

ARTFORUM

Dan Graham: WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

By Hal Foster (October 2009)



OF ACTIVE ARTISTS over the age of sixty in the United States, Dan Graham may be the most admired figure among younger practitioners. Though never as famous as his peers Robert Rauschenberg, Richard Serra, and Bruce Nauman, Graham has now gained, as artist-critic John Miller puts it, a “retrospective public.” Why might this be so? “Dan Graham: Beyond,” the excellent survey curated by Bennett Simpson of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (the show’s inaugural venue), and Chrissie Iles of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, offers ample reasons.

If Minimalism was a crux in postwar art, a final closing of the modernist paradigm of autonomous painting and a definitive opening of practices involving actual bodies in social spaces, its potential still had to be activated, and with his colleagues Graham did just that. (This moment is nicely narrated by Rhea Anastas in the catalogue for the show.) “All my work is a critique of Minimal art,” Graham states (in an intriguing interview with artist Rodney Graham also in the catalogue); “it begins with Minimal art, but it’s about spectators observing themselves as they’re observed by other people.” Hence many of the forms associated with his work: interactions between two performers; performances by the artist that directly engage audiences; films and videos reflexive about the space of their making; installations involving viewers in partitions, mirrors, and/or videos; architectural models; and pavilions of translucent and reflective glass.

For Graham, the first object of questioning was the ideal of phenomenological presence to which Minimalism seemed to aspire. In various pieces, he demonstrated how this presence is complicated by time and movement, media and technology, the persistence of memory and the sheer fact of other people. Although Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenologist who was

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most important to the Minimalists, dwelled on the gaps between self and image and between subject and object, as well as on the decentering produced by the presence of others (this was a basis of the influential theories of the alien gaze put forward by Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Lacan), he also appeared at times to promise a wholeness of being in “the flesh of the world.” Graham took programmatic aim at this ideological soft spot.

To cite a couple of examples from the show, as early as *Project for Slide Projector, 1966/2005*, Graham questioned the possibility of any direct relation to the object of perception. This piece is a coordinated sequence of projected photographs of nested glass boxes taken from different positions and at various focal lengths, such that, with its elements continually in and out of focus, no sculptural object as such ever emerges. Then, in a one-minute double film projection titled *Roll, 1970*, Graham played with the aforementioned non-fit between subject and object. Here on opposite walls are projected two films, one of the artist rolling on the ground with a camera in his hands, the other of what he filmed while rolling, a landscape in slow tumble; arrested between the films, the viewer can relate, but not suture, the two scenes. Graham further questioned transparency to self and other in his performances, conversations, and installations (which, again, are often complicated by partitions, mirrors, and/or videos). One of the most compelling instances is *Opposing Mirrors and Video Monitors on Time Delay, 1974/1993*; with its two wall mirrors, two video cameras, and two color monitors arrayed opposite one another, it catches the viewer in a dueling *mise en abyme* of reflections and relays that renders any coherent sense of self in space nearly impossible to recover. The architectural models and pavilions that would emerge from such installations also complicate phenomenological experience. Produced in glass, often in the form of two-way mirrors, these pieces create faint fun-house effects that distort our body images, and sometimes the most basic of spatial distinctions are confused. Importantly, Graham did not restrict these works to art-world preserves but proposed or located them in demotic situations as well—middle-class housing (e.g., *Alteration to a Suburban House, 1978*), city buildings (*Three Linked Cubes/Interior Design for Space Showing Videos, 1986*), and public parks (*Elliptical Pavilion, 1995*).

