange says: I, too, am bright, active and noisy, but not as common as red. People get tired of me very easily, and only use me in small quantities. I have a lot of fun, especially at Halloween, because I like to get into mischief. I'm sometimes hard to get along with, and I like a good fight with purple and red, so don't put us together. You'll find my tangy flavour in oranges and tangerines.<sup>10</sup>

The associations and emotions generated by colour vary from one person to another. However, the basic fundamental psychological properties of colour are universal, regardless of which particular shade, tone or tint is being used. Each of them has potentially positive and negative psychological effects that are created depending on the relationships in the colour combinations. Psychological properties of the eleven basic colours<sup>11</sup> are as follows:

**Red** symbolizes physical strength, warmth, energy, passionate, desire, love, vitality, stimulation, and excitement. However it also represents defiance, aggression, intensity, extremes, strain and anxiety. Red is a very emotionally intense colour and its effect is physical.

**Blue** signifies intelligence, communication, trust, efficiency, peacefulness, relaxation, logic, calm, caring, reliability and reflection but it also suggests coldness, aloofness, lack of emotion, unfriendliness. Blue is the colour of the mind and it affects us mentally, rather than the physical reaction caused by red.

**Yellow** effects are optimism, confidence, self-esteem, extraversion, emotional strength, creativity, happiness, cheering and high spirits. Whilst, the negative effects are irrationality, fear, emotional fragility, depression, anxiety, suicide. In this case the stimulus is emotional; therefore yellow is the strongest colour, psychologically.

**Green** is the colour of balance. It represents harmony, balance, refreshment, universal love, rest, restoration, reassurance, environmental awareness, growth, equilibrium, hope and peace. Green also suggests boredom, jealousy, stagnation, blandness and enervation. Green has a strong affinity with natural and general well-being, symbolize hope and life.

**Purple** signifies spiritual awareness, containment, vision, luxury, authenticity, truth, quality, as well as introversion, decadence, suppression and inferiority. It has associations with royalty, time and space and the cosmos. Purple also suggests dramatic, sophisticated, imaginative, magical and mystery as well as sensual, feminine and romantic. Purple eases the mind and overactive glands, conveying elegance and artistic creativity.

**Orange** effects include the sense of physical comfort, warmth, security, sensuality, passion, abundance, fun and also deprivation, frustration, frivolity, immaturity. It affects us at both combination of the physical and the emotional level. Orange is associated with thirst and refreshment, an energy colour associated with movement.

**Pink** evokes physical tranquility, nurture, warmth, love and sexuality. It also represents inhibition, emotional claustrophobia, emasculation, physical weakness. Being a tint of red, pink also affects us physically, but it soothes rather than stimulates. Pink also gives a suggestion of sweet, romantic softness, gentleness and intimacy.

**Grey** effects which are psychological neutrality and lack of confidence, dampness, depression, hibernation, lack of energy. Pure grey is the only colour that has no direct psychological properties.

**Black** suggests sophistication, elegance, glamour, security, emotional safety, efficiency, substance, and the negative effects are oppression, menace, heaviness, death, evil. Black is all colours, totally absorbed; dark and compact. It is the colour of authority and power.

**White** signifies hygiene, sterility, clarity, purity, cleanness, simplicity, innocence, efficiency and the negative effects are sterility, coldness, barriers, unfriendliness, elitism. White has the effect of absolute silence on our souls with full of living possibilities; give freedom and uncluttered openness.

**Brown** effects are seriousness, warmth, nature, earthiness, reliability, support, and it also conveys heaviness, lack of humor, and lack of sophistication. Brown has associations with the natural world, which brings sense of stability and alleviating insecurity.

