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BE MY MIRROR

by Kirsten Swenson 5/5/09

Lately, Dan Graham seems to be everywhere. A frequent reference point for artists today, he has been a key figure in the art of the past 30 years, and is by all accounts central to the history of Conceptual art. Yet he has remained elusive. While a few of his works have become landmarks—notably the photo-essay "Homes for America" (1966-67) and his video *Rock My Religion* (1982-84)—the arc of his career and the range of his production are not broadly familiar to American art audiences.

The reasons are fairly clear: much of Graham's work has taken the form of text- and photo-based magazine pieces, performances, architectural models and slide shows, which do not lend themselves to major museum exhibitions (or success in the market). A reluctant Conceptualist who last year told Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth that art was merely his "passionate hobby" and that in fact he is "not a professional artist,"1 he has tended toward work that is disposable and temporal and belongs to popular culture as much as the art world. He has also been engaged from the start with the punk, hardcore and avant-rock movements. In short, unlike fellow pioneers of idea-based work, Graham has declined a consistently object-oriented practice. (There is the further obstacle that a significant portion of his collectible output is in European private collections, alongside that of other like-minded, difficult-to-categorize artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, who himself showed early interest in Graham's work.) The deeply informative "Dan Graham: Beyond," co-curated by Bennett Simpson of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Chrissie Iles of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, is the first comprehensive retrospective of his work organized by American museums.

Graham's involvement in the art world began with the John Daniels Gallery, on East 64th Street in Manhattan, which he co-founded (with David Herbert) and directed for its six-month life starting in late 1964. Offering an alternative to the Pop art that dominated New York galleries, it showed work that favored new materials and new approaches to abstraction. Among its notable shows was "Plastics," which included work by Robert Watts, Robert Smithson, Donald Judd and Arman, among others; and Sol LeWitt's first solo exhibition. A solo show of Smithson's work that Graham planned was never realized because of the gallery's demise.

When the gallery closed, Graham turned to magazines as primary venues, writing art and music criticism and creating breakthrough text pieces, of which "Dan Graham: Beyond" includes several examples. *Figurative* (1965; published March 1968) is a cash-register receipt printed in *Harper's Bazaar*, which the editor memorably placed between

ads for Tampax and for a padded, torpedo-shaped bra ("If nature didn't, Warner's will"); *Schema* (1965) is an arbitrary rubric for a fixed-length publication, specifying numbers of adjectives, adverbs and infinitives, type of paper stock, and so on; and *Detumescence* (1966; published in the *New York Review of Sex*, Aug. 15, 1969) presents a decidedly clinical (and rather hilarious) account of male postcoital experience. Graham's involvement with the art scene as writer and gallerist, which in current parlance might be called "relational," and his forbearance, in the '60s, from making art objects, now seem to foretell the range of "post-studio" developments that would emerge in later years. But at the time, Graham was simply "not sure he was 'an artist,'" as Lucy Lippard later recalled.3 (Nor, for that matter, was he sure he was an art dealer. "My gallery failed, it was a total failure, we sold nothing," he has said.4) Working in the fluid zone between art and non-art that was touted—if not fully inhabited—by such Conceptualists as LeWitt and Mel Bochner, Graham staked his radicalism, as Philippe Vergne sees it, on his refusal to accept the "bloodless" categories of high and low art.5

By the end of the '60s, Graham had become deeply interested in the ideologies manifest in the built environment, issues with which he remains engaged; his main concern has been how suburbanization, and the equally antiseptic curtain-wall office buildings that rose en masse in urban America in the postwar years, radically changed the social landscape. The focus on speculatively built suburban tract housing makes this retrospective particularly timely, coinciding as it does with an economic depression linked to flimsy bets on the residential real estate market.

After the Daniels Gallery failed, Graham, "evading creditors," had moved back to his parents' home in suburban New Jersey.6 He took pictures of recently built, look-alike residences in his home state and on Staten Island, and read, among other things, an article by Judd on the city plan of Kansas City. The result was his iconic project "Homes for America," first realized as a slide show included in the 1966 exhibition "Projected Art" at the Finch College Museum of Art in New York. Shortly thereafter, the piece appeared as a photo-essay in *Arts* magazine, titled "Homes for America: Early 20th Century Possessable House to the Quasi-Discrete Cell of '66."7 Later described by Graham as a "fake think piece" on postwar suburban developments, the epochal work, a quietly devastating exercise in deadpan, begins with the foreboding claim that "Large scale 'tract' housing 'developments' constitute the new city." The essay implicitly ties the "quasi-discrete cells" of tract housing to the factory-fabricated modular forms common to Minimalism, linking the serial logic of the art and residential architecture of the '60s.8