In this way, Graham passed through the rabbit hole of Minimalism into an expanded world of projects. Again with other artists at the time, he opened phenomenological experience onto social and historical contexts, rethinking “medium” as a matter of spatiotemporal intervention and “space” and “time” as matters of discursive questioning. This rethinking had already prompted his early magazine pieces such as *Homes for America, 1966–67*, a deadpan typology of suburban tract housing that, among other things, annexed the publication page as an artistic site; it also led to his later essays on rock music, TV comedy, garden history, corporate atria, and postmodern architecture. Such concern with “the social-economic framework” of culture at large distinguished Graham not only from the tautologies of much Conceptual art (which he disses, in a 2008 interview with musician Kim Gordon included in the catalogue, as “academic bullshit”) but from the involutions of much institutional critique as well (that is, its tendency to remain within the prescribed parameters of its objects of analysis). “Art is a social sign” has remained his motto.

In American art after 1960, Minimalist and Pop genealogies often appear distinct. From the start, however, Graham crossed the two lines and short-circuited the opposition: Like Nauman,

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he often presented situations that implicated body and image, space and media. (Brilliant though it is, the structuralist map of “sculpture in the expanded field” proposed thirty years ago by Rosalind Krauss has proved inadequate in part because it has no place for Graham in this respect.) Moreover, Graham suggested that these terms—body, space, image, media—are not sexually indifferent; for example, in the performance *Two Consciousness Projection(s)*, 1972 (documented on video in the show), a seated woman focused on a television monitor of her own image verbalizes the contents of her consciousness, as a standing man describes the woman as she appears in the camera. (A later version of the performance in the nude raised the gender stakes all the more.) And though Graham did not develop the psychological theater opened up by such performances in the manner of Nauman, let alone Vito Acconci, he did anticipate some of what was to come in feminist art. “The thing is,” Graham claims in the catalogue, “I was a feminist from the early 70s.”

Perhaps this is enough to suggest why Graham is so highly regarded; nonetheless, the show prompts a few questions about his practice. At times, his version of experiment has the feeling of a laboratory where the viewer is asked to be scientist and rat in one. For example, in his initial pavilion, *Public Space/Two Audiences*, 1976, a soundproof structure is divided in two by a plane of glass, and the rear wall of one room is mirrored. Viewers must pick a room to enter (each has a door) and are instructed to stay for thirty minutes. (A long period in this distracted age, the stipulated duration is now reduced to ten minutes.) One purpose of the piece is to see what kind of sociality might develop in each space, and perhaps what sort of enmity across the pane, so there is a trace of B. F. Skinner here; the fact that Graham intends “a combination of behaviorism and phenomenology” might not mollify all of us test specimens. At times this sense of manipulation qualifies the claims, made by artist and curators alike, for the “egalitarian” and “democratic” nature of his work.

More significant are the mixed ramifications of the opening to the social and the historical that Graham helped to initiate. “Twenty years before ‘Cultural Studies’ became a ‘discipline,’” Benjamin H. D. Buchloh wrote in a blurb for the 1993 book *Rock My Religion*, a collection of writings and projects produced by Graham between 1965 and 1990, “Dan Graham practiced it as a mode of artistic intervention.” Again, much good has come of this ethnographic turn; along with Smithson and others, Graham proposed a reordering of the cultural sources of visual art perhaps as radical as that developed by the Independent Group in the 1950s. Apart from *Homes for America*, the best example is his video *Rock My Religion*, 1982–84, a “documentary fiction” that traces a genealogy of ecstatic communion from the Shakers to rock and punk (with a look at such diverse manifestations as the Ghost Dance of the Sioux Indians along the way). There are terrific insights here: that, in its sexualization of ecstasy, rock turned religion upside down; that, in its Oedipal rebellion, rock marginalized women; and so on. (My favorite moment is a tape of Jerry Lee Lewis debating whether his music is God’s work or the devil’s.) *Rock My Religion* is in line not only with cultural studies but with New Historicism, an approach, also prominent in the 1980s, that supported innovative montages of historical materials; it anticipates the archival mode of much contemporary art, too. Yet at times *Rock My Religion* qualifies as art by default (it’s not quite history, so it must be . . .), and, though it exudes the intensity of the super-smart autodidact, it also suffers from the idiosyncrasy of this self-schooling. Indeed, in the quirky versions of cultural history pioneered by Graham and Smithson, there is a hint of the vengeful

