Reflections on Simon Hantaï:

Daniel Buren in conversation with Daniel Sturgis, Varennes-Jarcy, September 23rd 2014.

Abstract

This essay, in the form of a conversation between Daniel Buren and Daniel Sturgis, reflects upon Daniel Buren's friendship and respect for the work of Simon Hantaï. Daniel Buren talks of his introduction to Simon Hantaï's work, and how Hantaï influenced not only himself but also other artists from his generation and in particular Michel Parmentier. Daniel Buren also looks critically at the Simon Hantaï retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in 2013, which he felt did not fully capture the radical qualities that first drew him to Hantaï paintings and installations.

Keywords
Daniel Buren
Simon Hantaï
Michel Parmentier
Henri Matisse
Jackson Pollock
Paris

This conversation, which reflects on the informative friendship and respect that Daniel Buren has for Simon Hantaï, took place specifically for this edition of *The Journal of Contemporary Painting* and in response to the Simon Hantaï retrospective at Centre Georges Pompidou (22nd May – 9th September 2013) which was curated by Dominique Fourcade, Isabelle Monod-Fontaine and Alfred Pacquement.

The artist Daniel Buren and the painter Daniel Sturgis have known each other since 2005 when Daniel Sturgis curated an important UK showing of Daniel Buren's *Voile/Toile - Toil/Voile* [2005] and a newly commissioned wall painting at the Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere, England; this exhibition in part re-introduced Daniel Buren's work to a British audience after an absence of 10 years.[i]

Sturgis Daniel, I would like to ask you about your relationship to Simon Hantaï and about how you responded to his work. For me it is interesting to think about his career, as it can be seen to touch on aspects of your own development as an artist. In the early 60s you were, I believe, associated with the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, though importantly I don't think you ever took any courses there, though you were enrolled for four years. It was rather through your friendship with Michel Parmentier and his experience in the studio of the French painter Roger Chastel, an artist I associate with the 'School of Paris' that you viewed the École. In that atelier along with Michel Parmentier were Jacques Poli, François Rouan, Claude Viallat. Can you say a little bit about the relationship between yourself and these artists and about the relationships to the work of Simon Hantaï?

Buren I was at the École des Beaux-Arts, but prior to that I was at another art school in Paris, the École Nationale Supérieure des Métiers d'Art that does not exist anymore. So I already had a three years diploma, when I was accepted into the

Beaux-Arts. However I was invited, when I was twenty two years old to do a fresco in the US Virgin Islands in the Caribbean [1960-61].[ii] So in the very first year I entered the Beaux-Arts, I left immediately to work for nine months in Sainte-Croix. When I came back it was very important to be a student. The political situation and the Algerian conflict meant that if you were not a student you would immediately be conscripted to do military service and few months later have to go to the war.

I was therefore accepted back by the École des Beaux-Arts even though I had not been there for the whole year. In total I was enrolled for four years, which is unusual, but in the end they did fine me, because I never actually attended class. Of the other students the only one I knew originally was Michel Parmentier, who was a very old friend of mine as we were together for three years at Les Métiers d'Art school before the Beaux-Arts. We were together even a year before that in an 'academie' in Paris to prepare for the 'concourses' entry exams that we required to get into any art-school in France. Then after our three years at the Les Métiers d'Art we decided, together, to try to enter the Beaux-Arts, which we both got into. As I explained I was immediately out, away, and then I was not interested, but I still had my card to escape the military service. I was not following the classes or anything, but through Michel Parmentier, who was, I became friends or acquainted with all the people that we are talking about. So, I knew them very early on, but I was not so close to them because I was not really at the school and was already not so interested in what they were doing at that time!

Regarding Simon Hantaï, and the second part to your question. After I came back to Paris from the Virgin Islands I was working and living, for the only time in my life, in a small basement studio, which was given to me by my brother in law. And the person in the house opposite was Simon Hantaï. So I knew him very early on in the early 60s at the end of 1961. I was working in a kind of 'studio' below and behind the house, which was more or less in front of Hantaï's house. So from about the end 1961, I met him regularly and I became quite close to him. Close enough for him to invite me to his studio anytime I passed, and I was walking in the street all the time, going to work, going out, going to work, going out and I stopped a hundred times to see if he was free. The street was a private street with small gardens in front of almost all the houses, looking like an old post-card from Paris at the end of the nineteen century! Then we would sit together and I would listen because he would speak and speak and speak, and I would just listen, as I was very interested. It was not a normal two-way discussion at the beginning because I was learning.

