

DAN GRAHAM

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Dan Graham, ARTIST, Maybe ARCHITECT

MASSIMILIANO DI BARTOLOMEO

In 1976, during the “Ambiente/Arte” exhibition organized by Germano Celant at the Venice Biennale, Dan Graham showed a work titled PUBLIC SPACE/TWO AUDIENCES. A game of prestige, it took advantage of man’s very ingenuous perception of space to double the reference coordinates of a place, using a “simple” mirror-wall and another in transparent glass that intersected a rectangular room. It was like looking through a bottomless mirror, with one’s ego reflected in it; but it was also pervaded by a transparency. Meanwhile other wandering presences could be discerned, though it was impossible to ascertain their exact whereabouts. This work inaugurated a new approach by Graham to time delay: a dizzy perception postponed, an opportunity to observe a stranger, albeit only for an instant, before recognizing the stranger as oneself. The artificiality of the video and of the projectors, aided by mirrors and showcases, had enabled Dan Graham to explore perceptive dimensions that were in no way dependent on Renaissance perspective: an orderly and scientific rebellion that surveyed every spatial possibility. Again in 1976, the video TIME DELAY FOR TWO OPPOSING SHOP WINDOWS gave him an opportunity to explore this encroachment elsewhere. This time the observer’s attention is focused on the object displayed, but distracted by his/her own reflection and

by that of the passersby. Graham expands on that condition by installing two monitors, two television cameras and two mirrors, in two juxtaposed shop windows. This rigorous and exact, geometric and timely arrangement has the capacity, however, to set up infinite spatial combinations. These two experiences ferried Graham’s work into an exploratory field far from the neutrality of an art specially prepared, but sharply conditioned by place.

Graham’s “machines” have become instruments for surveying space, sectioning it according to sensorial sequences caused by incidents and fractures, screenings and television cameras that make the appreciation of a place ambiguous. The absolute and the relative interpenetrate alternatively, and the visitor can choose to observe one of the multiple realities, in the knowledge that no one possesses the dignity of the absolute except in the instant in which it is perceived. Place, on the other hand, is defined in its continuous denials, being projected and reflected according to contradictory coordinates. The concluded space of a room multiplies its dimensional planes by denying the truths of Cartesian geometry and releasing any subordination to a central and perspective representation: like optical benches on which to fix projections of reality while crossing the narrow border that separates the two worlds in which we are wrapped: the concrete one before our eyes, and the hazier one that resides in the tangle of our suggestions. If, therefore, in the closed spaces, Gra-

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ham's pavilions represent the infinite as opposed to the finite, in the open spaces the reverse is true: the surfaces absorb the surrounding landscape, offering visitors the possibility of a synthesis, though this is never taken for granted. As, for example, in *TWO CUBES/ONE ROTATED*, which is a plain geometric interlocking of two glass and mirror cubes that can also be entered. This work, first shown at the ARC Musée d'Art Moderne de la ville de Paris, becomes naturally a frame for the space around it. Significantly, the dry and cold aluminum profiles hold back the portions of reality like pictures in a gallery of images rolled into themselves. In this case, the space is not subject to fractures recounting its complexity, as it is in the closed installations. Rather, it is simplified, harnessed to a geometrical pattern that seems to lend order to its comprehension. An exact reading is moreover denied by the fact that the simultaneity of information cannot be organized. And within this logic, the element of disturbance is necessary to our appreciation of Graham's work, while the reflections in the glass present a continual comparison between the observer and what is observed. In this way distraction can complete the observation. Speaking about his 1976 installation, Graham recalls that: "...If you entered and found yourself alone, it was like being inside minimalist art, but as soon as there was more than one person, you would get a double reflection, beside the feeling of bewilderment caused by the continuous reversal between the observer and the person observed." But it is still just as effective today, despite our having grown accustomed since then to an ever more technological and virtual existence. Indeed at the Italian Pavilion in this year's Venice Art Biennale, there were the same incredulous looks, nervous smiles and hands alternately raised, to get confirmation that the persons on the other side of the mirror were actually themselves. A feeling of dizziness may seize the viewer as he or she ingenuously observes a pavilion by Graham: a feeling that turns into contemplation or euphoria, a static or dynamic state. *THE STAR OF DAVID PAVILION*, from 1989, but finally realized in 1996, on the grounds of Buchberg Castle in Austria, is paradigmatic in this respect. Adults catch their breath as they grasp the intensity of images and sentiments crystallized in the



DAN GRAHAM, *PUBLIC SPACE/TWO AUDIENCES*, 1976, installation, "Ambiente/Arte," Venice Biennale / ÖFFENTLICHER RAUM/ZWEIFACHES PUBLIKUM.

