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ART

A Round Peg

Courtesy of Dan Graham

Dan Graham in 1982, photographing his "Two Adjacent Pavilions" at Documenta VII in Germany. Art, he says, is his "passionate hobby." More Photos >

By RANDY KENNEDY

HERE'S a good art-world quiz question, one that could stump many an astute insider: What do Sol LeWitt, Sonic Youth, Dean Martin, Mel Brooks, Merle Haggard, Hudson River School painting and midcentury New Jersey tract housing have in common?

The answer, Dan Graham — a Zelig of so many creative circles over the past four decades it is dizzying to keep track — sat recently sipping an iced tea and eavesdropping on conversations at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where a retrospective of his work opened Thursday, finally adding him to the ranks of conceptual art's thorny 1960s pioneers to receive a full-blown American career survey. (The show, organized with the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, began there and travels to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis after it closes in New York on Oct. 11.)

Among his conceptual peers, those who set out to wrest art from the realm of objects and move it more fully into one of ideas, Mr. Graham, 67, is someone whose work does not come easily to mind even for an informed artgoing public. In part this is because his restless intellect has never allowed him to settle into anything resembling a signature style or to be easily categorized. (Most attempts at categorization are parried by Mr. Graham himself with a professorial

annoyance and fencer's agility, and he dislikes being called a conceptual artist and says he is not a professional one in any sense, calling art his "passionate hobby.")

If the world had nothing else for which to thank him, it might be enough that during a brief stint as a dealer he gave LeWitt his first solo gallery show, along with presenting early work by Dan Flavin and Donald Judd. Or for the part Mr. Graham played later in the formation of Sonic Youth — he helped Kim Gordon, one of the group's founders, land her first New York apartment in his Lower East Side building and cast her in an all-girl "band" for a 1980s performance piece, jump-starting her music career. When Mr. Graham, rumpled and white-bearded with a kind of Mr. Natural aura, shows up at cutting-edge rock concerts these days, well-read 20-somethings tend to mill around him admiringly.

But it is the way his artistic DNA has seeped into the work of younger artists over such a prolonged period that underscores his importance. Chrissie Iles, a curator at the Whitney who organized the show with Bennett Simpson, a curator at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, said that prominent artists as well distributed over the years as Tony Oursler (video artist, born 1957), Rirkrit Tiravanija (known for the shows in which he cooks for gallery visitors, born 1961) and Wade Guyton (who "paints" with printers, born 1972) all showed strong traces of Mr. Graham's influence. Their work looks and feels almost nothing like his, or like one another's, a remarkable testament to the way Mr. Graham's fascination with perception and with the conventions of art and mass-produced culture have become part of the contemporary art landscape.

Because so much of his work — from early pop-culture writing to performances with video cameras to his well known mirrored pavilions — is about what Mr. Simpson called "the way one experiences the space of the self," it has also seemed more prescient as each new iteration of the Web alters the calculus of media, society and individuality.

"The pieces make sense, in a way, even more than they did 10 years ago," Ms. Iles said, "when they had a completely different kind of reading because we hadn't gotten to this stage yet, the stage of Twitter and Facebook and Flickr."

Mr. Graham grew up in Union County, N.J., the son of a chemist (his father, whom he has described as abusive) and an educational psychologist, and pursued no formal education after high school. But by the time he was a teenager — difficult years during which he said he was "almost psychotic" — he was educating himself at breakneck speed, absorbing Margaret Mead and Claude Lévi-Strauss, along with the literary critic Leslie Fiedler and the French Nouveau Roman writers.

He wanted to be a writer, and when this passion united with another for rock music, he began a sporadic career as an odd sort of critic. One of his often-cited pieces, published in the rock magazine Fusion in 1969, wasn't about music at all;

it was a rigorous, admiring deconstruction of the way Dean Martin unconsciously — or maybe consciously — deconstructed the medium of television every week on his variety show through the creation of his shambling, supposedly bourbon-saturated persona.