## The Artists: Colour, Space and Environment

### Liam Gillick

The works of Liam Gillick are formed by a visual consciousness of the way different qualities of materials, structures and colour can affect their surrounding and influence behavior through the use of bold colours, off-the-shelf industrially produced materials and repetitive geometric forms. Often his pieces take the form of screens, dividers or ceilings to which coloured panels add warmth and brightness in a functional environment. Through interventions into specific architectural spaces, whether a gallery or public space, Gillick encourages people to negotiate and experience differently, the environment he has manipulated. The work titled *Coats of Asbestos Spangled with Mica* is made of coloured Perspex and aluminium. In this work Gillick tries to explore both our bodily perception of space and our intellectual perception of an altered environment. Gillick explained, ‘I absolutely believe that visual environments change behaviours and the way people act’.<sup>12</sup>

This installation also functions at two different physical and conceptual levels. Above our heads is a huge grid ceiling in different colours of bright Perspex, which are slotted in parallel bands. The coloured panel grids are the same size and are repeated to cover the whole ceiling and to dominate the room. The bright Perspex, in colours such as red, blue, yellow, orange and white, glows under the light and transforms the space into harmonious colour reflections bouncing off the wall and floor. This work is like a conjurer’s misdirection which aims to lead the mind elsewhere.



**Fig. 4.2** *Coats of Asbestos Spangled with Mica*, 2002.

Gillick is a visual kleptomaniac and embraces the idea of visual pleasure. What his work reflects is a contemporary skepticism for our shifting relationship to the urban environment. ‘Gillick’s work readdresses the vexed relationships between inherent form and inherent meaning, between mise-en-scène and sociopolitical realities, while resolutely resisting any firm conclusions’,<sup>13</sup> wrote Caoimhin Mac Giolla Léith. The

work such as *The Wood Way* and *Applied Discussion Platform* deal with the way in which ideology is manifested in architecture and how, in turn, architecture affects social interaction. Both works use opaque and transparent materials, creating reflections and varying degrees of visibility depending on our angle. Gillick has described his art in the following way:

I absolutely believe that visual environments change behaviours and the way people act. I'm not prescribing certain thinking – it is a softer approach than that – I'm offering an adjustment of things, which works through default. If some people just stand with their backs [facing] to the work and talk to each other, then that's good.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 4.3 *The Wood Way*, 2002.



Fig. 4.4 *Applied Discussion Platform*, 2003.

*The Wood Way* uses pine planking arranged in neat rows to create vertical, floor to ceiling walled partitions. The work, made of separate pieces, each built for specific environments, is brought together as a unified whole. The wood and Perspex are arranged repetitively in vertical and horizontal arrangements. The coloured plexiglass and powder-coated aluminium glow softly with translucent light. The orange, blue, pink, yellow and brown rectangles, held together by grey aluminium strips are attractive and oddly dramatic.

In a further work, *Applied Discussion Platform*, coated-powder plexiglass and anodized aluminium are repeated and arranged in squares and rectangles in varying sizes and different colours. The colours are warm and bright which affects the space physically and infuses the surroundings with rich glowing reflections that have a subliminal impact on those who pass through it. As Sean O'Hagan wrote:

You can pass through here quite distractedly, or you can read into the work for meaning, he elaborates. For instance, Plexiglass and aluminium are the materials of renovation and refurbishment. They are materials of McDonald's sign, and display cases in Prada, of aeroplanes and bullet-proof screen in banks, of really sexy nightclub floors and riot shields.<sup>15</sup>

## Sol LeWitt

LeWitt has also explored repetition and variation of a basic form and line in a variety of wall drawings. From simple line and form, he shifted to more sensual colour and surfaces, myriad geometric shapes and their permutations. He plays with the effects of

colours to alter the appearance and vibrancy of the space. Of the artist's obsession with line, shape and colour Marioni commented, 'He's completely democratic and wants to do every combination of lines, and then shapes and colour'.<sup>16</sup>