And through my friendship I introduced Michel Parmentier to Hantaï around the end of 1964 before leaving again for another long stay - one full year this time - in the Virgin Island. This time I executed very big mosaics. Meanwhile during this year, Parmentier met Niele Toroni in Paris and introduced him to me when I came back from Saint-Croix in 1966. It was also at this time that Parmentier introduced Hantaï to the people around him at the Beaux-Arts, who became well known as painters.

Sturgis So none of those painters knew Simon Hantaï's work before you and Parmentier introduced him to them and spoke about him?

Buren That is correct, Simon Hantaï was introduced to all this generation through me. After all it is my generation as well, even if I shared almost nothing with them in terms of aesthetics or theoretical positions… excepted of course with my closeness with Michel Parmentier.

Sturgis Then this introduction happened by coincidence really? Because by chance you had the studio opposite?

Buren Completely. Also because Hantaï was a friend of my brother and sister in law who initially introduced me.

Sturgis But did you know anything of Simon Hantaï's history?

Buren I knew almost nothing. Very little, but as soon as I met him I was really interested to know who this person was. Then I tried to catch or grasp everything. I was reading and looking. That is the reason I also met, at this time the Gallery Fournier. They were the main gallery for Simon Hantaï, and I became very close and interested in that gallery. This is before I dared to show them what I was doing. I did show my very early works to Simon Hantaï, we were just next door to each other, but I also showed work to him so we could speak about it. As he had the time and interest to speak to me, a young unknown artist, it was at least fair to show him what I was doing. For me, I knew what I was doing was just to try to make something. I knew it was not in anyway extraordinary.

Sturgis Another facet of this moment, for you and many of your generation, and I believe increasingly for Simon Hantaï as well, was a strong reaction against the so called 'School of Paris'.[iii] Against its history and its then contemporary manifestation in a type of lyrical abstract painting. I have always thought that an interesting moment within this trajectory must be the contemporary appraisal of the Matisse cut-outs which became visible and known at about this time…

Buren That was the mid 40s up until his death.

Sturgis Ah, earlier? That is intriguing because those two things seem to me connected. When thinking about Hantaï's work you obviously have this history that comes from André Bréton and from Surrealism, but then something very dramatic happens in the second half of his career with the development of the pliage technique – the fold – which through the development of many series of paintings, many of which were actually concurrent, you see a break with his past work. Do you see this rupture as revolving around or reacting to ideas from late Matisse and his scissored cut? I can see this cutting as a dramatic negation of so many of the qualities of Matisse's past paintings, through a physical, playful and decisive rupture of the surface. But there are other ways to look at Hantaï's break as a reaction to American painting perhaps, which Simon Hantaï thought strongly about. I think I am correct in saying that Hantaï's studio was previously the studio of a young American Ellsworth Kelly, and maybe it is wrong to speculate on an almost psycho-geographical connection, but I do wonder if Hantaï was aware of his studio's past inhabitant, his nationality and maybe even his relationship to Matisse and American style painting.

Buren I also learned, during my avidity to know as much as I can about Simon, that the studio where he was working and living with his family, was, just before his time, the Studio of Ellsworth Kelly during all his Parisian years, which is a funny coincidence when we know how both artists have had a close relation and admiration with and for the work of Matisse!

To speak about myself, at this time I was beginning to become really enraged and furious against my surroundings and what they stood for. That is the reason why over a long period I built this group with Parmentier because we were very close to each other.[iv] We were enraged by what was the School of Paris. We were so upset, so furious with what we knew, and what we saw, that we more or less completely attacked it and made as much distance from absolutely anything to do with it - including I must say, even if I developed a different way of thinking later on, people like Matisse. After thinking for many years how to break from all this, we knew that the best way was to create a group and to work with other artists and not alone. We started to make our dream possible at the early beginning of 1966 when I came back from the States.

