

THE BROOKLYN RAIL*Dan Graham*

by Marc Mayer (May 2023)



Installation View: *Dan Graham: Is there Life After Breakfast?*, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2023.
Courtesy the Estate of Dan Graham and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

Dan Graham died a year ago at 79. Internationally influential for much of his career, he distinguished himself early in a number of areas, from his pioneering conceptual work, performances, films, and videos, to his signature steel and glass “pavilion” sculptures. Moreover, Graham was among the most important artist-writers of the last half century. His voice was noted for its idiosyncratic range, its originality and subtle humor. Although his diverse corpus is relatively modest in size, Graham holds a prominent place in the canon and, after seeing the five well-coordinated tribute exhibitions currently on view throughout the city, I feel sure that he always will.

For its project space, 303 Gallery commissioned David Platzker, a noted authority and purveyor of artist books and multiples, to mount a sampling of Graham’s innovative “magazine pieces.” The classic selection surrounds a formal model of a late pavilion/sculpture, the elegant *Neo-Baroque Walkway* (2020), a snaking, roofless tunnel of two-way mirror glass that would be a throbbing fun-house to walk through. Like almost all of Graham’s pavilion/sculptures, it uses the imposing steel and glass vocabulary of corporate architecture, but reduced to the human scale of a garden folly and articulated by the artist’s ingenious grammar. Graham was an aficionado of architecture—his interests were wide enough to embrace subjects as disparate as anthropology and astrology.

Also in a project space, Lisson mounted *Here's Looking at You*, a programme of three video-taped performances: *Past Future Split Attention*, first performed at Lisson, London in 1972; *Performer / Audience / Mirror* (1975); and *Lax / Relax*, first performed in 1969 and recreated by the artist at Lisson, London in 1995 in order to record it. (Graham did not consider his taped performances documentation, but works of art in their own right). The best known of the three, and required viewing for anyone interested in performance art, is the unforgettable *Performer / Audience / Mirror*. A crucial work in Graham's corpus, it anticipates the later mirrored pavilion sculptures that are essentially artistic intercessions between viewers, or formal opportunities for strangers to look at themselves and at each other with impunity.

In *Performer / Audience / Mirror*, Graham breaches the conventional separation between performer and audience. Sitting on the floor facing a wall-sized mirror, the audience sees itself, thereby becoming self-consciously "the audience" as it attends to the performer before it. Consistently speaking in the present tense, the performer explains his body's movements as he makes them. He demonstrates a few banal muscular-skeletal curiosities and describes them as matter-of-factly as Alain Robbe-Grillet, the *nouveau roman* author of whom Graham was fond. The performer then switches his attention to the audience and describes a selection of members individually—their posture, their facial expressions—and interprets them briefly. The piece is a simple exercise in raising group consciousness, but something remarkable occurs as the performer turns his back on the audience to face the mirror along with them. When he crouches down to their level, the dichotomy of performer and audience evaporates; in that moment, as if by magic, "me and you" become "us." A big part of the magic is Graham's remarkable performance itself: confident, fluid, calm—imagine a serene sportscaster. There's a bootleg version on YouTube.

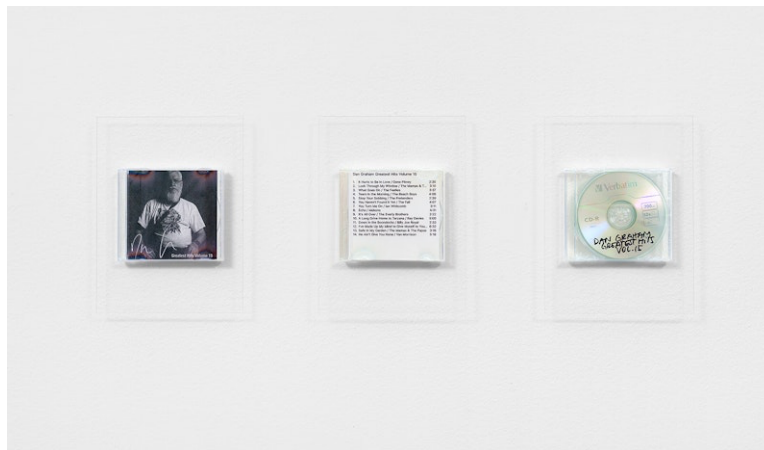


Dan Graham, *Hedges and Two Way Mirror Glass Labyrinth*, 1991. 2-way mirror, glass, aluminum, live plants, 92 x 270 x 200 inches.
Courtesy the Estate of Dan Graham and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

Fittingly for an artist who was so engaged with print media, Printed Matter in Chelsea mounted a special display of his books, magazines, CDs and memorabilia in four standing vitrines.

