

REGEN PROJECTS

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Los Angeles Times

Review: 'Dan Graham: Beyond' @ MOCA

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Another colorless exhibition has opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art. I don't mean colorless as in dull or insipid, since this is a show definitely worth spending some time with. I just mean "without color." Black and white are the dominant tones in "Dan Graham: Beyond," while splashes of gray, silver and smoke pass for stylistic panache.

Starting in 1965, the New York Conceptual artist began doing hand-to-hand combat in the local art world, making work that chipped away at encrusted shibboleths of New York School aesthetic doctrine. Graham's results, as laid out in the first rooms of MOCA's four-decade survey, are by turns witty, surprising, smart and engaging, as only an art in the process of exploring untested possibilities can be.

The unremitting lack of color is vital to the work's success.

Take "Homes for America" (1966-67), which remains perhaps Graham's best-known piece. Photographs of suburban tract-housing developments in New Jersey are interspersed with blocks of text. The washed-out photographs are in color, but it's incidental.

These dry, matter-of-fact pictures are typically composed to underscore bland uniformity and sameness in the structures. A mirror-image of two brick staircases leads to the front doors of a duplex. An angled row of two-story shingled boxes is marked by tall down-spouts from wide rain gutters. Plastic kitchen trays are stacked up beneath fluorescent lights inside a strip mall's discount house. For this environment — built according to requirements of mass production — the chunks of printed text chronicle the economics of land use, the logic of variable floor plans and the obsolescence of architecture and craftsmanship, traditionally understood.



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The piece has all the charm of an analytical housing and urban development report produced at a government printing office. "Homes for America" was in fact printed in Arts Magazine. It unfolds as a cross between a socially conscious photo-essay — the lineage might include Margaret Bourke-White or Felix Man — and common art criticism. In form, style and presentation, "Homes for America" implicitly criticized two kinds of art prominent in the late 1960s.

One was High art, as suggested by Graham's reliance on an off-the-shelf Kodak Instamatic, rather than a professional-grade Leica or Nikon camera. Specifically, the piece undercuts New York School art, as codified with steadily narrowing precision by its powerful high priest, critic Clement Greenberg. Graham's colorless art stood in direct opposition to Greenberg's anointment of Color-field painting as art's ultimate Modern refinement.

A gray, three-column, two-page magazine spread was about as far as art could get from, say, Jules Olitski's atmospheric layers of pure color spray-painted on canvas, which were an official U.S. entry at the Venice Biennale that year. Olitski, a Greenberg favorite who soon after became the first contemporary American to have a solo show at the august Metropolitan Museum, represented what the establishment was doing in the art world.



"Homes for America," by contrast, represented what the establishment was doing outside the art world — which meant just about everywhere. With the rise of modern suburbs, an American generation after World War II essentially invented a new way of living.

Beyond the art world, one could also find the second kind of art implicitly being criticized by Graham's analytical, dryly illustrated text. The layout is like a nerdy send-up of "Better Homes and Gardens." The commercial razzle-dazzle of mass culture, which would play a seductive role in marketing the suburban developments Graham addressed, is nowhere to be found in his art.

Graham was 24 when he made "Homes for America." Born in Urbana, Ill., he grew up in Winfield Park and Westfield, N.J., southwest of Newark. Self-taught, he attended neither college nor art school, hightailing it to New York as soon as he could. He opened a short-lived downtown art gallery, and his first solo exhibition took place there in 1969.

Over the next decade, three-quarters of Graham's exhibitions were mounted in Canada and Europe. The new and fragile contemporary American art market had collapsed. He showed frequently at schools and alternative spaces. With one big exception, most of the show's compelling works were made during this scrappy time.

"Roll" (1970) is emblematic. A pair of film projectors placed back-to-back show brief, grainy, amateur movies on opposite walls. One pictures the artist in the middle distance, rolling down a slight hill in an autumnal woods. The other shows the same thing — except this time the movie camera was held by the artist, not someone else filming him. The image tumbles and tosses as limbs, body parts and dry leaves are jarringly glimpsed.

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One is an objective view of the artist in action, the other a subjective view. One feels remote, clinical; the other chaotic, dizzying, slightly dodgy but fun. The two film clips were shot in autumn, but only one feels bleak. The other is like playing in a pile of leaves.

Oddly, the first seems like a sober fragment of literary narrative — something dramatic is happening to a man represented in a movie, following unidentified events before the film began. In the second, something is happening to the viewer, whose discombobulated experience while watching is key. The first shows art's formal goal before the 1960s, the second embodies where it was headed thereafter.



A big chunk of MOCA's thorough, 40-year survey, co-organized by curator Bennett Simpson and Whitney Museum curator Chrissie Isles, consists of performance documentation. (The catalogue is often as good or better a venue for that.) Some of the film and video installations, which employ mirrored walls and closed-circuit video to complicate twists on watching and being watched, actual space and virtual space, are clever elaborations of more resonant works by Bruce Nauman and Peter Campus.

There are also numerous examples of the steel-and-glass pavilions Graham has been making since the 1980s. (Several are scale models.) Recalling garden follies, these perception-bending, fun-house environments are among his most popular works, but they tend to leave me cold. A cross between Larry Bell's mirrored-glass sculptures and Doug Wheeler's perceptual light-spaces, they just don't add much to the familiar precedents. The pavilions work best when used indoors as lounging areas for watching videos.

There, you look up from a TV set into an actual hall of mirrors that complicates the virtual one flickering on the video screen, while simultaneously catching a glimpse of another lounger — who might be nothing more than an ephemeral reflection. Watching yourself being watched by a mirage is unnerving, especially in today's surveillance-saturated world of government and corporate snooping.

The last truly compelling piece is "Rock My Religion" (1982-84), a nearly hourlong video that unexpectedly traces a quarter-century of raucous rock 'n' roll back to America's prim Puritan roots. When a grainy rendering of an ecstatic Shaker circle-dance is juxtaposed with a clip of Jerry Lee Lewis tearing down the house with "A Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On," Henry Rollins' hard-core punk turns into amplified speaking-in-tongues and Patti Smith does become the Mary Magdalen of fallen savior Jimi Hendrix.

As an image and text piece, "Rock My Religion" brings "Homes for America" full circle. The magazine format gets updated to MTV, founded the year before, and the work's bleary stew of sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll and irrational religion neatly coincides with the fearsome rise of televangelist power early in the Reagan Era. It's a sight worth seeing.

—Christopher Knight

"Dan Graham: Beyond," Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave., 11 a.m.-5 p.m.
Mondays and Fridays, 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursdays, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Ends May 25.
\$10. (213) 626-6222

Top, middle photos: Detail from "Homes for America," (1966-67), Bottom: "New Space for Showing Videos" (1995). Credit: MOCA