We absolutely rejected everything that constituted what we called the School of Paris, the best and the worst of it. The worst was certainly dominant but we threw away the best as well. The worst of the School of Paris, for us was the very late abstraction and a very comfortable kind of painting. I have to re-iterate, because I remember very well, that this painting was the main, the only, thing in France. Because I had travelled to the Caribbean, and knew what was happening in North America, I was absolutely aware that in Paris and France we were completely out of the game. I was doubly enraged. I did not like the works and I did not care for the general attitude of the art world, the small art world of that time. It was still thinking that Paris was the centre of the world, which it certainly never was. It was important before the war but in the 1960s it was visibly finished. In the early 60s, Paris started to lose the market, which until then had been the only market for art, and this resulted in the city not being able to support so many good artists, especially when you consider what was happening in America. You have to understand we had no possibility to do anything, because if you were not part of this line you were out of the game. So we were really aggressive. And that was why we built this little group, Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni cutting as much as possible, bridges with the past but also with the American artists associated with Abstract Expressionism.

And the people you speak about, Rouan, Viallat, at that time, of course they were like us out of the art school, but they did not exist as a group. We knew each other, but our association, Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni, came to light in late 1966 until the end of 67, and they happened to form a group in 1971.[v] That is a long period, today you have the feeling that it was the same month, but in fact when you work and you are twenty five years old between 66 and 71 is like a century…

Sturgis Yes of course, but do you see a shared antagonism to the contemporary situation in the work of Simon Hantaï ? Some of the strategies that he was engaged with at that time, with the first folded paintings – the pliage technique - is echoed in both the practices of Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni and the looser Support/Surface group of painters that included at times Rouan and Viallat?

Buren I think Simon Hantaï was, even if I was less aware at the time, a very original figure. At that time, for the people who knew his work, Hantaï was still attached to Surrealism. He was also not born in France so was disconnected with the School of Paris and was related to another situation which he was no longer a part of, Surrealism. André Breton, presented him as one of the last surrealists, but he quit that. He was connected with a painter, who I completely disliked the work of, named Georges Mathieu, and then when I understood what they wanted to do, I was even more against it (laughs). When I met him he was no longer working on paintings that can be easily assimilated to Surrealism. He was starting the folded paintings.

I introduced Hantaï to Parmentier, before we did the group, because Parmentier came to my little underground studio, so one day I brought him to Hantaï, and then they became quite friendly. Parmentier was quite impressed by the work of Hantaï, so much so he started quickly to work with the idea of folding. Which came absolutely directly from Simon Hantaï. In fact as much as I was close, as much as I respected Hantaï's work, as much as I learned from Hantaï, I don't think my work was so much influenced aesthetically. I don't know how to phrase it, but possibly in the very deep background… when I saw his respect for Pollock I tried to understand exactly why someone can speak like that… and I understood much more and maybe faster because of this…

Sturgis Through him?

Buren Absolutely. But with respect to the work I did, compared to his work, I see almost nothing. But with Parmentier who was very close to me too, the work is quite close in terms of technique, but in fact it is very far from Hantaï. He liked it and he found a way to use the technique to do something else, which I think is great.

Sturgis And was that something that Simon Hantaï respected?

Buren I think he was very impressed by the work of Parmentier and I think Parmentier in every side of his character was really radical, almost excessive. He really burnt himself out, let's say, it was part of his character. All his life he was carrying such a physical problem, he was an alcoholic from eighteen and sometimes absolutely unbearable because of his violence and his radicalism. Hantaï was always impressed to see someone having this radical character and being so radical in his own work. And I think he was also impressed and very proud that someone understood something from his technique to take it and to play differently with it. Which is true too. And Parmentier of course never denies the influence, it is more like 'I don't care'. He always acknowledged the roots of the folding of his works.

Sturgis But do you think the influence went the other way as well? That this group of artists from your generation affected Simon Hantaï?

Buren It's a funny thing, but I never thought we influenced him. But we were extremely radical with the system… we were really aggressive against everything and I think in many, many ways I am still like that. And forty, forty-five years ago, we were

so much more violent in our writing than Simon Hantaï ever was because he never wrote something bad about so and so, but we dared to do that… even if the consequence was to have people hate us for ever, because we dared to say such and such a critic was nuts.