In, *Wall Drawing #1055*, LeWitt painted brightly hued colours on six walls, with a different background colour applied to each wall. The walls, from edge to edge and floor to ceiling, are covered with shapes in intense blue, green, orange, purple, red and yellow. The drawing was contiguous, creating a premium retinal space in which the viewers found themselves immersed in a three-dimensional electrifying visual experience. For example, the brilliant red background contained the painting of horizontal and vertical bars of purple and a single electric yellow, horizontal blue and vertical green bars. Other walls used green backgrounds with vertical and horizontal backgrounds with vertical and horizontal bars of blue, single horizontal green, electric red and purple. LeWitt explained the use of colour, 'I use the primary and secondary colours, as bright as possible and try to have them fairly evenly distributed'.<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 4.5 *Wall Drawing #1055*, 2002 (installation views).

The repetition of bright colour has a strong role in influencing and changing viewers' perception and emotions through transformation of the whole space into glowing colour reflections that dissolve components of the architecture into illusory planes. The viewer is literally, immersed within the intensity of the experience. Edward Leffingwell wrote, 'These wall drawings are designed to also exist singly, in institutional or domestic sites, as well as in this powerful ensemble installation'.<sup>18</sup>

## Olafur Eliasson

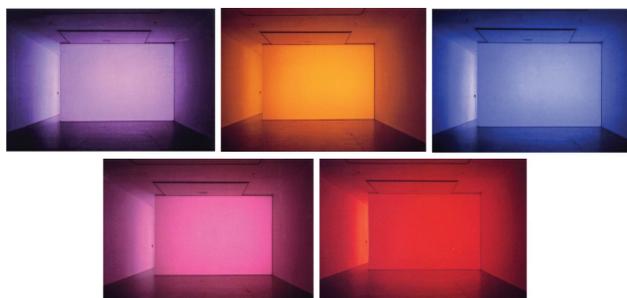


Fig. 4.6 *Room for all colours*, 1999.

Another example is the light-installation called *Room for all colours* by Olafur Eliasson in which the artist explores colours and its effect on one's surroundings: he questions the relationship between human perception and reality. The work comprises a grid of tinted light and controlled by a computerized dimmer to change the level of brightness and colours such as yellow, purple and blue. Different colours give different space appearances as well as changing our perception and interpretation about our environment. 'Through a kind of representation perception, our experience is filtered and re-organized, and this determines our ability to see and to sense',<sup>19</sup> says Eliasson. Through this work we become aware of colour representation and we attain an ability to see ourselves in a different light that closely related to our cultural experience.



Fig. 4.7 360° room for all colours, 2002 (installation views).

Another installation, *360° room for all colours* is a round light-sculpture that envelopes viewers within a cylinder of morphing spectral hues where audiences lose their sense of space and perspective. The effects of intense lights are very elegant and sensational and create a sublime experience. As the colour can affect our mood and our perception within the space, this work sets up complex physiological reaction, which in turn evokes a psychological response. The glowing of soft colours diffused by a floor to wall and ceiling creates an enjoyable and pleasant environment that reminds us of the colour of the rainbow, like entering a magical or dreaming world. 'The fact that 'colour', uniquely, only materializes when light bounces off it into our retina indicates that analyzing colours is in fact about analyzing ourselves'.<sup>20</sup> His works play with the viewer's emotional response to different colours, which plunge the audience into a physiological as well as psychological experience.

## Daniel Buren

Buren also who explores human perception and the relationship between colour, space and architecture which offering multi-effects and an open-ended visual experience: 'that artistic outcome of a combination of sensations, comprehension and playing with space'.<sup>21</sup> *Colour, Rhythm, Transparency: The Single Frieze, Thannhauser 4* is the installation that was created for the windows in the Thannhauser Galleries. It makes the integration of artwork and site explicit. In this installation, coloured gels (such as blue, yellow, red, green, purple and white) were affixed to the glass, which filter the light coming into the building. By harnessing the light in the actual space, the work allows the audience to see and be aware of the condition of the surroundings that may

often go unnoticed. Anne Rorimer comments about the architectural context of Buren installations, ‘Significantly, the work’s formal properties and spatial allocation on the wall arose in direct association with existing conditions of architectural detailing’.<sup>22</sup>



