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# NEW YORK OBSERVER

## The Counterculture Takes Up Space

By Marjorie Welish 8/07/09

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The clear glass pavilions of Dan Graham would seem the opposite of Richard Serra's winding, high-walled steel corridors: the pavilions open, the corridors pressing in. But they have much in common. This thought will help orient the viewer tempted to see the retrospective "Dan Graham: Beyond," now at the Whitney Museum of American Art, as a show suggestive of how a generation's ragged band of hardies like Serra, yet also Robert Smithson, Richard Long and Bruce Nauman, prodded sculpture to become something other than solids taking up space.

Postminimalism is the zone here, and its major issue is to explore the social space that people inhabit wherever confronted by obstacles, whether constructed by artists or not.

So when the elevator doors open to the exhibition of Dan Graham's work, do not be surprised when you see not very much of anything except for pavilions—transparent and/or reflective—and catch glimpses of yourself in their mirrored surfaces. These pavilions are to be approached. And entered? Yes, insofar as the pavilions are actual spaces; no, insofar as reflections thrown this way and that as you move defeat the sense of a fixed orientation.

A highlight of this show is the re-created pavilion *Public Space/ Two Audiences* (1976) that Mr. Graham made for the 37th Venice Biennale. An enclosed room to be entered, it is a succinct proposal about the discrepancy between the objective space and the subjective perception of such spaces.

Other works are not so strong. For instance, of the several pavilions treated in a video presentation, there is a promo for *Yin/Yang Pavilion* (2003)—obviously not the same thing as the experience of it, nor how it evolved.

At a planning meeting a few years ago, architect Steven Holl had invited Mr. Graham to contribute a pavilion to the Simmons Hall dormitory being built for M.I.T. and suggested that it might be set immediately in the path of students' cross traffic. What finally did occur was quite different: a small modish afterthought set upon a roof off one of the dormitory's upper floors. A better survivor of the working process is the rooftop pavilion installed in 1989 at the Dia Foundation, when its location on 22nd Street was a constant reminder of postminimal and conceptual projects that required of the viewer only goodwill and curiosity about what is possible in light and sound installations. It was from the rooftop café designed by Mr. Graham that sitting for 20 minutes over cappuccino or Orangina offered the possibility of observing how others coped with the viewing pavilion just beyond the glass-walled café. And that was the point.

Most of Graham's works, actual or virtual, are about observing and being observed in social spaces. This extends to his use of media, print and film—both. Early video pieces specifically remain definitive. Yet a more recent piece, *Cinema* (1981), is also worthwhile because as a model of a building into which a movie projection is inserted, *Cinema* induces an imaginary spectacle more complex than the movie theater it proposes to face onto a street.

Media is the point of origin and background for Dan Graham, and the Whitney Museum devotes its smaller galleries to filling us in on the skittish productivity of Mr. Graham's early years, ranging from concrete poetry to punk rock criticism. After a year of co-directing the John Daniels Gallery in 1964-65—where he showed Dan Flavin's fluorescent light sculptures and Sol LeWitt's three-dimensional grids, and had planned to exhibit work by Robert Smithson—he had the luck to be heard giving a slide lecture by an editor of Arts Magazine, who offered to print some of the slides and text as a magazine spread. The result, "Homes for America" (1966), Graham's countercultural intervention against mainstream suburban success, reveals Mr. Graham to have entered the art world as a drop-out with resentments against societal expectations of him, but now armed with the way to express that resentment. He has been building alternative spaces ever since.

*["Dan Graham: Beyond," co-organized by Bennett Simpson of Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (Feb. 15–May 25, 2009), and Chrissie Isles of the Whitney Museum of American Art (June 25–Oct. 11, 2009)]*

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