

The Stripe

With all the potential of the world of art-making, all the inspiration around and within ourselves, why would an artist choose to restrict themselves to stripes - bands and lines plodding across the canvas? Are stripes just a form of decoration, or a fast, unimaginative means of filling empty space in a painting? Then what reason for a work that is *only* stripes?

In this paper I will briefly review the usage and meanings of stripes within pictures throughout western art history. I will then look in more depth at a number of artists and their work where stripes are the only or principal form used, identifying different underlying concepts and interests. In so doing I will demonstrate similarities as well as the enormous variety of purpose and use held within the not-so-simple stripe.

The medieval viewer, “particularly attentive to the materiality and structure of surfaces” (Pastoureau, 2001, p. 19), was disturbed by stripes, which disrupted the standard reading of levels in an image. As seen in the image to the right, there is a sharpness and clarity in the layering of figures and objects which stripes, particularly in clothing, would disrupt.



Striped habits were prohibited to members of the clergy in the 13th century, while under

Gospel Book of Otto III
c. 1000
Bavarian State Library

Saxon rule "prostitutes, criminals, and other undersirables" were required to wear them (Gordon, 2011, p. 182).

Although of severely constrained use in clothing, stripes and repeated lines were important in art to provide patterning and decoration to the surface.

When seen in images of clothing, the stripe was used on images of outcasts and deviants, becoming an indicator of perjorative or outsider status.



Madonna and Child on a Curved Throne
13th century
National Gallery of Art, Washington



Vengeance of Chiomara
French 15th-16th century
Bibliothèque nationale de France



Titian
Diana and Actaeon (detail)
1556-1559

In Titian's painting *Diana and Actaeon* both skin colour and social status as a servant position this handmaiden as an outsider, reflected in her striped clothing.



Paolo Veronese
Die Anbetung der Könige (Detail)
1571

One of the Magi in Veronese's work shown on the right is distinguished by his striped robes - although a king, his skin colour makes him an outsider in this culture.

The visual clarity of the stripe and the many variations possible have made it an effective identifier. Stripes form the basic unit of heraldry, they are frequently seen in flags and are used as a component of many uniforms.

This use has been reflected in art works. In *Liberty Leading the People* Delacroix shows the stripped flag of revolution and democracy amongst many contemporary and classical symbols of the heroic, righteous nature of the peoples' uprising.



Eugène Delacroix
Liberty Leading the People
1830

Jasper Johns's *Three flags* is a more nuanced or ambivalent work. Todd Gitlin suggests Johns is "neither celebrating the flag nor stabbing it in the heart... He's inviting you to become innocent." (Gitlin, [n.d.]).



Jasper Johns
Three Flags
1958

Johns takes a highly familiar format that is also an emotionally freighted symbol. The detailed treatment makes it clearly his own work. It challenges viewers and their assumptions, potentially jolting the passing glance and demanding longer attention.

The stacked flags create a visual dissonance, a confusion of depth perception, which links back to the disruption in reading that Pastoureau identified in a medieval context.

Over the centuries many of the negative associations of stripes were forgotten or modified. Noting the stripes of seamen's jerseys and ship's sails, Pastoureau follows a transference to shore, leisure and sport (Pastoureau, 2001, p. 71).



Eugène Boudin
Trouville, la nourrice
1885

Boudin has used this to emphasise the location in his painting of Trouville. The distortion of the known linear form of the stripe also provides a sense of the fluttering of umbrellas in the shore breeze.

Vincent van Gogh responded to the colour and patterning of stripes - "But what pleases me very much is the gaily coloured clothes, the women and girls dressed in cheap simple material, but with green, red and pink, Havana-yellow, violet or blue stripes, or dots of the same colours." (van Gogh, 1888).