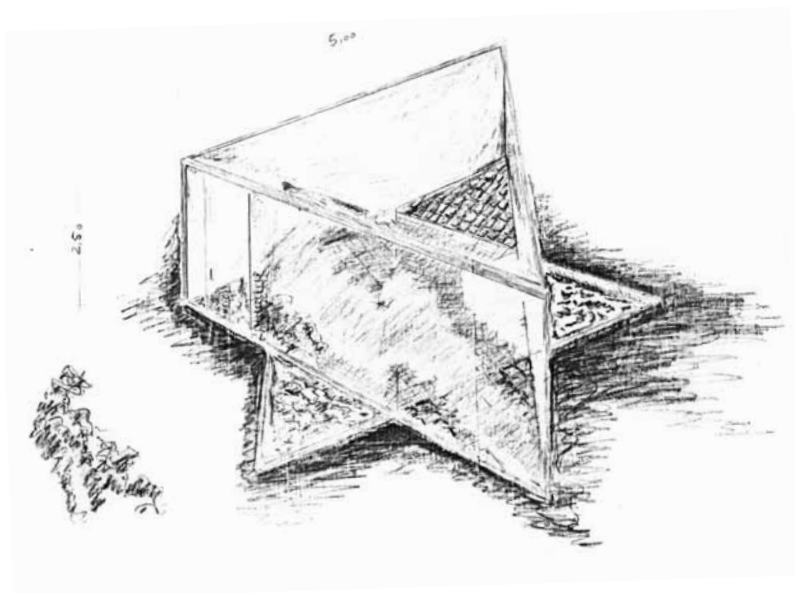
transparent volume; the star shape is recognized in the intersection of the solid triangle, which can be entered, and another triangular water basin that seems to emerge from the two-dimensionality of the water. Its reflections thus also occupy an underground dimension, while the dizziness is in the eye, as it rapidly regains the tops of the star itself on the ground, later lost in its semi-extrusion. Children run towards the wall that isn't there, playing tag and going through a door almost concealed by the immateriality of glass. As the water on the interior of the solid two-way-mirror image position can be walked on by a metal grid, they gaze at their figures reflected in the water and superimposed on the sky, and point

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at themselves through the two-way mirror planes. Dizziness becomes a game, and the dazed state is a venture beyond rationality. As Roger Cailliois explains in his book *Man, Play, and Games* the coincidence that occurs between dizziness and the mask projects man's identity into a play-related and irrepressible dimension, until a state of stupefaction is reached. Certain propitiatory tribal dances, or more simply the children pirouetting in the courtyard in a hilarious crescendo until they lose their balance and feel sick as the ground starts to undulate, are actually a moment of exploration, an attempt to dig out the authenticity of a dimension that sometimes appears too static. Graham's pavilions convey this giddy sensation, setting off a continuous circular process, even in the visitor's absolutely static state while the space begins to rotate, absorbed or rejected by the screens with which the volume is constructed. In reality, the deception begins precisely with our attempt to grasp the complexity of the structure, the exact intersection of its planes and the geometry of its space. Seduced by the possibility of understanding, and trapped by our unconsciousness, we keep trying again, convinced that this time may be the lucky one, whilst in this reiterated deception the exploration continues.

At times, the distance between art and architecture is minimal; sometimes the two overlap and in-

terpenetrate. This happens in the large suspended canvases by Anish Kapoor, in Richard Serra's magnetic spirals, in Kounellis's brutal labyrinths. The magazine *Domus* recently published a report on the excursion by the art world into the dynamics of architecture: and a recent article, titled "Art Eats Architecture," illustrated the sensational work installed by Kapoor at the Tate Modern in London. Kapoor himself has since been appointed to "design" a station on the Naples Underground. Dan Graham pushes beyond and succeeds in taming space, crystallizing it. However, he does not deprive it of possible changes. He transforms the viewer into an inhabitant, as his or her own privileged witness within the work. The drawing and the preparatory sketches, but also the models, reveal this designer's attitude: by means of axonometrics, perspectives, plans, and sections, where materials and finishes are indicated, but above all the visitor-inhabitant's entrances and routes, in a language detached from architecture. Functional diagrams anticipate the work's mechanism and the inhabitant's behavior, fostering a continual interaction between visitor and place. The CAFÉ BRAVO for the Berlin Biennale of 1998 therefore is a work of architecture, built with technical help from the architect Johanne Nalbach. It is composed of two cubes that intersect in the courtyard of an old factory converted into an exhibition space.



DAN GRAHAM, STAR OF DAVID PAVILION, 1989, drawing by the artist / DAVIDSTERN-PAVILLON, Skizze des Künstlers.



DAN GRAHAM, STAR OF DAVID PAVILION, 1989–1996, two-way mirror, aluminum, Plexiglas, Schloss Buchberg, Austria, $102\frac{3}{4} \times 165\frac{2}{5} \times 94$ " / DAVIDSTERN-PAVILLON, Einwegspiegel, Aluminium, Plexiglas, $261 \times 420 \times 238$ cm.

Reflections in the two-way mirror glass and the mirrored profiles in chromed aluminum, distort the composition formed by the façades of surrounding buildings, while the two cubes seem to appropriate them for themselves. People in the café appear to be suspended in a bubble, yet they are reassured by its familiar furniture. They are distracted however, by the impossibility of defining the boundary between exterior and interior, public and private. Take M. C. Escher's ironic drawing PRINT GALLERY (1956), for example: is the visitor portrayed outside or inside the print?

And again, the fax used by Graham to technically illustrate his most recent work in Italy, at the Galleria

Minini in Brescia: a sheet of paper on which four lines design the rectangle with the correct proportions to define the context of the exhibition space, and then, in a thicker line, the two "S" quoted and indicated in the materials. Live paths of glass, mirror and aluminum pursue one another to create an impossible labyrinth, where visitors enter and would like to get to the other side, through the sheet of stretched metal. In a moment of sensorial deprivation, we discover that we have once again been deceived, seduced and abandoned, left alone but infinitely greater.

(Translated from the Italian by Rodney Stringer)