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Hedge Two-Way Mirror Walkabout, Metropolitan Museum, New York – review

By Ariella Budick

A seriously charming and richly allusive installation has appeared on the roof of the Met



'Hedge Two-Way Mirror Walkabout' sits on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum in New York

The Metropolitan Museum's remote rooftop garden has always offered savvy visitors respite from hall after hall of sublime majesty. Right now, it opens on to an artificial-grass oasis that hovers like a magic carpet above the edge of Central Park. Lawn chairs are temptingly scattered about. The view beckons. And off to one side, a mirrored pavilion perches on its glowing patch of green, catching the kaleidoscopic tumult of the city and playfully casting it back.

Dan Graham collaborated with landscape architect Günther Vogt to transform the Met's severe space into "Hedge Two-Way Mirror Walkabout", a seriously charming funhouse. It's a mind-bending piece of walk-in sculpture, a two-chambered bubble of mirrored glass and steel that invites viewers to glimpse themselves in its reflective surfaces. However

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we look at it, we see ourselves askew – here, sleekly thin; there, grotesquely fat, mixed up with the people on the other side of the transparent wall and a flickering melange of sky, leaves, buildings and passing clouds.

Graham's rooftop pavilion teems with allusions. It invokes, first of all, the extravagantly ornamental structures – faux Greek temples, mock gothic ruins – designed as picturesque points of interest in 18th-century English gardens. At Stowe, Lord Cobham hid a "Temple of Ancient Virtue" among the vegetation, honouring the greatest Greeks and expressing his yearning for Hellenic antiquity. Graham has fallen under a more modern version of the neoclassical spell: he finds inspiration in the stripped-down austerity of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, which he admires both because it was always meant to be temporary, and because it effectively blends vegetation and reflective glass.

Graham has merged that picturesque fantasy with the midtown skyline. His twisty mirror reflects the gleaming necklace of skyscrapers around Central Park, many of them glass boxes in the spirit of Mies. Those ever-taller towers project an air of elegant efficiency while offering excellent camouflage: the reflective façades of high-rise headquarters and plutocrats' pads provide their occupants with limitless views yet shield them from observation. "Surveillance power is given to the corporate tower," as Graham notes in the catalogue. At the Met, he has created a miniature office building with a diabolical twist. The architecture of corporate modernism was developed to maximise productivity and embody egalitarian transparency, but Graham's glass geometries are deliberately labyrinthine and confusing, an exercise in rationality gone nuts.

If his shiny glass-and-steel structure echoes midtown Manhattan's extravagantly vertical skyline, the emerald plot miniaturises the awesome expanse of the Great Lawn, which unfolds just below the roof's parapet. Graham plays off the idea of Central Park as New York's backyard, installing a high box hedge like those that marked off the subdivisions of his youth.

Graham grew up across the Hudson River in New Jersey and he describes the suburbs as "an ambivalent arcadia". One of his most famous pieces is the 1967 "Homes for America", a grid-like photo essay on the prefab insta-towns that mushroomed along the peripheries of American cities. The houses look like serialised containers by Donald Judd, though Graham christened them with such allusive names as "The Sonata", "The Serenade" and "The Nocturne". In the generic repetitiveness of suburban homes, he found the democratic promise of social mobility. He recognises, though, that the orderly chequerboards of houses and lawns can feel confining, even prison-like. The Met's rooftop hedge is an equivocal symbol. "Good fences make good neighbours," Robert Frost wrote, with more than a pinch of irony. Here, Graham elaborates a similar idea, marking off boundaries between properties that nobody owns.

His charming burst of greenery belongs to a long tradition of picturesque illusion, intertwining artifice and nature. The landscape designers of the 18th century groomed hillsides to look like paintings. In the 19th century, Frederick Law Olmsted sculpted Central Park with that romantic example in mind. In the 20th, Kevin Roche, the architect who for decades supervised the Met's expansions and renovations, also designed the Ford Foundation Building, where great pillars enclose a verdant paradise. And in the

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21st, this Day-Glo clearing appears atop a museum that is both a corporate intrusion into the urban wilderness and another kind of indoor Eden.

Graham has summed up this lineage by drawing an explicit analogy between the urban museum and the bucolic estate: “Contemporary art museums function as locations for romantic rendezvous, just as 18th-century landscape gardens encouraged purposeful strolling, punctuated by pauses at pavilions and arbours.” The Latin phrase for the country in the city is *rus in urbe*, and “Hedge Two-Way Mirror Walkabout” is a fresh iteration of that old idea, spiced with subtle trickery. A parody office sits on a synthetic lawn at the edge of a man-made wilderness in the centre of a great metropolis. No wonder the reflections in its mirrors look so strange.