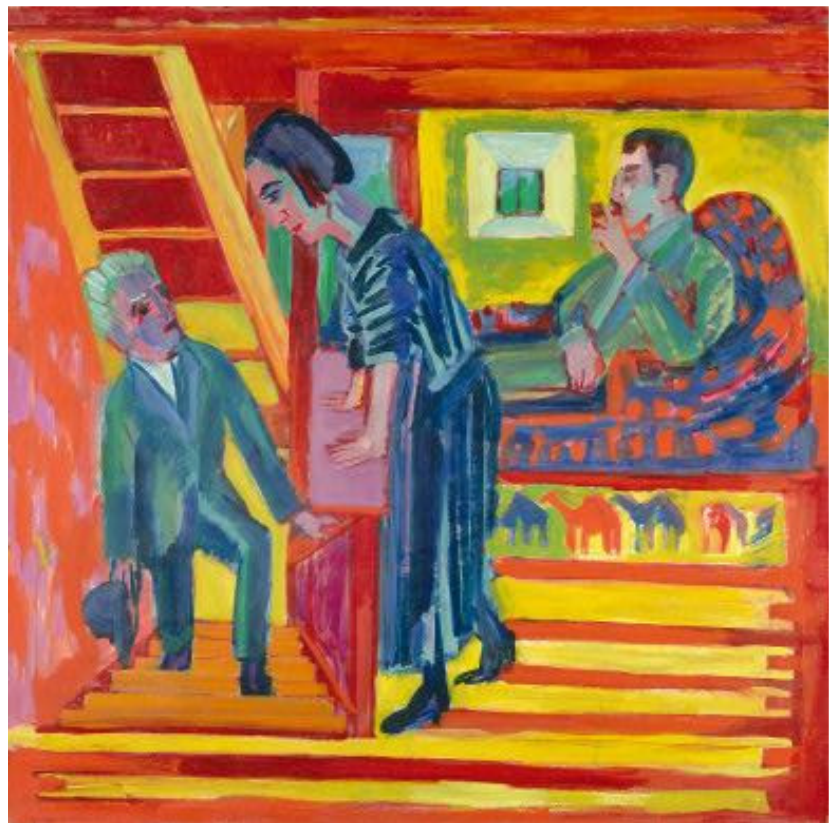
Vincent van Gogh
La Mousmé
1888
National Gallery of Art Washington

The stripes of bars can suggest a prison, as in Marco Cianfanelli's sculpture marking the 50-year anniversary of Nelson Mandela's imprisonment. In other works stripes may guard and protect.



Marco Cianfanelli
Release
2012

The visual potency of the stripe can be seen in Kirchner's *The Visit – Couple and Newcomer*, where it is used in combination with colour to create an agitated, claustrophobic series of spaces. It is only later that the eye finds the generally vertical stripes of the woman's dress, helping to make her the pivot of the composition.



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner
The Visit – Couple and Newcomer
1922

A final example of the power of the stripe as part of a composition is Pollock's *Blue Poles*. In a complex explosion of paint, the rhythm of the stripes of dark blue dominates and defines the work.

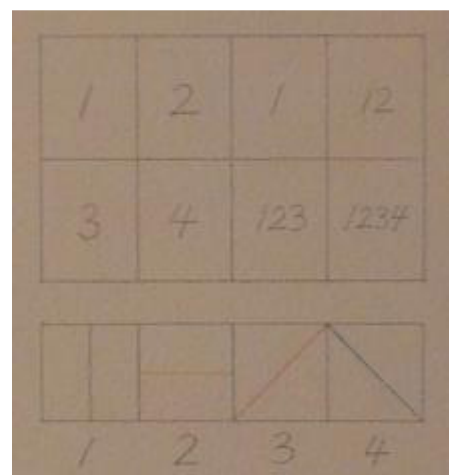


Jackson Pollock
Blue poles [Number 11, 1952]
 1952

In all the examples above the stripe is one component of the picture. They are a source of visual disturbance, or visual clarity. They provide identification as flags and uniforms, or associations to seaside, prison or protection. They create and mould space. Some stripes supplement, others dominate symbology and composition, but they are only part of the whole. Why would an artist choose to restrict themselves entirely to the stripe?