Graham's essay dwells on the era's depersonalized home, which no longer reflected individual tastes and needs but was built "to be thrown away." He finds humor in the names given to houses in one Florida development—"The Sonata," "The Concerto," "The Ballet," "The Rhapsody" and so on—while also acknowledging the earnest aspirations they convey. But, he concluded, "contingencies such as mass production technologies and land use economics make the final decisions." While disposable housing driven by corporate interests was, and remains, a troubling phenomenon, Graham's approach is not, on the surface anyway, a simple indictment; "Homes for America," he recently said, was "a celebration of the poetry of the suburbs."9

Who lived in these homes? The nuclear families contained in suburbia's interchangeable units were just as much an object of scrutiny for Graham as were the dwellings themselves. That these happy families consisted of kids listening to rock music in their bedrooms while their mothers were popping pills in theirs is the assumption behind Graham's mordant unpublished magazine piece *Side Effects/Common Drugs* (1966), which charts the collateral damage ("anorexia," "blurring of vision," "decreased libido," etc.) of what the Rolling Stones memorably called "mother's little helpers."

Graham's fascination with the cloistered social environment of tract housing is evident in his architectural model *Alteration to a Suburban House* (1978/1992). It proposes replacing the siding of a single-story "ranch" style home with glass; a mirror would bisect the house lengthwise. (There seems to be a clear debt here to Gordon Matta-Clark's *Splitting* of 1974, and a nod to Philip Johnson's 1949 Glass House.) Residents of Graham's altered house would be on display—an implicit judgment, perhaps, against the closed-off "quasi-discrete cell" for its concealment of troubling family dynamics. Mirrors like the one in this piece crop up frequently in Graham's structures, both built and hypothetical, placing inhabitants within visual fields made continuous, by reflection, with their surroundings. The house is turned inside out in a different way by *Video Projection Outside Home* (1978), in which a monumental television on the front lawn of a suburban residence broadcasts what's on the tube inside. (A model is included in the current retrospective; the project was realized at a private home in Santa Barbara in 1996.)

The kids who transform these stultifying suburban environments into sites of creativity and rebellion are given particular attention by Graham, whose career-long involvement with rock music reflects his firm belief that playfulness and youthful rebellion are productive responses to life in the suburbs—or to any other context structured by authority, whether parental, corporate or curatorial. That is evident to anyone who saw Graham's over-the-top rock opera puppet show, *Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty* (with contributions in various disciplines from Tony Oursler, Rodney Graham, the band Japanther and others),presented at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2004 and reprised for the 2006 Whitney Biennial.

At L.A. MOCA, children have reacted with glee to *Opposing Mirrors and Video Monitors on Time Delay* (1974/1993), racing from one closed-circuit video camera to the next. And they dance inside *Public Space/Two Audiences* (1976), two rooms joined by a panel of soundproof glass and lined on one wall with a mirror, in which participants are put on display and can watch themselves watching others who are watching them. The gallery containing Graham's celebrated video work *Rock My Religion*, a polemical collage about the dialectical relationship of punk rock music to Puritan and other fundamentalist religious practices, has been packed with reverent art students.10 Youth culture of the 1980s is captured in the jumpy, handheld videotape of a performance by Minor Threat, the seminal D.C. "straight edge" hardcore band whose shows are now legendary for the raw energy of both the band and fans in the mosh pit.

Graham's occasional performances extend his anthropological probing of social environments and his phenomenological exercises in self-awareness. In *Performer/Audience/Mirror*(1975/1977), video documentation of which is included in the

retrospective, the audience sat facing the mirrored wall of a dance studio. In front, Graham moved about while verbally articulating the positions he took, the audience's movements and expressions, and features of his own appearance as scrutinized in the mirror. The stream of banal description continually shifted between performer and audience, individual and mass. As with *Alteration for a Suburban Home* and *Public Space/Two Audiences*, in *Performer/Audience/Mirror* Graham encouraged spectators—or participants—to see themselves both as individuals and integral members of a crowd or community. In this work, the mirror contributed to a confusion of boundaries between private and public that has become fundamental to the full-scale structures Graham has made since the late 1970s.

These two-way mirrored constructions are the works that first gave Graham significant institutional presence. Sleek and interactive forms of outsize, architectural minimalism, the pavilions—as Graham often calls them, denoting their recreational function and ancillary relationship to host institutions—contain viewers who, beckoned inside, become the objects of others' attention while seeing their own images reflected back to them. The layered reflections elicit a sense of both displacement and self-consciousness. While many museum-goers have encountered Graham's outdoor structures at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden at the Walker Art Center, and, in New York, the former Dia Center in Chelsea, "Dan Graham: Beyond" presents less familiar indoor rooms designed for specific functions: *Girls Make-Up Room* (1998-2000) contains a small stool arrayed with lipsticks and a mirror, and *New Space for Showing Videos* (1995) offers a series of connected modular spaces for individuals or pairs to watch documentation on monitors of Graham's outdoor pavilions (though presumably any video could be screened).