You know as a person he was extremely interesting, and extremely elaborate, extremely intellectual. He knew almost everything in the field of painting. He spoke beautifully about Pollock and Matisse, especially Pollock, who he understood like no one else at that time. And I think with his work, people think first about Matisse, but I think about Pollock. The drippings of Pollock, the 'all-over' theory, are much more a key to his understanding than anything else. He was using Pollock as his main reference; it underpinned his way of thinking. It showed new possibilities for the future, to study… I think he was really convinced of such a thing, and he was, from my memories, working all the time about that.

Sturgis I see that connection with Pollock in many ways. In their all-overness, but also in the physicality of the work, both in its making, but also in its material presence – the toughness of the raw canvas that is revealed through the pliage and the almost abandoned quality of the paint itself. And of course Hantaï's paintings also capture within the pliage the action and performance of their making.

Buren Yes - and in such a very original way. When you consider this collation, what Simon Hantaï was making shows no visible formal influence from Pollock, but inside the work and the way of thinking, Simon Hantaï learned a lot. The way Pollock was using the floor to work on, for example, things like that which looks very technical, but are in fact much deeper than purely the technical, they are not a gimmick, and quite unlike so many people at the time, who were just trying to make paintings that looked like small Pollock's, trying to make an imitation of a Pollock. So I think the connection was in his intellectual, personal view. And funnily enough I understand, and I am aware that people think the paintings seems to be a little closer to someone like Matisse, and of course he was very interested with Matisse, that was another goal for him, to be like the Matisse of the Papiers Découpés, which was a fantastic point in the recent history. But the key was Pollock.

Sturgis And do you think that, when you consider those early paintings, the *Mariales* [1960 - 1962], say or the *Meuns* [1967 - 1968], the first folded ones, that they are very antagonistic and that there is an element of confrontation within them? , I would speculate that that rawness comes from ideas I might associate with Jean Dubuffet, from the politics and the ethics within his work and writing. Is that something that you would recognize?

Buren You mean in the work, or in his attitude?

Sturgis I mean in the work, in the crumpledness of the Hantaï's canvases. Although the paintings might be beautiful, they are not that easy to consume, they have a vulgarity as well.

Buren Yes, especially at that time. The brutality and even the making of the work was more evident then than it is today.

Sturgis Right.

Buren This happens to many works, which have something very strong or violent within them. All of a sudden people get accustomed to it, so the brutality becomes absolved, and everyone sees something much more normal. This is not at all to say that at the beginning it was very brutal but after that it becomes very charming. That is not true at all. Even if with time work looks much more traditional than it was, it is exactly the same work, but today the image it projects becomes much more acceptable than it did.

You know for example I never understood something about Simon Hantaï's work. In the beginning, when I was in the studio in Paris, and later we became good friends and I went to his big studio in the countryside I would see him working. I saw the work on the floor. I was really close to the making and very fascinated by the way he was constructing the work. But I never dared to say that to him, well maybe I did I don't know - why when the work was finished did he was put it on stretchers? For me it was like a very strange backwards step. Like I do something really radical which breaks painting, by doing painting, but then when I want to show it to you - I show you a painting.

Sturgis This leads to another really interesting question about the work to do with the paintings actual status. Perhaps it is most poignant to think about in relation to the slightly later series', the *Études* [1969 - 1973] and *Tabulas* [1973 -1982]. I have seen those utterly amazing photographs, which you will know, of Simon Hantaï in the studio . The paintings all around him, they are posed photographs, and the canvases are all unstretched. There is an unpreciousness to them. The amount of work creates an incredible intensity. It asks us to consider how they have been manufactured, to question the amount of labour that has been put into their production. For me that amount of labour, and the abundance of work is almost absurd. But maybe this absurdity can gets lost as well… when the paintings gets shown they can turn into something much more traditional, perhaps not easel paintings but… there was a moment though in the 1980s when the work not always stretched.[vi]

Buren I think, I always saw it like that. Especially because I knew the work before it was exposed or exhibited. And they were extremely well stretched, they were like a drum, much more than just a method of support such as being glued on the wall for example. It was really strongly stretched, and in fact sometimes you really have to understand how shapes happen to be on this canvas, how they were done. They were some of the most beautiful art visible at that time, but in lets say the quality of their painting, I was always thinking why he did not find another way. Could he show the work a little closer to his making. He was extremely strong on the importance of the making but when I saw these works exhibited, I think the making was almost invisible. I was very concerned and I was extremely surprised knowing him as I did, knowing his aptitude of going very far with ideas, ideas to do with the making, how to be blind, how to work without knowing. So why at the very end could it almost look like a banal painting.