"The audience is never 'taken in' by the myth of Deano's 'personality,' " Mr. Graham wrote, putting Martin in the unlikely company of Brecht and Godard. "Instead, it is made aware that this is an artifice — the sustaining scaffold necessary to support the premise of the show."

Partly because Mr. Graham had no money for conventional art materials and, like many artists in those days, wanted to separate the worlds of art and commerce, his early work focused on magazines as kinds of conceptual, disposable galleries, in which he tried — and usually failed — to place articles as "artworks." (In one essay, cited in the show's catalog, he compares magazines to the pods in the 1956 movie "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," things "subliminally planted in the home" that go about disseminating new ideas about design and living as they pile up in the living room.)

After the Upper East Side gallery he co-owned went under in 1965, Mr. Graham, a despondent 23-year-old with mounting debts and no driver's license, took the train to New Jersey to move back in with his parents. But on the way, gazing out at the consecutive forms and colors of tract housing from the train window, he conceived the first work that made a name for him as an artist, one that has since become a touchstone of conceptualism.

Called "Homes for America," it is a series of amateur-seeming snapshots of suburban architecture, published in 1966 in Arts magazine after Esquire turned it down. The blandly colored pictures tweak Minimalism — the houses look like Judd boxes — and send up the sorts of erudite essays then being published in magazines like Esquire that probed the standardizing soul of suburbia. (Another piece he tried to get published around this time, called "Detumescence," was a simple one-page explanation he had solicited from a medical specialist, describing what happens to the male body and psyche in the moments after orgasm.)

"I never made money in art," said Mr. Graham, who for much of his professional life lived in a small $450-a-month apartment on the Lower East Side and was not represented by a gallery. "I was never successful. Artists and musicians knew about me, but I think the work was always too early."

His fortunes have improved in recent years; he lives alone in a nicer apartment in NoLIta and is represented by a prominent gallery, Marian Goodman, though he says the work still doesn't sell well, and he speaks disparagingly of "superstars," including a few represented by his own gallery, like Pierre Huyghe and Tino Sehgal, making it clear that he is not counted among them.

Given the feverish nature of his interests it comes as little surprise that talking to Mr. Graham is less like a conversation than like being swept into a tsunami of language, with gale-force allusions. Over iced tea and later over lunch at the Whitney, where he was helping oversee the show's installation, he pinballed from science fiction and Philip K. Dick to Albert Bierstadt and the Hudson River School (he said that most of his work is heavily influenced by a similar concern with light) to bisexuality. ("I think it helps to have bisexual tendencies," said Mr. Graham, who is straight. "I wish I was bisexual.")

Though many critics through the years have complained that Mr. Graham's work can be hard to love and too dryly pedagogical, he said he sees himself as a Jewish comedian working firmly in the tradition of Jewish comedy greats like Mel Brooks and Andy Kaufman, whom he considers to be great conceptual artists.

"Anarchistic humor is very important to my work," he said, calling "Homes for America" a piece of "pure deadpan humor — it's a fake think piece." Works in which the humor is more readily apparent have included one that placed large-screen televisions on people's front lawns so that passers-by could see what the inhabitants were watching that moment on the television inside the house. Another work proposed altering a suburban house so that it would have a glass front and a mirror bisecting the interior: anyone walking by would be able to see not only the inhabitants but themselves and the street reflected inside the house, making a funhouse out of distinctions between private and public space.

His glass pavilions have been placed indoors and outdoors in locations as remote as the Arctic Circle in Norway. And while they might look like curvaceous updates on Minimalist sculpture or like perceptual exercises — you can look through the glass, but it is often mirrored enough so that you look at yourself too in the landscape — he said he wants people to think of them as existing "somewhere between architecture and television." He notes that children and the elderly tend to understand them intuitively.

"All my intellectual ideas come from popular culture," he said, at one point protesting: "I'm not deconstructing it. I'm celebrating it."

