PublicWorks

DAN GRAHAM

Yin/Yang Pavilion

A Commission for Simmons Hall

Architect: Steven Holl Architects

Dan Graham's Yin and Yang

My work is for children and parents on weekends.

—Dan Graham

Like many artists who came of age in the 1960s, Dan Graham makes complex works that engage the social yet are rooted in a deeply committed critique of the very institutional structures into which they intervene. An early practitioner of Conceptual Art, Graham advances his arguments about the public realm in various media including video, performance, photography, critical writing, architecture, and sculpture. His more than twenty "pavilions"—freestanding, sculptural objects—comprise the core of his production as an artist. The pavilions are among the most rigorously conceptual, uniquely beautiful, and insistently public works of postwar American sculpture. Deceptively simple in form yet philosophically complex, they initiate a phenomenological and kinesthetic experience in which the viewer participates as subject and object, participant and passive or disembodied observer.

Graham is one of the most influential artists of his generation. Writer Brian Wallis has claimed that beginning with his earliest works of the 1960s, Graham "...displayed a profound faith in the idea of the present...[he] sought to comprehend post-war American culture through imaginative new forms of analytical investigation, factographic reportage, and quasi-scientific mappings of space/time relationships."[1] This mix of profound cultural currency and a stringent ability to pinpoint and rigorously synthesize aspects of popular culture characterizes Graham's body of work as a whole. His active problematizing of the relationship of art work and viewer, and the status of the art object within a context—gallery, corporate atrium, or public space—is expressed in seminal works including the early video feedback rooms, *Alteration of a Suburban House* (1978), the video documentary *Rock My Religion* (1984–85), and pavilion sculptures such as *Yin/Yang* (1997–2002).

Graham's art practice began when he was the director of the John Daniels Gallery in New York in 1964. Exhibiting minimalist sculpture and proto-conceptual works by Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, Carl Andre, and Dan Flavin, Graham's curatorial/entrepreneurial activities strategically complicated the lively critical discourse that flourished in the wake of Abstract Expressionism and Pop art. This early intervention into the realm of commerce and its relationship to the object of art typified Graham's interrogation of art's context. The so-called dematerialization of the art object was linked historically and emotionally to the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and the Women's Liberation Movement, and Graham's self awareness as an artist was formulated within this milieu of social change. In his "Homes for America," a parody of popular sociological texts illustrated with photographs taken by the artist (first published in 1966 in *Art in America*) Graham inserted a kind of pseudo-documentary voice into the otherwise hieratic and contested ground of art criticism. Functioning as a writer, performer, or architect, and locating all these modes of address within his practice as an artist, Graham began a career making hybridized works that fundamentally subvert both the context for which they are made and their self-reflexive status as works of conceptual art. Artist Jeff Wall has described Graham's works as "...a permanent state of 'category shift.'" They are, Wall writes, "...simultaneously about their various subjects and are yet formulations that emerge from contemporaneous aspects of Graham's practice, whether in his photography, architectural pavilion work, performance or video." [2]

Consistent in basic form and construction, Graham's pavilions have evolved both through private and public commission as well as in collaboration with artists and architects. The coincident siting of *Yin/Yang* in the atrium space of Steven Holl's MIT student residence hall, a structure that straddles a residential neighborhood and the campus of one of the most respected educational institutions in the country, typifies the successful marriage of context and site. Creating as it does a place of rest, contemplation, and formal elegance within an environment of continual flux and intellectual interrogation, it eloquently provides an ideal platform for the ongoing public conversation in which Graham subtly engages.

The *Yin/Yang* pavilion occupies a central and quite visible site within Holl's building. The building itself is located on a campus edge between the academic complex and neighboring Cambridgeport. It looms on the far end of the campus playing field like some kind of retro-futurist vision of cold-war housing, re-humanized for the new millennium. Designing with the socio-geographic juxtaposition at the forefront of the building's program, the architect elaborated the structure to accommodate this tension common to many East Coast and Ivy League campuses. A designer who often co-mingles aspects of the organic within his otherwise modernist structures, Holl introduced a series of interventions into the usual, often dehumanizing cellblock construction. Several elements, both decorative and functional, are immediately apparent as part of Holl's vision of "porosity."