**Fig. 4.8** *Colour, Rhythm, Transparency: The Single Frieze, Thannhauser 4, 2004-05.*

The patterns of colour are adhered directly to the architecture of the gallery, which becomes a support for and part of the artwork. The presence of vibrant coloured pattern creates the spectacular visual effects which colour reflections infused the entire surrounding and work as framing device to bring the viewer’s attention to a given context or situation. As Alison M. Gingeras wrote favourably about the way colours and materials are used in Buren’s works, ‘...to create a space for undeniable visual pleasure’.<sup>23</sup>

Covering the whole windows (which become wall) with enormous repetitive coloured patterns, Buren transforms the space into decorative surrounding which offer a different perspective on what might be a familiar environment. The work offers an amazing visual experience; the view of the city and the park can be seen through the coloured patterns. This work can be defined as ‘a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society, a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances’.<sup>24</sup> Daniel Buren explained:

...This is where work touches on the limits where the notion of the decorative can be introduced. In all of my *in situ* works and all the work using “wallpaper” the question of frontier between the decorative and non-decorative is posed, because the thing is applied to the wall becomes the wall. Here, one encounters another problem: it would seem to suggest that the wall itself decorative! And there, [the viewer] loses all points of reference and question starts to be interesting.<sup>25</sup>



**Fig. 4.9** *La Cabane Implosée: Les Rumeurs De La Ville, 2002.*

*La Cabane Implosée: Les Rumeurs De La Ville* comprised of 71 rooms, which was conceived as a huge grid installation that overtakes the architecture space. All the rooms were painted in different colours combinations, creating a colourful architectural environment. The audiences can simply lose direction and get confused: there is no unidirectional progression of rooms and no indication of chronological order of individual works. Every room or cell works as a device of the open-ended space, and we are able to enter to different rooms from various directions. ‘In fact, there was almost no means to disassociate the mechanism of exhibition design itself from the individual works as the network of rooms — entitled the “device” by Buren — served both as “container and content”’,<sup>26</sup> says Gingeras.

This architectural-sculpture gives a new visual vocabulary that is spatially very complex: the rooms and square grid windows produce a multi-dimensional space which changes depending on our angle. ‘It is by working for a given exhibition site that the work *in situ* — and it alone — opens up the field for a possible transformation of the very place itself’,<sup>27</sup> says Buren. The concept of ‘space within space’ creates a very unique multiplicity experience where the viewers walk from one room to another without knowing the chronological direction: playful and exciting. Buren explained about the context of space in his works:

Work *in situ* could be translated as a transformation of the space of reception. This transformation can be made for the space, against the space, or in osmosis with the space, just as a chameleon changes colour on a green leaf, or becomes gray on stone wall...*in situ* means that there is a voluntarily accepted link between the space of reception and the “work” that is made, presented and exposed there.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Colours significantly affect our aesthetic dimension, as well as influencing the surroundings and appearance of the spaces, which create a sense of visual unity. Every work gives out a different feeling where the colours play an active role in changing viewer’s perception and emotion. The works significantly integrates the architecture spaces with the built structure that alters the natural surrounding into visual complexity and ambiguity. The unique characters between multi-coloured shapes and panels within the installation spaces created a strong contrast, fragmenting the viewer’s perception as well as producing rhythmic optical vibration, which evoke a complex relationship between sensations and experiences.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Favre, P.-J., (1969). *Color Sell Your Package*, Zurich: ABC Edition, pp. 39-40.
- <sup>2</sup> Goethe quoted by Mahnke, H. F., *Color, Environment, and Human Response*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996, p. 10.
- <sup>3</sup> Itten, J., Birren, F., (1970). *The Elements Of Color*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, p. 8.
- <sup>4</sup> Libby, W., (1974). *Color and The Structural Sense*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., p. 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Kupper, H., (1973). *Color: Origin System Uses*, London: Van Nostrand Reinhold Ltd., pp. 7-8.
- <sup>6</sup> Quoted by Favre, P. -J., (1969). *Color Sell Your Package*, Zurich: ABC Edition, p. 48.
- <sup>7</sup> Quoted by Birren, F., (1988). *Light, Color & Environment*, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., p. 53.