Sturgis The way the work is displayed is really interesting. In about 1969 I think, the paintings were shown hung on the walls but with their bottom edges resting on

the floor. The first time this seems to happen is in the exhibition of *Etudes* at Galerie Fournier [19 June – 16 July 1969]. And then later we have the much larger architectural installations – the most intriguing I think in the early 1980s where we have the gigantic un-streatched canvases uncompromisingly inhabiting the exhibition spaces. And at Fournier gallery, in 1982, he was exhibiting some of the *Tabulas lilas* on the floor [17 June – 17 July 1982].

Buren The very big paintings you are speaking about those 3 by 5 metres, if you have that on a huge wall, it is a masterpiece. But consider the recent retrospective at the Beaubourg [Centre Pomidou 22 May – 9 September 2013], the work was all stretched and absolutely like a painting on the wall.[vii] Like a normal painting on the wall. I think the show was a disaster.

Sturgis Right.

(Both laugh)

Buren If you want my feelings. The show was absolutely awful.

Sturgis What do you think it didn't capture?

Buren You know, it was wrong. I think the whole show especially the balance between the old work and the new work. I don't think, if we have a retrospective, that we should just put the very different work from the beginning in the garbage can, but the proportion was totally stupid - too many works of the surrealist period. In fact they have a lot of very interesting things in them, I don't at all disagree with that, but it is for me at least completely meaningless as he broke with that work. So, why show such a huge amount of works from that period. He judged and saw the full situation which happens to many, many, many great artists and suddenly switched to something else.

Sturgis You would have preferred an exhibition that just concentrated on the later works…

Buren No, but to have so many works from the period before is ridiculous when five works is enough. You could even write in the catalogue, he did two thousand works and was first discovered by André Bréton ok, that is no problem. But to have too many works from the very first period, showing a little more surreal imagery… and then some work turning more abstract…
I think there was far too much.

Secondly which I think was even worse, was what happened. They wanted to make a great show of Hantaï to try to establish his position in art history but they made a show that keeps his place like more or less a mediocre artist. I think in that regard the exhibition failed totally. It repositioned him to the place, which unfortunately is the one he has which is a medium interesting artist. And it is not the fault of the artist! First of all he is dead, he has no responsibility, he can have responsibility for previous things, and he was not a simple guy, he was very complicated, very difficult. There was the opportunity to make something much more like he was, like the work, more aggressive… it is not just "nice" painting! So we will still have to wait for another show of Hantaï's work which will show

him as one of the best painters in the western world, and best thinkers about painting we have ever had.

And I think the reason is very simple. With someone like Hantaï you want to show the quality of the artist, so you use the full museum and you show work from all the periods, the serious periods, and in each room you show one or two works fantastically well. You leave the space for the people to look at it, to see from the beginning to the end what these works are. And that can be absolutely a little bit traditional but beautiful, and then it is much stronger because due to the way he works you have paradox. The way he works I think is absolutely fantastic - to be blind… to fold… to see what is created… and this means you don't make one piece, you make thousands of pieces, I exaggerate, but it is like that. And that is very, very, interesting but you cannot show too many pieces. If you do then you switch the thing completely around.

Sturgis Right, right.

Buren Which is not true! Even if you work with this one technique, where you are not supposedly making composition or being very skillful with your hands, just completely brutal… put that in the paint… take that away… it is dripping everywhere… that is a result. You don't touch anything! And then you make another one and another result. And all the developments he went through with the strings, with no strings that means it is so mechanical… to try to break and end the hand… to break the idea of talent… all this which I was so interested in when we spoke, or when he spoke with me, to be more clear… It is the logic to produce a lot of work when you work like this, but it doesn't mean that the logic is to make a room with fifteen paintings, a second room with ten paintings of the period. This was such a huge mistake.