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nerd as well as a touch of the provocative adolescent (“I’m sorry, we hated Duchamp,” Graham says in a 2006 interview with artist Nicolás Guagnini. “We loved Speer at that time”). Graham remains suspicious of normative modes of adult subjectivity, and he continues to support young artists and musicians, recently completing—with Tony Oursler, Rodney Graham, Laurent P. Berger, Bruce Odland, and the band Japanther—a rock opera with puppets, video projections, sound recordings, and live music titled (after the old Jerry Rubin line) *Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty*, 2004.

“I always try to put together two things that shouldn’t go together,” Graham tells us. Examples abound: In *Rock My Religion* there is Ann Lee (founder of the Shakers) and Patti Smith, in his essays there is Walter Benjamin and Dean Martin, and so forth. Such juxtapositions do defamiliarize, and in the catalogue Graham cites the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky on estrangement. But, for Shklovsky, to estrange convention was to push art ahead—it proceeds “by knight’s moves,” in his famous phrase—while at times Graham steps so far afield as to disappear into other worlds. (This might be an unintended meaning of “Dan Graham: Beyond.”) At times, that is, his knight’s moves are difficult to follow, and his cultural references become more synchronic than diachronic in force. For all his opening to demotic subjects and public settings, then, a question of legibility arises with Graham. How objective is his matrix of allusions? Does its logic exist only in his own head? He refers to his art as “a passionate hobby,” and clearly his work is made out of such enthusiasms too. But does the DIY history of one artist extend to others, or are his “hybrids,” however productive for Graham, sterile for others?

This show convinced me to push back against such skepticism. The interdisciplinarity pioneered by Graham is not just culture surfing, and it has proved fecund for younger artists. (It is hard to imagine the subcultural investigations of Mike Kelley and Miller, to name just two, without his precedent.) What Andy Warhol was to the so-called Pictures generation, so Graham might be to the Orchard–Reena Spaulings crowd—except that, in part because of figures like Graham, art history no longer seems to develop in this dynastic way. Though indebted to predecessors, Graham is not deeply involved in a Wolfflinian dialectic of problem-solution-problem, and whatever artistic Oedipality he might feel is diffused in his broad network of cultural interests and citations. His relative freedom from the anxiety of influence is signaled by a new piece in the show, the slide projection *Artists’ and Architects’ Work That Influenced Me*, 2009, which pays homage to an eclectic group of practitioners, from Claes Oldenburg and Roy Lichtenstein to Dan Flavin and Robert Mangold, and from Mies van der Rohe and Robert Venturi to Kazuo Shinohara and Itsuko Hasegawa.

The installation of the work at the Whitney is smart, lucid but not rigid (as a friend said), inviting but also informative (one can, for example, read through all twelve variations on the magazine piece *Schema* [March 1966] if one wishes). As a result, we come to understand the different frames and stakes of the practice. The catalogue is also fine. Apart from prismatic essays by the curators and others, there are often-wacky interviews (mostly done by other artists), a good selection of Graham texts, and *Manga Dan Graham Story*, a “Graham for Beginners” executed by Fumihiro Nonomura and Ken Tanimoto, which alone is worth the cover price. On this affirmative note, let me end with a rare expression of thanks to the institutions involved. This show is one in a series of collaborations between LA MOCA and the Whitney over the past several years that

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has brought us surveys of Smithson (2004), Gordon Matta-Clark (2007), Lawrence Weiner (2007–2008), and now Graham. Though heavy on white guys, these shows have provided a much-needed primer in a crucial period of postwar art that many of the younger artists so intrigued by Graham and others did not witness firsthand. Trustees may worry about the economics of mounting such non-blockbusters, but the rest of us should be grateful.

“Dan Graham: Beyond” is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, through Oct. 11; the exhibition travels to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Oct. 31, 2009–Jan. 31, 2010.

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