He is a cultural sponge who seems to want to absorb and commandeer every conversation within his hearing. He can speak with almost equal enthusiasm and knowledge about the latest Seth Rogen movie, the Kinks, Mad magazine or Merle Haggard (whose superb prison ballad "Sing Me Back Home" Mr. Graham included on a three-CD mixtape called "Dan Graham's Greatest Hits," which he gave to a reporter and gives to almost anyone who speaks with him about music). In the lunch discussion with Mr. Simpson and Ms. Iles, when the conversation meandered onto anti-Semitism and "The Merchant of Venice," he somehow managed to veer it into an examination of the J. Geils Band.

Spending time with Mr. Graham, you can usually figure out when he is kidding, but it's very hard to figure out the ways in which he might be going about it. A

compulsive head scratcher when he is holding forth, Mr. Graham also compulsively refers to the astrological signs of anyone he might be talking about: Britney Spears is a Sagittarius, Wittgenstein was a Taurus, Judd a Gemini. Asked why he cares, he said, “Because it’s a cliché, and I love clichés because they’re mostly true.”

The photographer and art historian Jeff Wall has written that while many other conceptual artists “abjured, apparently for good, any involvement with the world” outside of their methodologies, Mr. Graham’s aim has always been “to remain involved with the wider world as a subject and occasion for art, but to structure that involvement in the rigorously self-reflexive terms” opened up by conceptualism.

Stating it more simply, Philippe Vergne, the director of the Dia Art Foundation, calls Mr. Graham’s work “elitism for everyone.”

“For Graham,” he writes in the show’s catalog, “enjoyment is central, but it is never a commodity; rather it is a channel for amused skepticism.”

Typically Mr. Graham disagrees vehemently, for several complexly interrelated reasons, calling Mr. Vergne a Paris-educated elitist himself, one who understands nothing about America.

“But I know that he knows a lot about rock music and likes it,” Mr. Graham conceded. “So I guess he’s not all bad.”

The artist Dan Graham at the Whitney Museum of American Art

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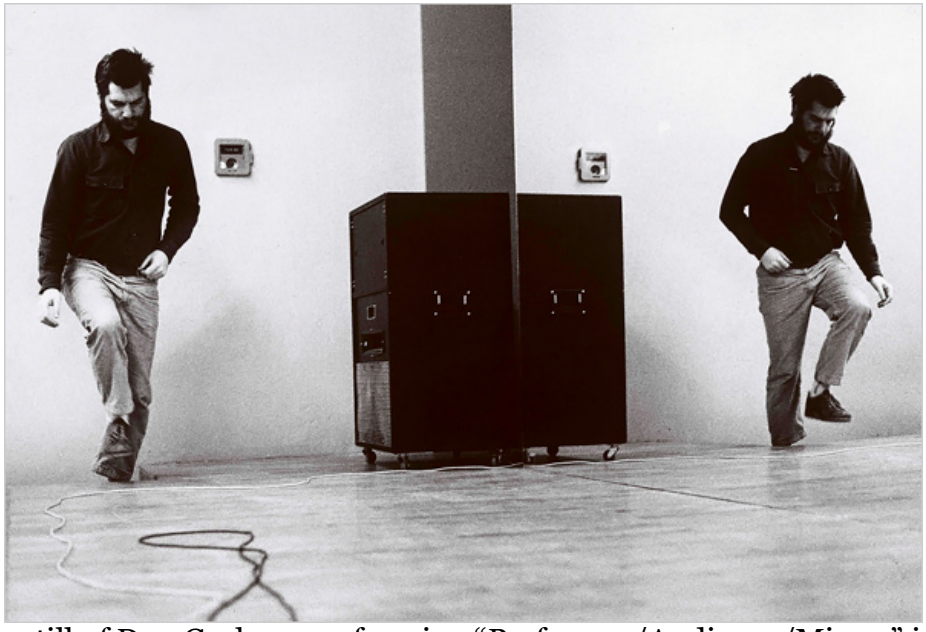

A video still of Dan Graham performing “Performer/Audience/Mirror” in 1977.

“Rooftop Urban Park Project,” 1981-1991, at the Dia Center for the Arts.

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Public Space/Two Audiences," 1976, at the Herbert Collection in Ghent, Belgium.

A performance of "Two Consciousness Projection(s)," at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Canada