

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Photography Victoria Hely-Hutchinson
Interview Colleen Kelsey

Since the 1980s, Dan Graham has been known for his pavilions, unsettling creations drawing a bridge between sculpture and architecture. Appearing in different spots on the globe, these walk-in structures are made of steel and both reflective and transparent glass. Beyond these pavilions, Dan Graham is first and foremost a one of a kind artist.



How should we go about categorising Dan Graham? The legendary American conceptual artist has mastered mixed media over the course of his multi-decade career. Starting in 1964, the Illinois-born, New Jersey bred over-saw the John Daniels Gallery and presented work by a trio of then-writers taking their first steps in art – Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, and Sol LeWitt. He has worked with mass media such as magazines and video, written rock criticism, art criticism, or collaborated with musicians like Sonic Youth. He also created *Rock My Religion*, one of the most seminal videos on the fervor and freneticism of rock and roll. Since the 1980s, Graham has been building pavilions, actual mirrored glass and steel architectural-environmental hybrid structures. They are meant to carve out idiosyncratic spaces of social interaction, and have found their homes in rural northern Norway, on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, or on playground sites for children.

Alongside all this, there's an assortment of other projects that Graham shrugs off as "not art". Such as *Dan Graham's Greatest Hits*, an ultra-rare, multi-volume edition of mix CDs that showcase his love and understanding of pop music's history, and have cultivated their own reputation as a prime collector's item. He recently curated a show on the punk rock draftsman Raymond Pettibon, at Galleri Nicolai Wallner in Copenhagen, and has another show, at Manhattan's Greene-Naftali Gallery, which will reappropriate footage from a number of mid-century American TV shows, such as *The Newlywed Game* and *Queen for a Day*.

We met Dan on a March Saturday morning at his loft in Nolita, where he's lived for the last twenty years on the third floor. Talking to Dan brings up his interests and influences, all entrenched deeply in American popular culture: comedy, television, cartoons, oddball radio shows, science fiction, and clichés. He quickly brings up astrology and gives us a crash course in the who's who of the zodiac (Courbet? A Gemini. Pettibon? Also a Gemini. Kim Gordon? A "typical Taurus.") Afterward, he took the time to show this Taurus his collection of refrigerator magnets.

How long have you been living here?

"Twenty years. This used to be a studio. Before I used to live on Eldridge Street."

We established we're both from New Jersey. You're from the Westfield area, right?

"I hated Westfield. I'm originally from Winfield—it kind of looked like army barracks. What was nice about it, there was

a small river, a semi-swamp. I think there were mostly ship-builders living there. I still relate much more to working class people from Catholic backgrounds. Those were the people who were living in Winfield. I did play a little bit of soccer. The school couldn't afford equipment for American football."

If you're from New Jersey, the usual impulse is to move to New York.

"The impulse is just that you could get cheap apartments in the East Village. I didn't have that impulse. I stayed with friends. My parents wanted us to move to Westfield so we could get a college education. I refused to go to college – I tried to drop out of high school and my sister, I think, had the same feeling. But Jim Jarmusch's girlfriend is actually from Westfield, no?"

When did you officially move to New York?

"Maybe when I was 24, it was on First or Second Avenue, in the East Village. [I had] absolutely no formal education, but I did read science fiction. Westfield is close to Mountainside, Mountainside was Bell Labs. The editor of Astounding Science Fiction, John Campbell, lived there. Along with a friend who liked science fiction—we actually visited him once."

What was that like?

"He didn't seem to be that well. He had asthma or emphysema. Science fiction was pretty important for me. The other important thing in New Jersey was, with my father I built a telescope, and I had this thing called Telescope Club. Since I was very shy around girls, it was a way to take a group down to the Princeton Observatory. I did have a magnifying glass to kill ants; I think boys and men tend to be more interested in optics."

What first got you interested in science fiction? Was it reading books, or movies?

"I wouldn't say movies. We weren't allowed to watch TV. I still watched, covertly, the Disney channel. Walt actually appeared and talked about Walt Disney things – and what was going to happen in the future in science. For him the future would be to freeze himself. Cryogenics. So he believed he was going to return alive. I think what was more crucial were the TV programs I saw when I was a paperboy, like *Liberace* [*The Liberace Show* aired from 1953 to 1954]. You know there's going to be a museum, one in Milwaukee and one in Beverly Hills? I also know he helped Elvis Presley dress."