Describing the pavilion *Octagon for Münster* (1987), Graham noted that its two-way mirror glass "deliberately alludes to the modern bank and administrative buildings' facades in the surrounding city."11 The glass and steel high-rises to which Graham's mirrored outdoor pavilions refer are often at odds, visually and socioeconomically, with their surrounding communities. As Fredric Jameson famously noted of the Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, "The glass skin repels the city outside" and "is not even an exterior, inasmuch as when you seek to look at the hotel's outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it."12 But projects such as Graham's *Rooftop Urban Park Project* (1981/1991) for the Dia Center's former exhibition space in Chelsea repurpose this ubiquitous reflective glass skin; the city is not repelled but brought closer, the combination of reflective and transparent glass framing shifting fragments of its skyline within an accessible, human-scale structure.

While the initial impact of work first realized in a magazine or as a performance can't be recaptured in a conventional museum display, "Dan Graham: Beyond" is a lively and revelatory exhibition. And while Graham is still elusive, it is this very slipperiness that makes him vital. Discussing Conceptual art, he has noted, "I got out of the field almost immediately. I didn't capitalize on it because I didn't want to be a Conceptual artist. I usually go through things very fast. I like things that are early experiments or models, and what I didn't want to do was to make a trademark of it."13 This fast-paced experimentation, and refusal to stay within the lines of the art world, make for a

retrospective that perhaps says as much about popular culture of the last 40 years as about Graham himself. The catalogue, full of interviews, the artist's writings, photo documentation, well-chosen scholarly and curatorial essays, and even a "Manga Dan Graham Story" (by Fumihiro Nonomura and illustrated by Ken Tanimoto), does justice to the intellectual depth and sheer entertainment value of Graham's oeuvre. It is an excellent supplement to an exhibition that honors a career of surpassing complexity and unapologetic contradiction.

1 "Interview with Dan Graham by Kim Gordon," in *Dan Graham: Beyond*, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2009, p. 169.

2 In her excellent and detailed catalogue essay, "Minimal Difference: The John Daniels Gallery and the First Works of Dan Graham," Rhea Anastas relates the critical reception of early work shown by LeWitt and Smithson at the Daniels Gallery to Graham's early conceptual projects of the 1960s, "Homes for America" (1966-1967) and *Schema* (1966). In *Dan Graham: Beyond*, pp. 110-26.

3 Lucy Lippard, "Intersections," in Olle Granath, ed., *Flyktpunkter/Vanishing Points*, Stockholm, Moderna Museet, 1984, p. 12. Quoted in Rhea Anastas, "Minimal Difference," p. 115.

4 "A Conversation between Dan Graham and Nicolás Guagnini," *Dan Graham: Beyond*, p. 279.

5 Philippe Vergne, "Don't Trust Anybody," *Dan Graham: Beyond*, pp. 139-40.

6 "A Conversation between Dan Graham and Nicolás Guagnini," p. 280.

7 Dan Graham, "Homes for America," *Arts* magazine, December 1966-January 1967, pp. 20-21.

8 In an important discussion of "Homes for America," Thomas Crow has noted that Graham's linkage of postwar development housing and Minimalism can't be reduced to "patent likenesses of appearance"; rather, the relationship relates to "larger conditions in the common life of society which have undercut characteristically modernist affirmations of possession and individuality, rendering them archaic and unrealistic. Minimalism, one sees, gains its pertinence by concentrating and enacting the logic of those conditions, ones equally on view in a systematic analysis of the postwar housing industry." Thomas Crow, "Simple Life: Pastoralism and the Persistence of Genre in Recent Art," in *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996, p. 185.

9 "Interview with Dan Graham by Kim Gordon," p. 171.

10 *Performer/Audience/Mirror* and the video *Rock My Religion* can both be viewed at www.ubu.com

11 Dan Graham, “Garden as Theater as Museum,” *Dan Graham: Beyond*, p. 251.

12 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1991, p. 42.

13 “A Conversation between Dan Graham and Nicolás Guagnini,” p. 283.

"Dan Graham: Beyond,” organized by Bennett Simpson and Chrissie Iles, is at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles [Feb. 15-May 25] and travels to the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York [June 11-Oct. 11], and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis [Oct. 31, 2009-Jan. 31, 2010]. It is accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Rhea Anastas, Beatriz Colomina, Mark Francis, Alexandra Midal, Mark von Schlegell and Philippe Vergne as well as by Graham, Iles and Simpson. An exhibition of new work by Graham was on view at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York [Mar. 3-28].

Kirsten Swenson teaches art history, criticism and theory at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.