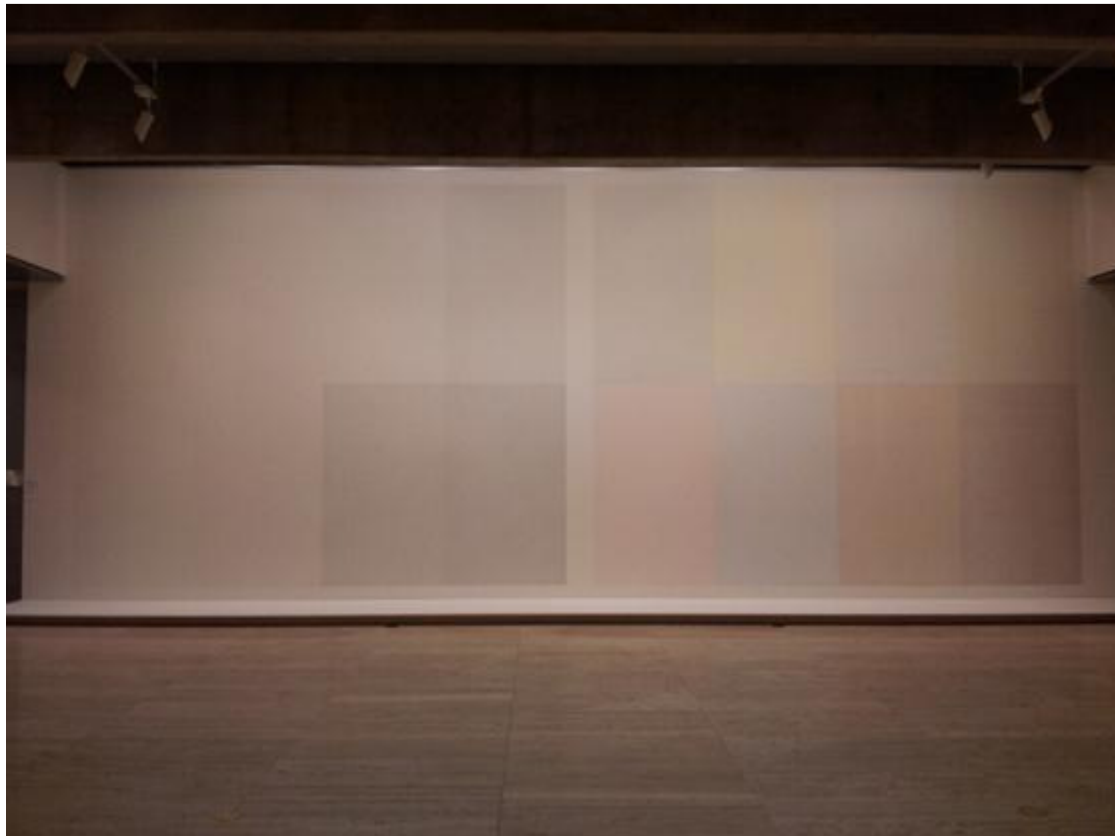
In 1967 Sol LeWitt wrote: "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art." (LeWitt, 1967)

LeWitt would take a simple form, such as a line, and repeat it in a pre-determined manner. On the right is a diagrammatic form of the basic instructions for a work at the Art Gallery of New South Wales which has the



Sol LeWitt
 Diagram for Wall Drawing at Art
 Gallery of New South Wales 2014

full title "*Wall drawing #338: Two part drawing. The wall is divided vertically into two parts. Each part is divided horizontally and vertically into four equal parts. 1st part: Lines in four directions, one direction in each quarter. 2nd part: Lines in four directions, superimposed progressively.*"



Sol LeWitt

Wall drawing #337 and Wall drawing #338

Both works 1971. #337 – pencil; #338 – coloured pencil

Using the repeated form of the line allows LeWitt to put the focus on the arrangement. The work invites viewing as a sequence. Haxthausen (2012, p. 17) suggests that LeWitt felt “thwarted by the nature of the easel picture as a single synchronous image, a spatial rather than a temporal structure”, while Kaiser (1992) wrote “LeWitt employed [abstraction] with a view to simplifying, rendering unambiguous, even encoding visual language. He sought a kind of basic vocabulary, in the fashion of musical annotation”.

