

REGEN PROJECTS

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ARTFORUM

PASSAGES

DAN GRAHAM 1942–2022

Alex Kitnick and R. H. Quaytman

ALEX KITNICK

I DIDN'T KNOW Dan Graham well. I met him a handful of times in the mid-2000s when I was a graduate student at Princeton University. I wanted to write my dissertation on Dan, but I was too young and too terrified to do it. Once, when I met him in his loft on New York's Spring Street, he threw a fit because I didn't know the work of the Japanese architect Itsuko Hasegawa. I was wet behind the ears and couldn't find my angle—I was too sympathetic to his position, which was at once ardent, skeptical, and laced with wry humor. With Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, we took an architectural tour of New Jersey, the artist's home state, and Dan snapped pictures of the octangular buildings of Paterson, Alexander Hamilton's industrial utopia, where Graham's compatriot Robert Smithson had also rummaged, and of the floppy inflatable figures flailing around exurbia-on-Hudson. When I invited Graham to Princeton, he screened a documentary on his work, narrated by the artist. Graham spoke over the soundtrack for an entire hour, offering a real-time voice-over that uncannily mirrored the historical record. Like David Antin (a contemporary), Dan was one of the art world's great talkers, and yet what he said was neither stream of consciousness nor off the cuff—rather, it was the result of a life dedicated to thinking, and thinking again, about "real life" and the systems that animated it. One might call these forces culture, but for Dan culture was far from the Arnoldian concept of the best which has been thought and said. The most generative site was that middle space of pop music, dating services, developers' architecture, and corporate arcadias, a lesson Graham learned, in part, from his study of Pop figures including Roy Lichtenstein and Robert Venturi. But if culture served as the artist's object of inquiry, art provided the space from which to look at it, offering an outside angle that allowed for thought. For Graham, art and life existed in strange tension with each other. He resided somewhere between those two poles.

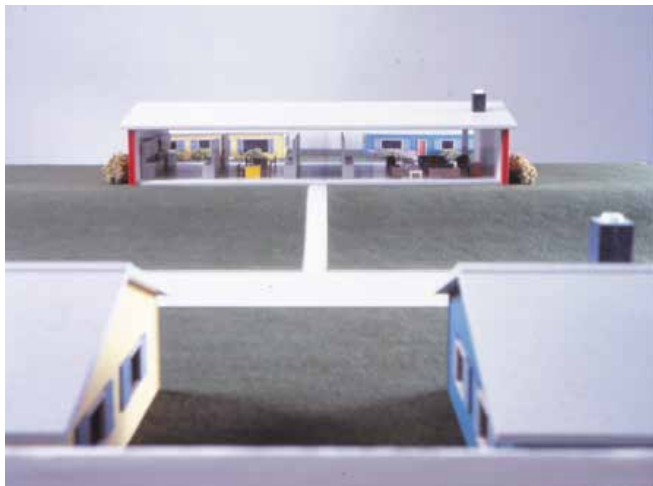
Graham came to be known as a talker, a figure—indeed, a *personality*—but he first presented himself as a writer, with a series of articles that appeared in *Arts Magazine* in the mid-1960s. These texts are now considered founding documents of Conceptual art, but I'm not convinced that was in any way clear on their first appearance (for many years, it was not even clear that Graham was an artist). And yet, with their deadpan language borrowed from popular sociology, they acted differently from the typical art coverage of the time. Was this guy serious, with his analysis of suburban tract homes and their floor plans, named *The Concerto*, *The*



Dan Graham, *Performer/Audience/Mirror*, 1977. Performance view, De Appel, Amsterdam, 1977. Dan Graham.

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Dan Graham, *Alteration to a Suburban House*, 1978, painted wood, textile, plastic, fiberboard, paper, glass, approx. 60 × 58 × 49".



Dan Graham, *Star of David Pavilion for Schloss Buchberg*, 1991–96, two-way mirror, aluminum, Plexiglas. Installation view, Schloss Buchberg, Austria, ca. 1990s.

Nocturne? The context suggested that the author worked through implication, that his real subject was elsewhere, across the river in New York, or perhaps somewhere between the art galleries of Manhattan and the tract houses of New Jersey, in the morass of culture itself. The high-water mark of Minimal art was 1966, and Graham implied that Minimalism and tract homes shared a logic of repetition. It wasn't that one was riffing on the other, but that a similar spirit bubbled beneath both, and that the social relevance of art might best be glimpsed by making this kinship apparent.

Graham might have been Marx-ish, but he was no Marxist. He never claimed that a capitalist base determined a cultural superstructure. Culture was made by many forces, and it provided raw material for making something else. Certainly, one of Graham's great works of cultural criticism is his 1982–84 video essay *Rock My Religion*, which started as a series of texts sprinkled through the art press. Graham begins with concert footage of Black Flag and quickly segues to the Shakers, Patti Smith, and the Lakota Ghost Dance, creating a constellation, or secret history, of energetic resistance to patriarchy, adulthood, and the powers that be. Rock, Graham claimed, offered temporary moments of communal liberation, transcendence, and fun within culture. It was a sonic utopia available both over the airwaves and in the club. Perhaps, he implied, art might once again do that too.

