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ART

Smoke And Mirrors

Dan Graham's Works Are More Than Meets the Eye

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Someone looking at something has been at the heart of most art you could name. In abstraction, the art lover is the looker and the art object's the thing. Easy. In realist art, the artist is the first looker, looking at the thing portrayed, and then the art lover looks at the picture of that thing the artist was looking at. As you look at the art object, that is, you're looking at it, and at the thing it shows, but also at the artist's act of looking at that thing. That's a bit more of a brain tease.

So what about if you got rid of the thing, and just made art about the looking itself? You'd think that would simplify matters, but it does just the opposite: For 40 years now, it's been adding fiendish complexity to the works of Dan Graham, one of the most influential figures on the scene today. It has also earned the 67-year-old New Yorker his current retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and made it the most important, compelling show of the New York season.

Imagine replacing all the pictures in a great museum with mirrors, so that there was only our own gazing left to see. That's rather like what Graham has managed in his art.

A classic Graham involves a walk-in "pavilion" made of a few huge panes of glass or mirror, or of half-mirrored glass that is both reflective and transparent.

Take a quick look at one of his pavilions, with your normal thing-seeking eyes, and all you see is a minimal sculpture made of a few panes of glass -- elegant and attractive, but not all that compelling. In the past, I've given Graham's pavilions just that kind of look, then lost interest.

But that's because I was looking wrong. To take in a Graham, you need to ignore the thing itself, and take advantage of the opportunities that thing gives to look at looking.

In a 1991 piece called "Heart Pavilion," the two side walls of a valentine-shaped room are made of half-mirrored expanses of glass. The top end of Graham's "Heart" is made of two more panes that are curved. When *you* walk in through a gap in one side, you see your

own face reflected, huge and wobbly, on the inside of the concave curves at the heart's far end. You look at yourself as you become an oversize looker floating in midair, a ghost in the machine of art. Or you can choose to ignore your own reflection, and look through the curves at all the museumgoers looking in at you. And then you realize that that's *not* what they're doing at all: From their mugging, you can tell that they're looking at themselves, being reflected circus-mirror style in the convex flip side of the same curved pane you're looking through. Which means that they're both not looking at the art -- they're thinking only of themselves and their funny reflections -- and looking just as the art invites them to. Except for a sober few of them, who are clearly looking at you as you look -- at yourself, or at them -- and imagining what it is you're seeing as you look, just as you're imagining what they are looking at, and seeing.

Another piece, from 1987, is not much more than a glass revolving door that connects two spaces in the gallery. It has so little true function -- why not just leave an opening between the two rooms? -- that it gets us looking at the now-functionless thing itself. Which, given that it's glass, means we're really looking at the reflections and transparencies it shows -- which are in any revolving door we've ever used, but which we've ignored as we've spun through.

The Whitney also gives us maquettes, drawings and videos that show reflective pieces by Graham that have never been built, have disappeared or were too site-specific to ship. In one, Graham plays with shop windows; in another, with an entire retail interior; in a third, with a movie theater -- all places built around looking, and where Graham can confuse the view.

In a model for a project conceived in 1978, Graham replaces the whole facade of a classic ranch-style house with a sheet of glass. Then he installs a mirror right across the middle of the suburban home, making its spaces half as deep as they would normally be -- but seeming deeper even than normal, because of the reflected view the mirror gives of the front halves of the rooms, and of the yard and street beyond. Life in the suburbs has always involved an element of looking and being looked at. Dozens of depressing novels and films have studied that panopticon effect. Graham's project makes it explicit, as passersby who look in see themselves reflected back, peeping at their own peeping-in.

Even before Graham hit on his mirror conceits, a lot of his work was about looking. A famous and influential early slide show, called "Homes for America" and also published as a magazine spread in 1966, is a suite of photos of more suburban houses, like the ones Graham grew up in in New Jersey. They're shot as though glimpsed casually, in passing. They give us the unfocused looking that is all we devote to our suburbs, but now that sidelong glance has been frozen in a suite of photographs.

Within a few years, as a pioneer of video art, Graham filled galleries with closed-circuit

cameras and monitors, on various time delays so that you got caught in a kind of infinite loop of looking and being looked at. (Graham also managed to do pioneering work in conceptual art, text-based art, performance art, installation art, documentary art and even rock-themed art.) Think of the infinite regress you get when you're caught between two mirrors, and how unstable that can make you feel about your place in the world. Then imagine a time gap between the two reflections -- that's the kind of supercharged disequilibrium Graham's art can evoke.

Even pieces by Graham that seem to have less to do with looking can turn out to invoke it.

A 1983 video seems to offer straight footage of a performance by the famous Washington hard-core band Minor Threat and of the mosh pit in front of its players. The thing is, because there's no real narrative -- it's just a bunch of guys forever hollering and power-chording, while another bunch of guys bounce off each other -- there's not much to look at or think about, except our own act of looking. Standing in the Whitney's white-cube gallery, we realize that we're just standing passively, looking in on all the random action, like scientists observing Brownian motion at the far end of a microscope.

Or there's the piece in which Graham piped the visuals from a family's television set out onto a monitor in their front yard, where anyone who passed could see whatever they were watching. The piece is about television culture, obviously, and the content that runs on our TVs -- how much of it there is, and how much of it is inane. But it's also about the raw act of watching, of channel-surfing, of turning the TV on and off. By funneling the signal out of the family's domestic space, it turns television watching into a spectator sport.

For the most part, we've now become so used to video feeds and pl*at*e glass and perfect mirrors that we barely notice the strange kinds of viewing they've surrounded us with. As we walk by a department-store window we look through it at the display beyond, rather than at it as it does the showing or into the reflection that it gives us of ourselves, looking. What Graham does, in a sense, is let us imagine ourselves into the shoes of someone from an unglazed, unmirrored, unvideotaped world -- into the shoes of a Giotto, maybe -- so that we can recognize how strange it is to be forever looking, and forever seen, at so many removes.

Dan Graham: Beyond is at the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan until Oct. 11. Call 212-570-3600 or visit http://www.whitney.org.