Sturgis So do you think by showing too much…

Buren One of the possibilities was to take the series, you make a choice, or rather you don't make it… whatsoever, that is secondary… you just place in one room one or two works of that period. Next room, you go to five years later, you have two works all the way to the end. The other possibility, which requires a bit more bottle, but I think could be extremely interesting is you fill up the whole museum with thousands of works everywhere! You are filling the walls, possibly some of the floor. But in between, like they curated it was so bad, because everything looks more or less medium. I don't want to say that is stupid but it is not the way it works. Hantaï breaks with all that!

Sturgis But do you think that break…, that rupture…, which the exhibition perhaps failed to fully capture wasn't necessarily a break with painting, it was a break within painting, within its boundaries and territory. The exhibition perhaps showed him as more akin to a process-led painter, where there is something more complicated in the way that he is working?

Buren I really think the way he breaks with the use of a brush and the hand, and what he was trying or hoping to do are very connected. Is it possible to imagine not knowing the full process? It would be like imagining a work by Pollock, done

vertically with a brush and some movement with the hand. You would have understood nothing. You could not even connect. Or it would be an illusion. With Pollock and Hantaï's work you have to realize what you see under your eyes… that it's done in a certain way and that way is a complete break with the full occidental history of painting. So the break is connected immediately and fundamentally between the way the work is made, which is either completely meaningless or completely anecdotal. It creates a certain type of painting that you cannot have in any different way, in any different means. So they are absolutely connected. And if you cannot, in an exhibition, make that visible to the visitor in an exhibition, you fail, and I think the retrospective totally failed. As I said, by having too many early works brings into the mind the idea of someone working like a painter! I mean a normal painter and he is not a normal painter. He is like Pollock, but in a different way, even if it is strongly influenced by Pollock, he creates another type of painting. It does not obviously follow Pollock. Technically speaking anyone who tried to make a Pollock like Pollock is an asshole.

Sturgis Yes, it will not work.

Buren It is impossible, and I think, more or less the same thing with Hantaï.

Sturgis One of the interesting aspects around Hantaï's working method is that it not really aestheticized, it is just action, it is almost futile. The way that the paintings have been made is slightly ridiculous. And when one thinks of the work from the 1980s, which are huge warehouse scale paintings, installations of paintings, they have gigantism to them. They seem totally oversized, beyond the bounds of reason, because you cannot commodify them, you do not know quite what they are. I would have liked to have seen these works in the exhibition.[viii]

Buren Yes, it is true. The process is banal as well as radical, and like a premature kind of gesture to break with the history of painting. Incredibly speaking, he became more and more radical through his career even against himself. He unfortunately completely misunderstood the art world. And for that he missed many opportunities. He took decisions which were not good for him. He took decisions not to participate which were bad, and others to participate which were much worse than the ones he decided not to. And the retrospective is influenced by this. He has some fanatics, but for the public who are considering him, and outside of France he absolutely does not existing at all. Which is totally unfair today. During his life, I will even go further, I think that was his own fault! I always thought that he was making mistakes. How to show, where to show, how to deal, so little by little he became more and more radical about the art system itself, which I can follow in an intellectual way. When I was starting, especially strongly in 1967, Simon was someone who told me many times "I agree with what you do Daniel, but take care, it is too radical."

Sturgis Do you think the decision not to participate connects with a Duchampian decision not to participate?

Buren No I don't think so. I think it was almost an emotional feeling which I understand, because I have been very close to that point myself. It is like saying everything is so bad, that everything is terrible. But then he was accepting things

which were no better. I think he was not making the distinction between what he was thinking about the art system and friends of his who were part of the art system. Because they were friends, he was saying yes instead of no. His friends more or less killed him. His radicalism was so fragile.

You know, for example he refused to be part of this big exhibition, good or bad, that is another story, which was on the French theme at the Guggenheim about fifteen years ago.[ix] He refused to participate when the people who were in charge, mainly Bernard Blistène who is now the director of Beaubourg, wanted to give him a very large place to exhibit which would have really helped him. But he refused, he refused because I believe he thought very very poorly of Thomas Krens (the Director of the Guggenheim)… which is ok, to think like that even if I don't share such views, but totally absurd, ridiculous if such a sentence forces you to refuse to show. Then instead he did a one-man show with Claude Berri gallery, in Paris, as if Claude Berri was out of this game of finance, big collectors, that he objected to, it is impossible to follow. If you refuse one because you get the feeling that business is too evident - and you may be correct in such a conclusion - you must refuse the other for the very same reasons. I did show with Claude Berri so I know pretty well the situation, and Simon Hantaï did an interesting exhibition there, but then he accepted a millionaire collector buying things, costing a lot and being very exclusive, being part of the market, and refused the Guggenheim because it was the market directed by a business man! So I don't understand. Which logic is followed here. He missed a wonderful opportunity to show some of his great works to the American public, the way he wanted to show them and being able to choose one or two works himself. Too bad !