The works of Graham's I struggle with most are his

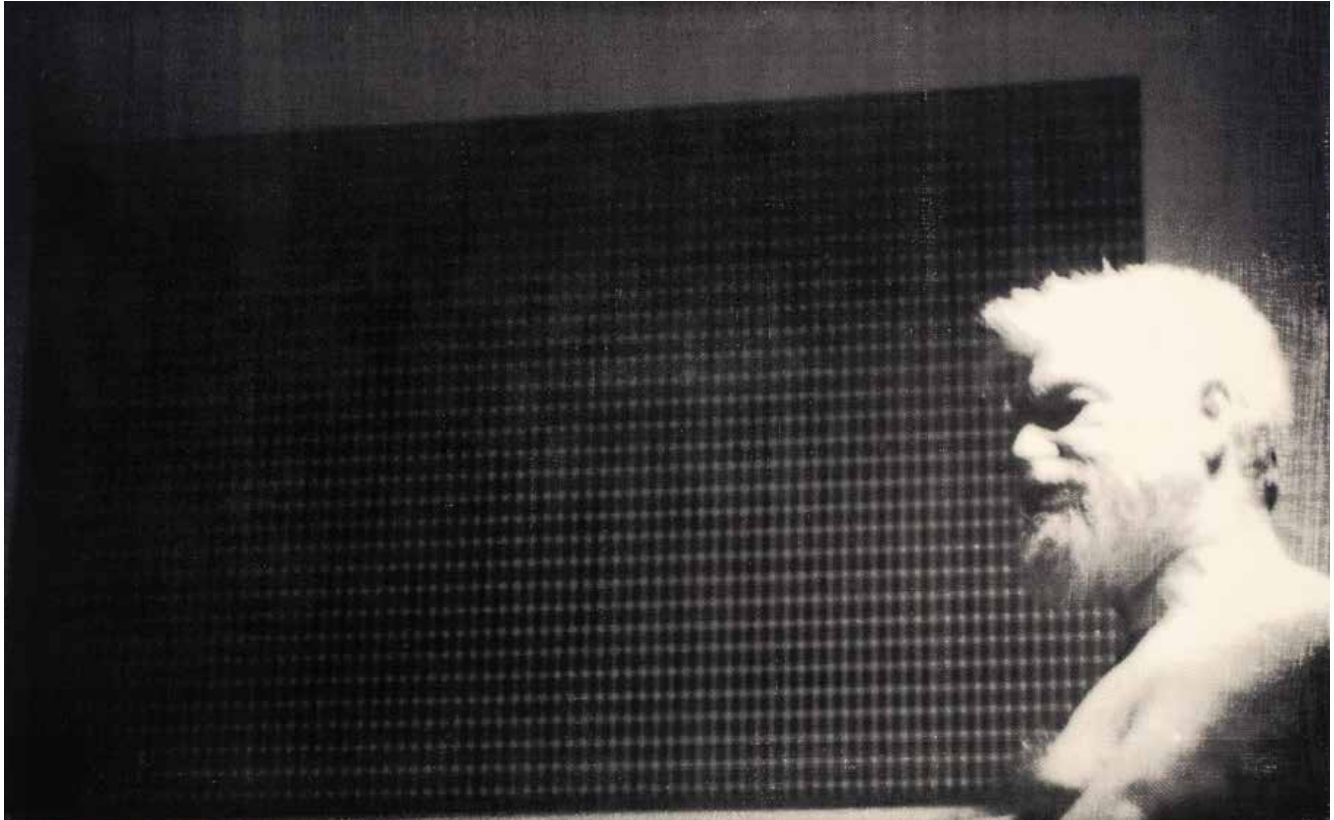
"laboratory experiments" of the 1970s. In a series of clinically white cubes, Graham created environments comprising mirrors and video that present the self as fractured and mediated. Inside, one jumps and sees oneself jumping, and then eight seconds later one sees oneself jumping again, and then again and again in infinite regress. Just as Lacan spoke of the mirror stage as crucial to one's self-image, Graham claimed the video stage as similarly fundamental, and that it might also be used to cast off the image we had been fixed with by the so-called mirror. And yet I often felt poked and prodded in these spaces, which now appear, as do many works from the era, as medicalized premonitions of the Kusamaesque experience-scape we inhabit today. Graham's lesson was more effective, I think, when he located similar devices in the space of the everyday world. *Alteration to a Suburban House*, 1978, is a spare model of a domestic scene in which a home's facade is replaced by a massive glass panel and the interior bisected with a reflective surface. The idea here, again, was not that Lacanian dynamics of subject formation underlay suburbia but that suburbia itself had created a split within the subject. Dan was obsessed with subject formation and the different systems of classification that induced it, no matter how specious; race and astrology were both determining fictions, but they had to be taken seriously because they created the frame through which many see the world. He had little time for essential identities and authentic expressions, but he seemed amazed by the different ways

a subject might be rendered, indeed institutionalized. Ideology occupied everything—we were always being hailed—but Graham refused the bravura of social-practice art and its promise of instant antidotes. He sought not so much to change the world as to make space within it. One way to do so was by taking the piss.