Perched comfortably in the middle of this pulsating environment are the interlocking, curved forms of Graham's mini-zen garden. Ever master of the subtle ironies in the conflation of Pop and socio-political sensibilities, Graham has created a multi-layered environment

within a self-contained, multi-use context. Graham has said that his design for the sculpture was inspired in reaction against what he viewed as a sentimentalizing and dilution of eastern philosophy in mid-1990's art making, and spectacular styles that indulged in an aggrandizing pseudo-religiosity. Adapted for its home, which mingles the complex demands of youth culture with the realities of the urban surroundings to which it necessarily has a direct visual and conceptual relationship, the friendly *Yin/Yang* pavilion rests easily between two worlds.

Adapted from a central concept of Confucianism, yin and yang represent the polar forces of the universe: yin is the female and yang is the male. One cold, dark, passive, one active, fiery and light. The pavilion's curved forms, made of Graham's signature two-way mirror glass appropriated from corporate architecture of the late 1970s, sit in a pond of water on one side (yin), and a small garden of stones on the other (yang). The glass is simultaneously transparent and reflective. The reference to pop-spirituality and Japanese gardens is introduced with both a sense of irony appropriate to the twenty-something generation who will inhabit the pavilion, and a genuine desire to create a non-gratuitous structure that will enhance the living environment of the engineers, mathematicians, and artists of tomorrow. The resolution of opposites accounts for the harmony and accord among the binary forces of nature and humanity. As is always characteristic of his work, Graham operates both from within and from without—as critical spectator and enthusiastic participant in the dialogue on both sides of the glass.

Indeed the pavilion operates on several simultaneous levels. Like the building itself, it shimmers in the light of the atrium, which partially encloses it. It can also be spied upon from above from one of several viewing cubicles, which open onto the atrium below. The footprint of the yin and yang symbol is most evident from this distance. Like a new-age peace sign, the eastern origin of the design is easily understood by an audience and client with an abbreviated attention span and an amped-up consciousness. The user of the pavilion is also on display. Perched in the largest aperture in the building, students mingling with the sculpture are clearly visible as if on display to the citizens in the surrounding neighborhood. Holl's core notion of porosity, or transparency—that recent lexicon made cynical by corporate unaccountability—is reiterated in Graham's sculpture. Students who choose to interact with the sculpture can enter it from the rounded end of the teardrop, which contains the stones. The adjacent reflecting pool mirrors the experience of the mirrored viewer who is then gazed upon by anyone who moves in or out of the building.

The pavilion form originated in the Renaissance, and has its modern origin in the exhibit halls of turn of the century expositions. About them Graham has said:

> In western culture the pavilion placed in a park setting began with the renascence garden, where it was often used for disney-like special effects. In the nineteenth century it grew in size into the Crystal Palace of the 1851 World's Fair Exposition in London. It now encompasses the quasi-utilitarian modern 'non-place' bus shelter and telephone booth.... Two way mirror used in office buildings is always totally reflective on the exterior, reflecting the sunlight, and totally transparent for workers inside. Surveillance power is given to the corporate tower.[3]

Recalling both cultures-on-display at turn-of-the-century expositions—non-western societies corralled into booths, gazebos, or exhibit halls—and the current trend of itinerate artists-on-display at international round-ups, the pavilion thematizes the residence hall as Tomorrowland, a petri dish for the next generation. Like Holl's whimsical treatment of a generic building type, Graham's sculptural commentary is utilitarian, sympathetic, and obliquely anthropological.

Graham's pavilions have sometimes referred to specific building types or emblematic forms responding to conditions inherent in a given sited commission. He has designed the so far un-built *Skateboard Pavilion* (1989); the *Robert Mangold Pavilion* (1991), an homage to the minimalist American painter; the *Star of David Pavilion for Schloss Buchberg* (1991–1996), for clients in Austria; the *Heart Pavilion, Version II* (1994), intended to create a romantic meeting place; and *Double Cylinder* (*The Kiss*)(1994), which makes reference to Brancusi's famous sculpture. In 1998, the form mutated to encompass Café Bravo, a fully functioning restaurant at the exhibition space Kunst-Werke in Berlin. More than icons, these works are contextual objects, site-responsive, and fully referential. Graham is, in fact, operating increasingly as artist, architect, and citizen critic with the building as his medium.

