

Dan Graham



Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, USA

Dan Graham
Skateboard Pavilion
1989
Architectural model
140x145x130 cm

A retrospective of Dan Graham's work is always destined to be a motley affair. The artist's tastes and interests are so omnivorous that any attempt to identify a unifying logic in his now-sprawling body of work can feel a little self-defeating. How, for example, to relate the restless, prescient public intellectual who wrote 'Homes for America: Early 20th-Century Possessable House to the Quasi-Discrete Cell of '66' (1967), to the jocular *manga* enthusiast, to the public artist who has designed two-way glass pavilions for sites across the world, to the passionate music buff who designed the cover of Sonic Youth's 1987 album *Sister?* There are multiple Grahams, and his practice is often defined along the interlocking thresholds of social/psychological subjectivity, audience and performance. This is true enough, but the same description might be ascribed to any number of living artists whose practices bear no relation to Graham's whatsoever. A greater degree of specificity is called for, and something like that emerges from this retrospective.

Graham himself is more focused about his own work, contending in a recent interview: 'All my work is a critique of Minimal art; it begins with Minimal art, but it is about spectators observing themselves. And all my work became about temporality. I think Minimal art is static.' Whether one agrees with Graham's wholesale characterization of Minimalism as 'static', it does seem fair to say that while artists like Donald Judd and Carl Andre were invested in a brand of phenomenology that concentrated primarily on formal, spectator-object relations rather than

the specificity of social relations, Graham is, by contrast, committed to finding forms and setting up conditions that not only encourage spectators to observe themselves, but perhaps more importantly, to observe each other. Whether his work takes the form of performance, public sculpture (a term he rejects in favour of the more specific 'pavilion'), video-based installation or text, a consistent minimalist sensibility is inflected and activated by Graham's very generous commitment to a distinctive brand of social phenomenology, a facet of his work that this exhibition foregrounds very successfully.

In an effort to establish this point immediately, the retrospective breaks with the conventions of chronology and teleology, opening instead with three two-way glass pavilions from 1991, 1998-2000 and 1989/2007. Each glass environment is confounding and tantalizing in its own right, generating almost paralyzing uncertainty as one stares, moves, and stares again at the structure in an effort to distinguish the physical object from the various illusions it sustains. True to the artist's understanding of his glass sculptures as 'pleasure pavilions', with these works, Graham successfully develops a phenomenology of ambiguity and tentativeness that re-makes the stoic, reflective experience of minimalist sculpture as a kind of comic theatre. Unfortunately, the decision to cluster three glass pavilions in the opening gallery also introduces a level of sculptural inertia to the experience of the space as a whole, which runs counter to the mischievousness of the individual works, and in part undermines Graham's very determined critique of Minimalism's 'static' nature. Fortunately, further glass pavilions are used to great effect to punctuate the rest of the

exhibition, navigating some of MOCA's more challenging twists and turns and drawing attention to the humorous, civic, even useful applications of these structures.

Other landmark works in the exhibition reiterate Graham's interest in finding forms to analyze social spaces, relations and rituals. Many of these projects rely on binary structures and almost all hinge on a desire to increase awareness of a given social condition or to complicate a set of social assumptions. One of the more complex examples is his hour-long video, *Rock My Religion* (1982-4). As one of the curators, Bennett Simpson, notes, the video is a searching, dreamlike allegory that proposes fundamental - perhaps primal - connections. It draws a parallel between the rapture of live performance (embodied in the video by the writhing, possessed form of Henry Rollins protheletizing to his followers from the stage) and the haptic experience of religious ecstasy, suggesting that the rightful roots of rock's celebrated radicalism may be found on the opposite end of the social spectrum, in the rites and rituals of early religious practice.

Other signal works, represented largely through textual documentation, photographs and assorted ephemera, emerge from a more orthodox conceptual base, without forsaking the investment in social phenomena so evident in *Rock My Religion* or other related projects. In *Identification Projection* (1977), for example, a woman stands in front of an audience and awkwardly describes the men and women in the group to whom she feels sexually attracted, while in *Nude Two Consciousness Projection(s)* (1975), a nude woman seated casually in a chair stares at her own image in a television monitor while verbalizing as accurately as possible 'the content of her consciousness'. In front of her, a nude man standing on a chair operates the video camera, as the audience observes this twice-mediated erotic encounter. Aside from his pavilions, Graham's nascent minimalist sensibility is most evident in works like *Public Space/Two Audiences* (1976) and *Opposing Mirrors and Video Monitors on Time Delay* (1974) - both aesthetically spare, environmentally-scaled projects that reject outright the strong gestalt effect of Minimalist sculpture and instead act as platforms for communal inquiry into a specific perceptual condition, an activity that in turn becomes a social encounter.

On a general level, the arc of Graham's career is evidence of a relentless, omnivorous curiosity. More specifically, though, the show demonstrates that Graham has found various ways to marry the aesthetic and phenomenological concerns of Minimalism to the analytical imperatives of Conceptualism, using the body - his body, found bodies, the bodies of his spectators and collaborators - as a bridge between these two concerns. Consequently he has arrived at an art that is equal parts formal investigation, social critique and good old-fashioned play.

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