During the last forty-plus years of his career, Graham created a series of pavilions that located the glassy materials of the corporate world in pastoral settings. These perfunctory acts of architecture were meant as spaces not for forgetting or escape but for thinking relationally *between* city and country—and in time, they asked us to think relationally between them, too. Graham made so many of them, on sites ranging from Kunst-Werke in Berlin to MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, from Brazil to Israel to Japan, that they marked the art world's geography as its footprint expanded to properly global dimensions. I pranced around one in a castle in Austria with a friend once and had genuine childlike fun, but others were rote, banal, even boring (the great, now-dismantled pavilion-video café atop the old Dia building on New York's West Twenty-Second Street was a startling exception). As Graham and his team erected these mirrored follies, Dan rose, somewhat miraculously, to occupy a beatified position in the art world. He was the kooky uncle of Conceptual artists, a role he played, I imagine, in part at the behest of the art world's PR machine and the many artists he supported and fostered. (The portraits done by his wife, Mieko Meguro, contributed to the image of an artist who played the *wild man blues*.) It makes me wonder about the artist's legacy and the legacy of Conceptual art more generally, especially given the passing, in December, of Lawrence Weiner, idea art's irascible linguistic pirate. (It's worth noting that both Weiner and Graham were autodidacts. Neither

Graham's real subject was elsewhere, perhaps somewhere between the art galleries of Manhattan and the tract houses of New Jersey, in the morass of culture itself.

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R. H. Quaytman, *iamb, Chapter 12 (Dan Graham)*, 2008, silk screen and gesso on wood, 20 × 32 3/4".

attended college.) Perhaps Conceptual art's ideas always floated on a cloud of celebrity—it's astounding how the portrait covers of *Avalanche* magazine (1970–76) look like vinyl albums—but I think we can see now that the ethos of the movement lay less in a dream of dematerialization than in an interest in information and the ways it might be shared and embodied, whether through publication, video, exhibition, collaboration, teaching, or friendship. Ultimately, Dan's medium was discourse; the dialogue he helped initiate continues to expand today.

ALEX KITNICK TEACHES ART HISTORY AT BARD COLLEGE IN ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, NEW YORK.

R. H. QUAYTMAN

Thinking back on my thirty-year friendship with Dan Graham, I realize, only now, that entering his orbit was a lot like stepping into one of his glass pavilions. There was an outside and an inside, with a threshold between them that was optically but not physically permeable.

As anyone who knew Dan will attest, he could deploy an intense focus toward his interlocutor that made it feel like he really *saw* you. He was a soothsayer, a reader of the signs and markers of our common life story. He had a way of getting at your deepest fears, laying them out like a cheap country-and-western song and thereby miraculously defusing them.

But then there was the other side of the glass—Dan's thoughts about this landscape, the art world that we were entangled in. To be Dan's friend, and to truly appreciate the pavilion, one needed a desire to learn how he himself interpreted these surroundings and their histories, concepts, temporalities. When I started working for Dan, in my early thirties, I had absorbed too many conflicting ideas about art and was having trouble trusting or believing any of them. Dan gave me a backbeat to march to as I pushed my work forward amid the overwhelming cacophony. I needed to find an artist with whom there was just no arguing, and I got that in spades. Arguing with Dan was always pointless. He couldn't hear, after all; he was on the other side of the glass.

To enter conversation with Dan was to participate in a vibrant, all-encompassing cosmology that happened on occasion to line up with my dreams. Through him, I learned that it was necessary to invent an imaginary route. I trusted his steerage because of what guided it: a sturdy feminism and a World War II-era socialist populism that always charmed me. His proclamatory politics were based in a love and trust of the surface of things. His friends will laugh at memories of the messages he would occasionally leave on our answering machines, screaming *New York Post*-style headlines into the receiver. Dan's mood could turn from concave to convex depending on whether his thinking communicated delight, humor, affection, and speculation or the inverse: impatience, anger, disdain, and gossip. To love and learn from Dan was to trust that his optics, distorting as they sometimes were, oriented us in a single direction, one that led away from elites and alienation and toward connection, toward play, toward, as the song goes, the sunny side of the street. □

R. H. QUAYTMAN IS AN ARTIST BASED IN GUILFORD, CONNECTICUT. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)