You can see the influence. [laughs]

"I think the most important TV show was Arthur Godfrey. He actually discovered The Everly Brothers. Early rock and



Downtown

Born in 1942 in Illinois, Dan Graham moved to New York City from New Jersey in his early 20s. After living in an apartment on Manhattan's Lower East Side where at one point former Sonic Youth members Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore were his downstairs neighbors, nearly twenty years ago he moved to this loft in the Nolita neighborhood. Down the block is a low-key restaurant called Fiat Café, where Dan says he likes to go and watch the tourists.



Ways of seeing

Dan Graham has examined architectural spaces and those who inhabit them since the 1960s. He started his site-specific pavilion works in the 80s, which are constructed of two-way mirrored glass, steel, and inspire various optical effects. The visitor activates them by entering their playful, unique space of shifting perceptions. He has exhibited both pavilions and their models at galleries around the world.

roll was very important. Also, radio. There was a program called Long John Nebel which had people who believed they were abducted by aliens from outer space, but it was also Jean Shepherd, which all the kids liked—he was from Chicago and doing a sort of Proustian memory trip of his childhood memories. Being a very shy teenager, with the music programs on TV, like *Top of the Pops*, I always made a list for myself and my favorite girls. It would change every month. So, I listened to a lot of music on the radio, and now when I do *Dan Graham's Greatest Hits*, I definitely have an important section for Rosemary Clooney."

My next question is actually about 'Dan Graham's Greatest Hits'—how did the project initially come about, and what's the process behind each volume?

"I showed *Rock My Religion* in the National Film Theatre in London, and the person that was supposed to interview me canceled. It turns out [The writer] John Slyce was there, he didn't know what questions to ask me, so he asked me for a list of my favorite songs. I guess he had them on tape, and he gave it to my brother, and he made it into CDs. He's more adept at computers than I am. I know who else has the same kind of historical interest in music of all time—Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan is Jewish, as I am. The last CD he did, *Shadows of the Night*, is all Sinatra songs. I think he realizes his tradition is that of a Tin Pan Alley Jewish songwriter."

When did you first become interested in writing?

"Probably when I was in my early 20s. In terms of getting published, none of my things were publishable. *Subject Matter* was done for Artforum, it was turned down. The Dean Martin article was not publishable, but it eventually was put in a magazine called Fusion, this kind of newsprint pulp magazine for rock music. All of them, actually, were subsidized by record companies. I think at that time everyone that I knew and who were artists wanted to be writers. Artist-writers. I know Artforum, when it was in San Francisco, was basically the writings of artists, and the chief layout designer was Ed Ruscha. I certainly did not want to be a critic. I just wanted to be published. I read literary criticism, like Leslie Fiedler, and that's my bias still in terms of making art. I'm more interested in the cultural context than actually making serious art."

When you talk about "the cultural context"... I'm going to segue to something that music and architecture and writing and magazines all have in common, which is the social component. The interaction component.

"This I identify with Ed Ruscha, I'm a gifted amateur. I think Ed's photographs are basically hobbies. He always uses a cheap camera and I see his taking photographs as a kind of hobby. I think what's interesting about the magazine format, because we all loved magazines then, was how they could be integrated with photographs and photojournalism. I know that when Walker Evans published his photos, it was always in the context of writing by someone else. Like James Agee."

Now people have almost a fetishistic attitude towards print.

"Well. What I like about magazines was that they were disposable. In the '60s there was this thing called a paper dress. There was a fantasy that artists had around '64, '65 that they could defeat economic value. When I showed [Dan] Flavin, he was happy that somebody stepped on one of his lights, and it exploded. He went back to the hardware store. Carl Andre had the same idea, and Lichtenstein. He used cheap printed matter to destroy painting. The opposite happened — I couldn't make art because I didn't know anything about art, so I thought magazine pages were also disposable. Plus I actually loved magazines. I also take my work as a hybrid."

Could you explain that?