LeWitt eschewed the subjective and concentrated on the idea, the concept, which need not be made physical. The physical outcome was to a large extent not impacted by location, although LeWitt noted "determining what size a piece should be is difficult" (LeWitt, 1967) and identified various considerations. Wall drawing #1091, shown on the right, was originally created for a room in a private home and has been recreated in a gallery setting, a constructed space within the larger gallery.



Sol LeWitt
 Wall drawing #1091: arcs, circles and bands (room)
 2003 synthetic polymer paint
 Non-geometric form (splotch) #3 – #6
 1999 painted fiberglass

Many of his works could be materialised multiple times by assistants following LeWitt's notations - even after his death. This does not imply a loss of aura, authenticity or authorship as described by Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). LeWitt regarded his wall drawings as similar to a musical score, and even preferred that they should be refreshed rather than age (from Buskirk, 2003, pp. 44 - 45). This was clearly distinguished from objects which "can be transported and ought to be". "Would you repaint a Mondrian?" LeWitt commented when he vetoed duplication of his *Standing Open Structure* (quoted in Buskirk, 2003, p. 47).

The historic symbology and optical effects of stripes were not a consideration except perhaps as examples of what the conceptual work was *not*, the "perceptual" work (primarily "meant for the sensation of the eye") standing in contradiction to the conceptual.

The work of Daniel Buren is a response by the artist to a particular site, a critique on Art, and a political stance. He sought to avoid pretension and illusion. "Illusion must be eliminated whatever it may be, as well as aestheticism, sensitivity, and individual expression, which of course doesn't mean that work must be done in groups, but that the piece becomes the *reality*, *raw thought*, and consequently *anonymous*" (Buren, quoted in Boudialle, 1968).

Since 1965 Buren has used 8.7cm-wide vertical stripes "as the starting point for research into what painting is, how it is presented and, more broadly, the physical and social environment in which an artist works" (Lisson Gallery, [n.d.]). Buren's works are site-specific - "the artwork calls on the specifics of its location for its identity and completion. This returns us to the idea of the site as an integral component of the



Daniel Buren
'Les Deux Plateaux' ('Colonne de Buren')
Courtyard of the Palais Royal
1986



Daniel Buren
Voile Toile/Toile Voile
Grasmere
2005

work whereby it can only be understood at that site, which is in turn transformed by the artwork" and "I can see that the day when I cannot move or travel any more, as I have done over the past forty years, I will either stop working or my work will be different" (Buren, 2006). The studio, the traditional institutions of gallery and museum are bypassed, and familiar places become unfamiliar, to be reassessed.

The further restriction of the stripe to a specific width and the white/other colour alternation, accentuates the specifics of the different locations and enhances the viewer's understanding of scale and space, reminiscent of Mel Bochner's *Measurement* works.

Jim Lambie's work also makes the viewer intensely aware of the space they are in. It seems to make the gallery move, stretch out, pull in, making it a huge pulsating mass. Every small irregularity in the shape of the room is extended, magnified, insistent.



Jim Lambie
Zobop
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

A strong conceptual base of “trying to fill a space while still leaving it empty” has been suggested of Lambie’s *Zobop* works (National Galleries Scotland, [n.d.]). The process of the work is fundamentally straightforward - Lambie or his assistants tape the perimeter then move inwards, selecting colour and width of vinyl tape as they go.



Writing about another work (at Inverleith House Edinburgh) Lambie explained “covering and resurfacing objects” in his works could come from different conceptual bases – in the case of a striped floor “[it’s] primary concern was a more psychological description of architectural space” (quoted in Triming, 2003, p. 103). He goes on “of course, we can start to open up many layers which I believe exist within these works, but you have to start somewhere, and I think that most good art starts from a simple place”.