- <sup>8</sup> Gage, J., (1999). *Color and Meaning*, Berkely & Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 262.
- <sup>9</sup> The 'Color Experience Pyramid' was invented by Frank H. Mahnke, 1990.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted by Sharpe, T. D., (1980). *The Psychology of Color and Design*, Chicago: Nelson-Hall, p. 93.
- <sup>11</sup> The psychological properties of the eleven basic colours are the compilation from reading undertaken within the context of colour psychology by Itten, J., (1962). *The Art of Color*, New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, pp. 130-137; St.Marie, S. S., (1973). *Homes Are For People*, Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., pp. 346-351; Mahnke, F. H., and Mahnke, R. H., (1987). *Color And Light InMan-Made Environments*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, pp. 11-16; Mahnke, F. H., (1996). *Color, Environment, and Human Response*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., pp. 60-66; Favre, J.-P. & November, A., (1979). *Color and Und Et Communication*, Zurich: ABC Edition, pp. 20-28; Jean-Paul Favre, J.-P., (1969). *Color Sell Your Package*, Zurich: ABC Edition, pp. 15-18; Halse, A. O., (1978). *The Use Of Color In Interiors*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, pp. 27-28; Bird, J., (2003). *Simple Style: relaxed interiors for the contemporary home*, London: Quadrille Publishing Ltd., pp. 28-32; Birren, F., (1978). *Color & Human Response*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, pp. 119-126; Birren, F., (1988). *Light, Color & Environment*, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., pp. 26-32; Sharpe, D. T., (1980). *The Psychology of Color and Design*, Chicago: Nelson-Hall, pp. 91-93; Pile, J. F., (1955). *Interior Design*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., pp. 268-271.
- <sup>12</sup> Roberts, M., (2008). *Space invader*. Retrieved from <http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Space-invader-370461/>, 4 February 2014.
- <sup>13</sup> Mac Giolla, L. C., (2002). 'Liam Gillick – Whitechapel Art Gallery', *ArtForum*, Volume 41 No. 2, October 2002, pp. 165-166.
- <sup>14</sup> Button, V., (1997). *The Turner Prize Twenty Years*, London: Tate Publishing, p. 186.
- <sup>15</sup> O'Hagan, S., (2002). *Liam Gillick: The Wood Way*. Retrieved from <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,710102,00.html>, 11 January 2014.
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- <sup>19</sup> Eliasson, O., (2002). 'Words on Colour 2001', *Olafur Eliasson*, London: Phaidon Press Limited, p. 130.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 130.
- <sup>21</sup> Lelong, G., (2002). *Daniel Buren*, Paris: Flammarion, p. 129.
- <sup>22</sup> Rorimer, A., (2002). 'From Painting to Architecture', *Parkett*, No. 66, 2002, p. 62.
- <sup>23</sup> Gingeras, M.A., (2002). 'The Decorative As Strategy – Daniel Buren's "The Museum Which Did Not Exist"', *Parkett*, No. 66, 2002, p. 88.
- <sup>24</sup> Taylor, B.,(2005). *Art Today*, London: Laurence King Publisher, pp. 124-125.
- <sup>25</sup> Gingeras, M.A., (2002). 'The Decorative As Strategy – Daniel Buren's "The Museum Which Did Not Exist"', *Parkett*, No. 66, 2002, pp. 88-89.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 88.
- <sup>27</sup> Lelong, G., (2002). *Daniel Buren*, Paris: Flammarion, (non-paginated).
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