Sturgis Was it about control?

Buren I don't think so. I think he just had a very aggressive feeling against this director and that is all. What was the reason? It was not coherent. There were many incidences like that. He was not showing for many years, and people thought he was incredible, refusing everything. Or when he was showing at the Venice Biennale [1982] but in the worst possible condition.[x] He was with another artist [Toni Grand] and made to share the French Pavilion, which is a pavilion that you can show no more than one person in. But when they, his friends [Alfred Pacquement and Dominique Bozo], invited him he accepted such a situation where he was made to look absolutely ridiculous. In fact the reception for the Venice Biennale was absolutely zero. He never gets any recognition from anything. Maybe from one of these places, there was a possibility for him to jump finally into the international world where he belongs – not just Paris. So I am still hoping one day or another he will jump, which I think it is simple to do. All it needs is a good show, true to the work, done today in America or at the Tate in London for example, but with more nerve than what we saw in Paris!

Sturgis But in one sense there is a discourse around Simon Hantaï which is very philosophical, is that something that he sought out do you think or is that something which happened? Do you think that is actually something in the work?

Buren Hantaï always has this legend to be out of the system, to be outside, almost like a savage somewhere. I mean he knew everything that was happening in Paris for

example or even in the world of art, but especially in Paris. He knew much more than anyone, including myself. He read everything, books because they were interesting, but also any kind of magazine of art, so he knew who was doing what, who was writing what, so he was far from someone being isolated. When you knew him, I would say he was a fascinating guy, because first of all he was extremely fluent in speaking non-stop. And his way of speaking was to be in his head making connections and allusions all the time. With philosophers, writers, politics, religion, art, words from Matisse, so he was quite elaborate and then quite fascinating by this way of speaking and plus the fact he was extremely critical about the society, which makes sense, of course. But he was also able to link all these things as a critique on the human population for example.

Sturgis And that criticism and wide reading was a kind of philosophical enquiry. Do you think he saw that within his paintings?

Buren That is difficult to say that. I am sure it is in part, like for everyone of us, it is somehow part of what we try to do in our…

Sturgis I suppose what I was thinking was if one thinks of some of the pioneers of abstract painting that was very important to them. For Mondrian, people like that.

Buren This was a really strong line for him, which for most part I personally share. His interest is really on the line of lets say Cézanne, Mondrian, Matisse, Pollock, and he knew more or less everything about this. This was the line I think that he belongs to. Funny enough I think this line was much, much stronger finally to him, than Surrealism. I think the Surrealism in his career is almost an accident. It has been exaggerated because he started with this and for so many years we are reminded of the myth. How he came to Paris and he had no knowledge of anything, not even the language, and no money whatsoever. How he put one of his paintings on the doorstep of André Breton and that is a true story. How Bréton was more or less overwhelmed and tried to contact him and how he became the very last discovery of Bréton. I think that for a long time he tried to get rid of this legend. I never heard him, let's say, speaking about André Masson and even less about Gorky, or Salvador Dali, I never heard these words in his mouth.

Sturgis Max Ernst?

Buren Nothing! He never spoke about them, I mean he spoke a lot about Matisse, a lot about Pollock, a lot, a lot about Cézanne, but you can see this line.

Sturgis And considering this, and the way abstract and modernist art played out do you think he would see himself as an abstract painter, or do you think that would be the last thing he would want to be?

Buren I believe that, even if it was not a dogmatic position. He became, a non-figurative abstract painter. Even if in his past association with Surrealism, he was inventing figures, not the figurative pretty-prettiness like Balthus, but a provocative figurativeness like James Ensor.

Sturgis Daniel, there is more to say but our time has run out…Thank you… That was very kind, and very interesting. So we need another show! A more radical show!

Buren I believe so much more in his work than I think the retrospective showed.

