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Smith, Roberta. "Bouncing Around a Visual Echo Chamber." The New York Times (July 3, 2009) [ill.] [online]

The New York Times

ART REVIEW | DAN GRAHAM

Bouncing Around a Visual Echo Chamber



Dan Graham: Beyond "Triangular Solid With Circular Inserts (Variation E)" is part of a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art

By ROBERTA SMITH

The art world loves a radical, especially one who talks a good game. And [Dan Graham](#) — the curmudgeonly, avuncular post-Minimalist and early video adapter — definitely talks and writes a good game. Since 1965 Mr. Graham, who was born in Urbana, Ill., in 1942 and grew up in New Jersey, has used magazine pages as exhibition spaces; subverted Minimalism with small, sleek walk-in pavilions; and helped establish the intellectual credibility of participatory art while also popularizing it. Throughout, he has had quite a bit to say, writing on contemporary art, on his own work and on what may perhaps be his greatest passion, rock 'n' roll.

You hear from Mr. Graham frequently in "Dan Graham: Beyond," the handsomely installed, often engrossing, sometimes amusing yet overly didactic and visually low-key retrospective of his work at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#), his first retrospective in the United States. He has written half of the show's text labels, explaining various pieces, like one, never executed, in which he wanted to replace one side of a typical suburban house with a sheet of glass.

He is seen or heard in several short videos, talking about his mirror, glass and

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steel-frame pavilions while the camera considers the complicated way some of these pieces refract both their surroundings and their viewers. The effect is a visual echo chamber of reflections, shadows and silhouettes — and of people seeing, being seen and watching others see.

To make sure we're all on the same page, Mr. Graham has even provided a wall text titled "Artists' and Architects' Work That Influenced Me," which mentions Larry Bell, Robert Mangold, [Sol LeWitt](#) and [Mies van der Rohe](#).

There is something endearing and helpful about this. Mr. Graham and the show's curators — Bennett Simpson of the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Los Angeles (where it originated this year) and Chrissie Iles of the Whitney — have clearly worked to depart from the usual retrospective format, trying to achieve a greater degree of, well, transparency. But Mr. Graham's work is not rocket science. It has a rudimentary, even primitive quality, as when, on one of the show's videos, he glibly explains that his "Star of David Pavilion" in Austria has something to do with [Kurt Waldheim](#), the Austrian politician and diplomat, or describes a piece at Harvard as "a sendup of corporate New Age Zen Buddhism." And then there's the recent pavilion titled "Girls' Make-Up Room," which includes lipstick and a mirror.

This primitiveness may reflect Mr. Graham's role in starting something new: formulating art after Minimalism and helping it recover from the movement's invigorating yet narrowing, shattering effects. One conclusion artists drew from Minimalism's reductive credo was that making art objects was no longer an option. Some artists, like Robert Barry, turned from painting to working with language; others, like Mr. Graham, simply started with language, which he placed in the context of magazines.

"Figurative" (1965), the earliest work here, is a cash-register receipt that was published, along with its title and Mr. Graham's name, in Harper's Bazaar at the invitation of Dale McConathy, a young, routine-averse editor at the magazine. It faces a typically idealized ad featuring a model in a bra. The amounts on the receipt are negligible, rarely exceeding a few dollars, but they are never tallied (or "figured"). They appear to extend infinitely up and down, evoking a life of unending nickel and diming. Into the illusory world of a magazine devoted to female beauty and several kinds of desire, Mr. Graham insinuates a harsh, belittling note of reality.

"Schema," a magazine piece from 1966-7, is even more a marvel of contextual self-reference. Intended to be printed in different magazines, it would be different each time, since it consists of a list of information about itself: its own typeface, the magazine's paper stock and page size, and the area of paper occupied by type or left empty, as well as the number of nouns, adverbs, adjectives and numbers needed to convey this information.

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This kind of circularity is crucial to Mr. Graham's work. It is evident in his interest in mirrors and his use of video, and the way his pavilions are activated by the people who enter them, who make the art happen by being there.

If the Minimalists brought art to people in a new way — by, for example, taking sculpture off the pedestal — many post-Minimalists put people in the art and none did so more than Mr. Graham. When he started working with film and video in the late 1960s, he branched out into real-world space, maintaining his characteristic circularity by using two cameras. The first person in these works was Mr. Graham himself, as in "Roll" (1970). Here he set up a camera outdoors and, shooting from a second camera in his hands, rolled past it with results so rudimentary that, viewed in 2009, the piece looks positively dumb. But by the mid-1970s Mr. Graham was making more sophisticated double-camera pieces. In "Opposing Mirrors and Video Monitors on Time Delay," viewers can see the repeating reflections of a monitor in a mirror, as well as themselves with a brief lag, and anyone else in the room.

Soon Mr. Graham eliminated the cameras and started working directly with the glass and mirrors in the pavilions. These works, which dominate the main gallery of the exhibition, veer between a fun-house simplicity and entertaining trickiness; some resemble low-functioning bus shelters. The best here, because it is the most complicated, is "Triangular Solid With Circular Inserts (Variation E)." A seemingly simple three-sided structure, its circular openings and mirrored surfaces create the illusion of a hexagon from certain angles.



"Triangular Solid with Circular Inserts (Variation E)," 1989-2007,
at the Whitney Museum.

Mr. Graham's pavilions reflect the world around them, but his best works deal with American culture head on. One example, which quietly skewers his

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immediate artistic predecessors, is “Homes for America,” a series of photographs that he shot in New Jersey in the mid-1960s. They are seen here in projected slides as well as in their published form, in Arts Magazine. The images of suburban American architecture parodied and humanized Minimalism’s repeating forms, while also going back to the sources of Pop Art sincerely, as documentary.



An installation of “Double Exposure,” 1995-2002, in Porto, Portugal.

Mr. Graham’s most profound embrace of American culture — perhaps his most profound work, period — is “Rock My Religion,” a 55-minute video from 1982-84 that has earned him a cult following in the music world. Building a idiosyncratic argument that rock music belongs to an American tradition of ecstatic, collective experience linked to the religious singing and dancing of the Shakers, the piece gives the fullest picture of Mr. Graham’s talent for language, his eccentric way of thinking and his reverence for history. (The blues, however, are curiously absent from his timeline.) I suspect that, square foot by square foot, the small gallery in which “Rock My Religion” is being (continuously) screened will consistently be the fullest in the show.

Mr. Graham has always been reluctant to call himself an artist, especially a professional one. Given that attitude, it seems legitimate to call his work quasi art. It is an elaborately narrated philosophical inquiry into the nature of art and its context (spatial or commercial) and the nature of visual and social experience. This could mean that, in the end, the artists he has influenced will turn out to have produced better art than he has — an idea implied by the title of the show. But that is fine. There is more than one way to be important.