Graham’s wife, the artist Mieko Meguro, runs 3A Gallery at 179 Canal Street. It’s a fifth-floor walk-up open only on Fridays and Saturdays, but I was glad I went. On a specially designed table, curator Jennifer Buonocore-Nedrelow displayed her collection of Graham publications, along with magazines and anthologies that include his work. Pasted directly onto the walls is an almost full set of the fifteen poems based on Graham’s *Schema* (March 1966), an exhaustive accounting of each datum of the poem itself, from all the parts of speech to the typeface and size, line, punctuation, and word count. In these “conceptually oriented” magazine pieces, Graham achieves the degree zero of self-reference. It is a landmark in both conceptual art and poetry, albeit wry. The gallery served green tea cookies, prepared by Meguro herself, to those who made the effort to visit.

The bonanza exhibition was at Marian Goodman on 57th Street. An old friend of Graham’s, artist Peter Fischli, the surviving member of Fischli & Weiss, did the curatorial honors. The show had numerous remarkable features, in particular the overall resemblance to a Fischli & Weiss exhibition. You would be forgiven for presuming that this might be a flaw, but I can assure that it wasn’t. Seeing Dan Graham presented in this refreshing way is an opportunity for those who, like me, respect Graham’s work without truly loving it. I love it now. Displayed on a thicket of plinths—the way Fischli & Weiss display their own small clay sculptures—is an exhaustive group of Graham’s maquettes for his pavilion sculptures. In fact, it’s a mini-retrospective within the larger exhibition, which includes works both realized and not. From the most rudimentary of 3D sketches to slick presentation models, you can watch the artist invent over time. Given the architectural scale of the finished works, a full survey of the pavilion sculptures is unlikely. Nevertheless, as I walked about this marvelous room, I frequently caught myself fantasizing about the prospect.



Dan Graham, *Dan Graham’s Greatest Hits, Volume 1 -21 + the Kinks*, 2004/2023. 63 jewel cases mounted to glass containing compact discs and inkjet prints, programmed soundtrack, organized and assembled by Peter Fischli, 10-1/2 x 7-7/8 x 3/4 inches. Courtesy the Estate of Dan Graham and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

Back at the beginning of the show, there is a full-scale pavilion sculpture conceived for presentation indoors. Banks of identical houseplants stand in for the natural setting of the more typical outdoor works, while the “architecture” is sleek and quietly satirical of corporate aesthetics, like most of Graham’s sculptural works. His signature two-way mirror panels let you see yourself while looking at others, stimulating awareness of both your separateness as an individual and your belonging as a fellow viewer. The effect was particularly acute at the busy opening.

I was distracted from this work by dozens of identical small objects lining the walls around it and running down the hall. These turned out to be Fischli's personal collection of "Dan Graham's Greatest Hits," compilation CDs of favorite songs that the artist had sent his friend over the years. Behind small floating sheets of plate glass—they rhyme with the larger installation while reflecting it—we see the cover, the back, and, usefully, the playlist of each CD. I could not resist photographing all of them. Graham was a deep listener and a deep reader of rock and roll with a particular passion for The Kinks. Conveniently, and I should add generously, Fischli transcribed all the lyrics he could find, along with anonymous commentary on their meanings taken from the web, and bound them into a limited-edition book. He also transferred Graham's manga-style autobiography into a slide show that you could watch seated on comfortable floral chintz sofas. Speaking for the deceased artist, Fischli has declared these sofas to be Dan Graham readymades because they were specifically chosen by Graham for a show he once had in Switzerland.

On the third floor, along with the big model for the unrealized *Skateboard Pavilion* (1989) and a quirky graffiti-like painting commissioned by fellow artist Jeppe Hein, was a continuous screening of Graham's stirring *Rock My Religion* (1983–84). The famous video work, based on the artist's earlier essays on the topic, conflates the similarly ecstatic character of American revivalist religion and American rock and roll. Two more chintz sofas were provided for viewing the nearly hour-long work. *Rock My Religion* bookends Ann Lee, the mystic founder of the Shakers, and Patti Smith, the charismatic singer-songwriter. Between these two remarkable women are performers notorious for driving teenage girls to distraction: the usual suspects Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, and Elvis.

Like all the fine tribute exhibitions I visited, the show at Marian Goodman palpably exuded a deep affection for Dan Graham. It was an inspired decision to have invited Peter Fischli to organize the largest show. He movingly honors a man known for caring and love, not only for the people he knew but for the anonymous people, children and adults, for whom he created. No art-for-art's-sake aesthete, Graham preferred people over culture, and he did so much to help us see the difference.