Since the conception of his first pavilion in 1978, Graham has been interested in issues of transparency and the phenomenological/optical effect of these transportable, re-siteable objects. Often citing Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's *Barcelona Pavilion* (1928–29) entry to the World's Fair, a fully self-contained and self-referential (tautological) building-as-sculpture-as-object, Graham asserts his structures into the public field. Rather than a version of institutional critique, he intends them to function as an integral part of the built landscape like the museum store, the café, the office, or the corporate lobby, all part of the typology from which the pavilions emerge. As he has often said describing the blankness of these spaces, "...they're great places to look at people, who look at other people, who look at other people."[4]

Graham's relationship with his public is not, at least in his built projects, adversarial. And this is a crucial distinction. Like Holl's impulse to create an empathic structure that accommodates and perhaps even enhances the lives of its client, Graham's pavilions hover between abstraction and materiality. The great strength of our best and perhaps most American public speech, of which public art is a vital extension, is a taught yet cultivated duality that is both inside and outside-that both indulges in an intelligently argued critique and crafts a forum for participation whether figurative or literal.

By Cornelia H. Butler

1. See *Rock My Religion: Writing and Art Projects 1965-1990,* ed. Brian Wallis (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993), ix.
2. See *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writing by Dan Graham on His Art,* ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999), xvii.
3. Ibid, p.142.
4. See Birgit Pelzer, Mark Francis, and Beatriz Colomina, *Dan Graham* (New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2001), p.21.

Dan Graham was born in 1942 in Urbana, Illinois; he currently lives and works in New York City. Graham was director of the John Daniels Gallery from 1964 to 1965, where he worked with such Minimalist artists as Carl André, Sol LeWitt, and Donald Judd. Graham also was an important contributor to performance and video art in the early 1960s, and from 1965 to 1969 he produced a series of works that were published in magazines. By the 1970s, he had begun working on the architectural structures—mirrored devices that reflect their surroundings—for which he is best known. Since his first solo show at the John Daniels Gallery in 1969, Dan Graham has exhibited internationally in four Documenta exhibitions in Kassel, Germany (1972, 1977, 1982 and 1992) and in solo shows and mid-career retrospectives at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; the Whitney Museum of American Art and Marian Goodman Gallery (both in New York); and Fundação de Serralves, Porto, Portugal.

Cornelia H. Butler has worked as a curator at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles since 1996. From 1989–1996 she was Curator of Contemporary Art at the Neuberger Museum of Art, State University of New York, Purchase, and Curator at Artists Space, New York. Prior to that, Butler was Associate Curator at the Des Moines Art Center. She completed graduate work in art history at Berkeley in 1987 and did further graduate studies in PhD program at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Butler has taught and lectured extensively and contributed to publications including *Art+Text*, *Parkett* and *Art Journal*. She has organized numerous exhibitions including *Willem deKooning: Tracing the Figure* with co-curator Paul Schimmel; *Flight Patterns*, *Afterimage: Drawing Through Process*; T*he Social Scene: The Ralph M. Parsons Collection of Social Documentary Photography*; *The Power of Suggestion: Narrative and Notation in Contemporary Drawing*; as well as solo exhibitions by Kay Rosen, Amy Adler, Lewis Baltz, and Jessica Bronson. She is currently working on an international historical survey of feminist art of the 1970s.

About MIT's Percent-for-Art Program: MIT's Percent-for-Art Program, administered by the List Visual Arts Center, allots up to $250,000 to commission art for each new major renovation or building project. The program was formally instituted in 1968 but earlier collaborations between artists and architects can be found on the Institute's campus. In 1985 architect I.M. Pei and artists Scott Burton, Kenneth Noland, and Richard Fleischner collaborated on a Percent-for-Art Program for the Wiesner Building and plaza, home to the List Center and the Media Laboratory. Other Percent-for-Art works include a terrazzo floor by Jackie Ferrara for the Tang Center and out-door sculptures by Louise Nevelson and Tony Smith. Other publicly-sited art includes works by Alexander Calder, Henry Moore, Pablo Picasso, Beverly Pepper, Michael Heizer, Victor Burgin, Jennifer Bartlett, Bernar Venet, Frank Stella, Isaac Witkin, and Jacques Lipchitz.

Funding for this publication was generously provided by Furthermore: a program of the J.M. Kaplan Fund.

MIT List Visual Arts Center
Wiesner Building, E15-109
20 Ames Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

tel: 617.253.4400
fax: 617.258.7265
http://web.mit.edu/lvac