Clearly the optical effects, the distortion, the viewers' physical responses, are important in the work. As well as the conceptual basis and the serial creation there is that link to earlier uses of stripes.

Stripes have been a recurring part of Bridget Riley's work. She explained their importance when she introduced colour into her paintings: "If I wanted to make colour a central issue, I had to give up the complexities of form with which I had been working. In the straight line I had one of the most fundamental forms. The line has direction and length, it lends itself to

simple repetition and by its regularity it simultaneously supports and counteracts the fugitive, fleeting character of colour" (Riley, 2009).

Riley varies widths and colours of the stripes, creating additional colours optically. Space is modelled by the interaction of colours as they appear to move forward or back. Riley's is an empirical approach, adjusting and refining the work as it progresses.



Installation view of Bridget Riley The Stripe Paintings 1961-2014, at David Zwirner, London

Mindful that it is in the viewers' eyes that the paintings are complete as the colours react to each other, Riley considers the various distances at which the paintings will be viewed. "*Ecclesi* (1985) seen close up shows a particular group of painted colours. Each band has a clear identity. Step back and the colours begin to interact, further away still a field of closely modulated harmonies cut by strong contrasts opens up" (Riley 2009).



Bridget Riley
Ecclesia
1985

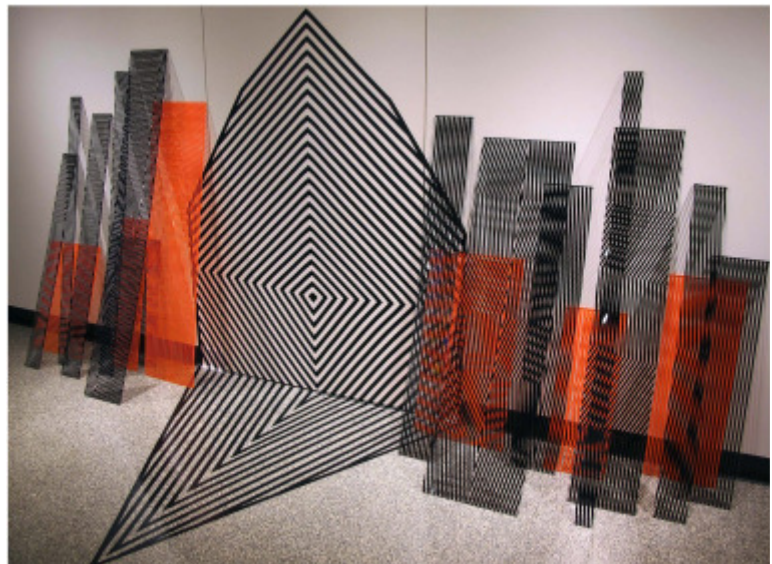
The simplicity of the form attracted Riley, in

common with LeWitt and others discussed above, and she has chosen to use assistants in

the production of her work - "Increasingly I work at a technical distance. For me the work is not physical. It has to be made, of course" (quoted in Wullschlager, 2014). The interest in colour interactions and the optical effects of lines is part of broader art history, with influences including Renoir, Monet and Cézanne (Shiff, 2014).

Nadia Odlum uses stripes in location specific interventions and in gallery installations.

