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MOUSSE

Dan Graham "Is There Life After Breakfast?" at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

by Peter Fischli (April 5, 2023)



Dan Graham, Hedges and Two Way Mirror Glass Labyrinth, 1991, Dan Graham "Is There Life After Breakfast?" at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy: Estate of Dan Graham and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo credit: Alex Yudzon

IS THERE LIFE AFTER BREAKFAST?

I was driving in my car on a curvy road in the mountains. The weather was nice, the street was dry, and my tires were in good condition. The road was empty, no traffic at all; it felt like everybody was staying at home.

I tried, using a technique of cutting the curves, to make a straight line by holding the steering wheel always in the same position. The more I tried, the more successful I became.

While executing this little experiment, I was listening to one of Dan Graham's Greatest Hits CDs. In the last couple of years, at intervals of approximately every three months, I received a nicely and carefully decorated envelope from New York containing a new CD, numbered 1 through 22.

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The songs that Dan selected as his favorites ranged from high-end mediocre country pop to middlebrow punk, interrupted often with a Christmas song in the genre of "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus." Often, I found myself skipping to the next track, going from one song that I loved to hate, to a song that I hated to love. However, every fourth or fifth song I just loved with no limitations or stupid superego conflict. Songs like Bob Wills' "Watching the Bubbles in My Beer" or Lydia Lunch's "Atomic Bongos" I could listen on repeat and at full volume while driving on the Autobahn. Some songs I really liked but would not even tell my dog that I do.

With Dan's texts of bright thinking, profound knowledge and sharp analyses of lyrics in popular music in mind, I always speculated why he selected a song—the so-called meaning of the song and what that meaning meant to Dan. The contradiction of the vernacular and the distinctive, or the ridiculous and the sublime, was well balanced in the playlist of each CD. I started looking up the lyrics of the songs and in doing so, I stumbled on various "meaning of the song" websites. There was no doubt that Dan could make a logical and rational argument for each song or that he could analyze it, making connections or putting it in the context of art, society, or history. For example, he once remarked that the Ramones "utilize a satiric, Pop Art-like ironic distance and a musical (rock and roll) Neo-classicism in manipulating their image . . . Like Lichtenstein's images, the Ramones' songs are comic-strip-type stereotypes of American pop culture. . . "

So the argument of taste or distinction which normally comes up when making a "selection"—especially if that selection is called "my favorites" or "greatest hits"—was not the way I wanted to think about it. There was this intriguing element of the mediocre in it, a carefully selected mediocrity, taking these songs and their lyrics at face value. The selection was made by that guy who was NOT going to New Jersey to take photographs of great architecture, no, that guy was looking for the vernacular, overlooked, everyday houses. But still, the topic of selection and distinction remains. Asking him once if there is a sociological viewpoint of interest for him, as in Pierre Bourdieu's book, La Distinction (Critique sociale du jugement), he boldly refused, saying something like: "that's oversimplification." His two-way mirrors have more to do with The Kinks' song "Two Sisters" than with Jacques Lacan.

One of his often-repeated quotes—and he was good at repeating quotes—was from Sol LeWitt: "Logic may be used to camouflage the real intent of the artist to lull the viewer into the belief that he understands the work." With this in mind, while driving on the curvy road, I asked myself what Dan was camouflaging when he was arguing for these songs. Imagining Young Dan listening to the lyrics sung by Dion and the Belmonts, "each night I ask the stars up above, why must I be a teenager in love?" amused me and my passenger, and we daydreamed about how he may have experienced teen love and how this may have also been the nucleus of his obsession with astrology? I started speculating about a hidden layer in his Greatest Hits CD "project." Was he trying to sabotage the idea of conceptual art—including the etiquette of being a conceptual artist—or was he on the contrary trying to expand it?

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Whether to recycle or dispose of these CDs out of my car's glove box, which have in the meantime become a useless and outdated medium, was something I had in mind a while ago, but how? Today, CDs belong to what Walter Benjamin described as the "just past." Dan would often refer to Benjamin on this topic, for example: "Nobody wants to look at the just past. People almost always look to a few decades before instead. And every time you have a neo-'60s or a neo-'70s . . . you're canceling out the just past." The unclearness of these CDs' status as a giveaway, maybe a private hobby for him, keeps them in a state of limbo in which their "value" has to remain undefined. This made them especially attractive to me. Did they try to have a life outside of the sphere of commodities? I was finding myself a bit lost in this forest of questions. But, at least two of them deliver a clear answer:

"Is there life after breakfast?" asks Ray Davies. "Yes there is."
"Is it possible to drive a straight line on a curvy road?" Yes it is.

—Peter Fischli

Curated by
Peter Fischli

at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
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