

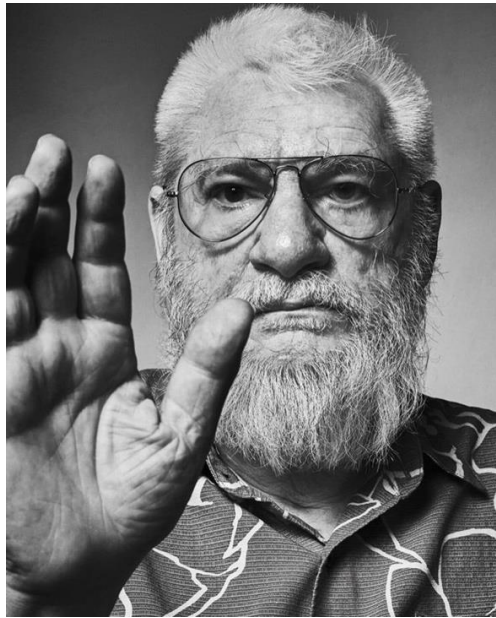
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The New York Times

Dan Graham, Mind-Bending Conceptual Artist, Dies at 79

*Best known for his large mirrored installations,
he played with ideas about spectacle and perception in a vast array of genres.*

by Will Heinrich (March 2022)



The artist Dan Graham in 2017. In a prolific career, he covered a dizzying array of genres, as various as sculpture, architecture and “puppet rock opera.” Credit...Sebastian Kim

Dan Graham, a contrarian polymath best known, despite his protests, as a conceptual artist, died on Feb. 19 in Manhattan. He was 79.

His wife, Mieko Meguro Graham, confirmed the death but declined to give a cause.

Though he had his problems with Conceptual Art as a category, Mr. Graham’s resistance to labeling went deeper. In a prolific career that took in genres as various as sculpture, architecture and “puppet rock opera,” and included pioneering works of video and performance art as well as criticism and teaching, he often identified himself not as an artist but as a writer. Sometimes he added that his real passion, in any case, was rock music.

But contradiction was also a philosophical throughline of his otherwise disparate undertakings.

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Mr. Graham in a 1977 performance piece. Standing between a mirrored wall and a seated audience, he lectured them about what they were looking at.
Credit...Dan Graham, via Lisson Gallery

Whether he was arguing, in an early piece of criticism, that Dean Martin's television variety show was more self aware than it looked; or helping to turn Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon from an art student into a musician by drafting her into a performance piece called "All-Girl Band: Identification Projection"; or standing between a mirrored wall and a seated audience, lecturing them about what they were looking at, Mr. Graham always aimed to unsettle.

His best known work was a decades-long series of large-scale architectural installations he called "pavilions" — sinuous booths of semi-reflective glass that wrapped his preoccupations with spectacle in an appealing sculptural language derived from Minimalism.

Entering a pavilion, or simply observing it, you might have seen yourself reflected against the room beyond, undermining a sense of where, or even who, you were. Or else, contemplating yourself as a funhouse-mirror distortion, you might have begun wondering just how much of your reality was determined by your architectural environment. Either way, you were bound to walk away thinking differently.

Mr. Graham's entry into the art world was almost accidental. A voracious reader and snapshot photographer but an indifferent student, he moved to New York after finishing high school and, in 1964, founded the John Daniels Gallery on Manhattan's Upper East Side with two friends.

"I was what they call a slacker," he recalled in an [Interview magazine article](#) by the artist Michael Smith in 2017. "I had no job, and I had two friends who wanted to social climb because they were reading Esquire magazine, and a gallery looked like a cool place to social climb."

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Mr. Graham's "Hedge Two-Way Mirror Walkabout," installed on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's roof in 2014.
Credit...Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

The gallery lasted less than a year, without sales. But before it closed, it had shown Dan Flavin and Donald Judd, given Sol LeWitt his first solo show, and introduced Mr. Graham — who had until then been more interested in science fiction and philosophy — into the very heart of the New York art scene.

When he started making art himself, he eschewed conventional mediums, submitting text pieces and photo spreads to magazines instead. This, he would suggest, was a way of contesting the notion of artistic value — *his* art would be disposable. Later touchstones included "Lax/Relax," a spoken word performance inspired by Reichian therapy, and "Rock My Religion," a careening, rough-edged video documentary that connects 18th-century Shaker circle dancing to hard-core punk while psychoanalyzing the hippie movement.

"He's deeply into astrology," Mr. Smith wrote in the Interview article, nodding to the difficulty of summing up a practice, and a personality, defined by its frenetic rush of mental associations. "He's an Aries, indicating spontaneity. He's also into clichés, architecture, music, art, puppets, mixtapes, and TV comedy."

In the end, Mr. Graham found an enormous amount of success for a self-described slacker. He had a [retrospective](#) at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2009, and his ["Rooftop Urban Park Project,"](#) a multipart pavilion overshadowed by wooden water tanks, sat on top of the Dia Foundation's building in Lower Manhattan throughout the 1990s.

["Hedge Two-Way Mirror Walkabout"](#) was installed on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2014, instantly becoming the centerpiece of an untold number of selfies, and his structure "Child's Play" was displayed in the Museum of Modern Art's sculpture garden in 2017.

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Mr. Graham's "Two-Way Mirror Cylinder Inside Cube," part of the Rooftop Urban Park Project at the Dia Center for the Arts. Credit...Bill Jacobson

Mr. Graham was a widely beloved figure in the art world, known not just as a keen critic with a provocative sense of humor but also as a radically generous friend.

"I would say that he had some kind of instinct for when things were really bad in people's life," said the artist Antoine Catala, who worked for Mr. Graham for a couple of years in the early 2000s, "and he would show up for them."

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