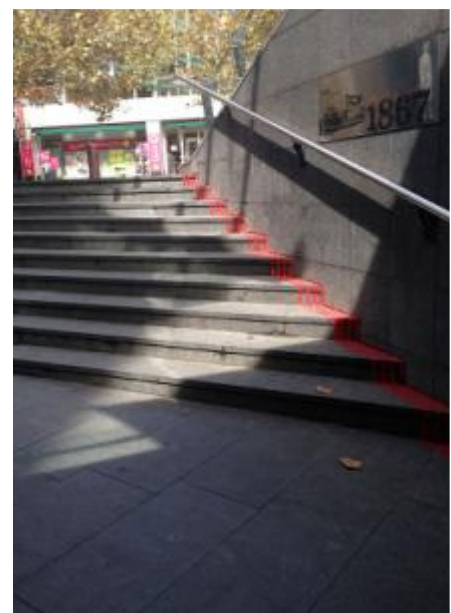
The installation to the right was part of a group show *Grid Line Pattern: a serial approach*, in which the curators suggested the participating artists worked



Nadia Odlum
Perspex Installation
Gallery Lane Cove 2014

with a repetition of standard units, as identified in 1966 by Mel Bochner in 'A Serial Attitude', but "unlike many of the conceptual artists of the sixties, they do make aesthetic decisions during the making" (Martin and Carey, 2014). Odlum seeks to make the viewer "complicit in the questioning of their own mental and perceptual faculties" (Odlum, [n.d.]).

Odlum takes advantage of modern materials in her work to extend the optical effects and visual distortion of lines by using overlays of perspex. The interacting



Nadia Odlum
Stairs and Stripes

stripes and and shadow shape space in a way reminiscent of traditional cross-hatching.

The intensified awareness of space and location induced by Odlum is in the vein of Buren, while the distortions, space and movement remind me of the disturbance to the medieval eye identified by Pastoureau.



Nadia Odlum
Perspex Installation
Gallery Lane Cove 2014

Like Odlum's layers of perspex, Barbara Rogers' work seen in her solo exhibition *Parallels* at the Sturt Gallery in 2013 also explored the interaction of overlaid stripes. In this instance the stripes were created on silk using various shibori techniques.

The organic lines achieved in the dyeing process are much softer than the painted, drawn or applied lines in the work of artists presented above.



Barbara Rogers
Parallels - exhibition installation view

Colour, light and shadow combined with the apparent fragility of the medium and its slight movement in the gallery to create an awareness of space, a sense of depth, without the harsh and disorienting effects seen elsewhere.

I suggest that Rogers uses a materials based approach in her work. She uses contemporary methods based on Japanese techniques of shibori, many of which produce stripe like patterning in the cloth.

The qualities of the depth of colour and patterning achieved, together with the qualities of the silk organza, have provided the artist with a palette of materials which she exploited in creating the *Parallels* exhibition.

Rogers referenced Pastoureau's book and its final sentence "Too many stripes can finally drive you mad" (Pastoureau, 2001, p. 91) in the material accompanying the exhibition, but the patterning she achieved is not an optical effect in the eye of the viewer. Not conceptually driven, the works are an outcome of the artist's aesthetic response to her materials.

Agnes Martin painted stripes with a determination not to be led by concepts or ideas. "I don't have any ideas myself. I have a vacant mind" (Martin, 1997, 1:03). She would wait for inspiration, and then endeavour not to get in its way.



Agnes Martin
Untitled, 1977. Watercolor and graphite on paper, image:
22.9 x 22.9 cm

Martin claimed "anything can be painted without representation" (Martin, 1972) and her work was informed by the natural landscape and her interest in Taoism. All elements in the works are equal, without a hierarchy, negative space and colours to be read as a whole. Agnes Berecz wrote of this and a sister work "their luminous color washes emphasize the interdependence of color and form, opacity and transparency, and line and field by appearing to dissolve the geometry of the horizontal areas" (Berecz, [n.d.]), going on to quote Martin's statement that the works "are light, lightness, about merging, about formlessness, breaking down forms." (Martin, [n.d.]).

There are many reasons an artist may choose to restrict their work, or a particular work, to stripes. By reducing choice they free themselves to focus on concepts such as a notation of visual language or the interactions of colours. They can make the viewer intensely aware of space, or make space move disconcertingly. They may create an environment that celebrates their materials, or create a space in which the viewer can pause and contemplate. It is a paradox that a choice that restricts opens the artist to possibilities.

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