[i] see Daniel Buren exhibition cat. Grasmere: Wordsworth Trust, 2005. An interview (Audio Arts: Volume 24. No 2-3, 2005) from this presentation of work is available from Tate Research on-line.

[ii] Between November 1960 and August 1961 Daniel Buren created a series of murals at The Grapetree Bay Hotel in Sainte-Croix, Virgin Islands, United States. These are no-longer visible as they were damaged in 1989 by Hurricane Hugo.

[iii] The School Of Paris (École de Paris) refers more to an idea that Paris was the prime and most important centre for western art than it does a particular specific group of artists. In the early 20th century it is easy to argue that this was undoubtedly the case, but after the 1940s this is no longer really tenable. During the 1940s and 1950s the term is often used to refer to artists associated with the loose groupings around Tascism or Art Informel, but by the 1960s it is really used as a reference to artists, mainly abstract painters and sculptors, who followed these innovations.

[iv] Between 1966 and 1967 Daniel Buren, and Michel Parmentier together with Neile Toroni and Olivier Mosset created the group 'Buren, Parmentier, Toroni, Mosset'.

[v] The term Supports/Surfaces refers to a group of artists, many from the south of France, who came together between 1970-1974 for a series of four group exhibitions, which culminated in the exhibition *Nouvelles peintures en France* at Saint Etienne in 1974. The title of the group and first official show under such name was at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1971 under the banner of the French Communist Party. It is interesting to see that Buren, Mosset , Parmentier, Toroni emerged *before* the political turmoil of May 68 and Supports/Surfaces three years *after*. François Rouan and Claude Viallat, who both initially studied in Montpellier, before progressing to the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris were at times associated with the group. Supports/Surfaces can be seen as a reaction to the rigorous position of Buren, Parmentier, Toroni, Mosset and to American painting, but although diametrically opposed to Buren, Parmentier, Toroni, Mosset it shared with the earlier group a revolt against the School of Paris, and the art world in general. It would be foolish to try to portray Supports/Surfaces as a rigid self defined group, it was not, however the main artists associated with it at this time included: André-Pierre Arnal, Vincent Bioulés, Pierre Buraglio, Louis Cane, Mark Devade, Daniel Dezeuze, Noël Dolla, Toni Grand, Jaccard, Jean-Michel Meurice, Bernard Pagés, Jean-Pierre Pincemin, Francois Rouan, Patrick Saytour, André Valensi and Claude Viallat.

[vi] Simon Hantaï showed un-stretched canvas work on a number of occasions, most notably between 1981-1982. However by 1998 when he abandoned his "withdrawal" and exhibited the donation of paintings at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, a note of clarification in the catalogue states "From the beginning, the foldings were intended for smoothing, for the maximum amount of smoothing possible". Alfred Pacquement, the current Director of the National Museum of Modern Art, Centre Pompidou and co-curator of the Simon Hantaï retrospective (2014) insists that the paintings "…demands the tension and precision of the frame…" and consequently saw the exhibitions of unframed failing to fulfill expectation in *Simon Hantaï* Alfred Pacquement, '1982: Simon Hantaï Withdraws' pp 202-203

[vii] The retrospective of Simon Hantaï was at the Centre Pompidou, Gallery 1, Paris between 22 May – 9 September 2014. It was curated under the direction of Dominique Fourcade, Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, and Alfred Pacquement.

[viii] There are many examples of gigantic work starting from the mid 1970s but perhaps the installation of them for public exhibition reached an apex in 1981 with the exhibition of *Tabulas* at the CAPC Bordeaux between 15 May – 29 August 1981. (repeats note above?)

[ix] *Rendezvous: Masterpieces From The Centre Georges Pompidou And The Guggenheim Museums,* Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 16 October 1998 - 24 January 1999.

[x] In 1982 Simon Hantaï represented France at the Venice Biennale together with Toni Grand. The exhibition was organized by Alfred Pacquement and Dominique Bozo. When he visited the pavilion in the

autumn of 1981 he envisaged a solo presentation and an installation very like the way he showed his work in the studio. "Investing the totality of the walls to inundate and capture the visitor in a painting space, enveloping us there absolutely, as the artist in the studio." (Dominique Bozo, Preface, exhibition cat. 40th Venice Biennale, 1982)