"I did the first show for Sol LeWitt, and Sol and Dan Flavin were guards at the Russian Constructivist show [at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.] Russian Constructivism seemed to be a hybrid between art, architecture, and design. I like the hybrid form. And most artists I knew, they were artist-writers. Flavin had a column in Artforum which meant he could trash everybody. And there was no such thing as polemics. Judd, his own writing style, is a little bit like Hemingway. I think for me the most important thing was humor, not

sociology. There's a huge misunderstanding about *Homes from America* for instance. Susan Brockman asked me to put the photographs in Arts magazine. Marie-Paule MacDonald was a great writer and architect who wrote that *Homes from America* was a "thinkpiece." I was parodying Esquire magazine. I wasn't a sociologist, someone like Stephen Shore taking beautiful photographs. I had no interest in the idea of the white cube of the gallery as a context. So I thought maybe suburbia was the new city plan, and to get the material I visited a developer who was building houses for older people in Florida. I remember he gave me a brochure and said, "Maybe you could squeeze something out of this." [laughs] It was also, I think, very influenced by Godard's film *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her...* these images of high-rise apartment buildings on the edge of the city, built very quickly. I remember Judd wrote about John Chamberlain, and he said the work was about building obsolescence. I was interested in the fact that houses could be built the way ships were during World War II, or airplanes in California. Very quickly with mass production, and not designed to last forever. It says a kind of building obsolescence. And I think I allude to that in the article. It was certainly not sociological critique of suburbs or against minimalism, maybe it was the development of minimalism. Judd and Sol LeWitt were interested in the idea of the city plan."

You recently put together a show of Raymond Pettibon's work in Copenhagen. When did you two meet?

"When I was having a show at Regen Projects, he wanted to see me very badly. I actually saw the work first at David Zwirner Gallery. We have to bring astrology into this. He's a Gemini. Geminis have to identify with somebody. He just wanted to see me very badly. My wife, who is Japanese, her work has to do with Manga, she just loved the work. Of course we share an interest in rock music and maybe having abusive fathers. What I've read is his father was very difficult, not too dissimilar from Brian Wilson's problems. What was great about his work was it's totally spontaneous. Also dealing with cliches. An article I did was called *Sol's Humor* because the key to Sol's work is his humor. When I was doing rock writing, I came from the tradition of literary criticism. At a certain point, I realized it might be more interesting to do a film. I started an article called "New Wave Feminism" and I thought a film could have a female heroine. It happened to be the heroine of my downstairs neighbor, Thurston Moore. He had in his files, Patti Smith's zines that she published herself. I think I never wanted to do a Hollywood film. But I realized what a labor of love *Rock My Religion* was. I had no money, I remember taking a Greyhound bus 30 miles away from a Shaker barn. I just walked. I used the cheapest places for editing, the quality was very bad, but I realized that doing the part called "entertainment" is really important. I know art seems to be big shows like Documenta, but it should be somewhere between entertainment, like Disneyland, and education. I'm totally anti-Andrea Fraser. I don't like institutional critique. [Daniel] Buren has a position saying, "museums don't change." I think every decade they're changing. Unfortunately, now is about spectacle. That began with the Tate Modern. I absolutely can't compete in that area. The first time I went to Louisiana [Museum of Modern Art] they have a sunken room, where you can lay down and play with the art, which is what I did. I think to get my projects done, I often say that my work is a funhouse for children and a photo opportunity for parents. The last great project was the roof of the Met, which was a series of wonderful aspects. Often the best work I do is very fast collaborations with people I think are geniuses. I can do that very fast."

Who do you think experiences a piece the best, children?

"I would say, definitely children, but children of all ages. When I did *Waterloo Sunset at the Hayward Gallery* (2002-03), I selected two kinds of cartoons, contemporary, like *The Powerpuff Girls*, and others that were historically important, like Krazy Kat and Mickey Mouse. You can touch the screen, and if you're ten years old, after you're looking at cartoons, you can access Tracey Emin's *Why I Never Became a Dancer*, or the space could be used for children's education, where they could make their own Lichtenstein. I never consider myself an architect, but I just like the idea of a minimum number of needs."





The new city plan

One of Dan Graham's earliest notable works, *Homes for America* (1966-67), comes from his taste for satire and parody. He photographed tract housing in the New Jersey suburbs, and in a move against the restricting nature of the white cube gallery space, published a faux-photojournalistic essay in *Arts* magazine, designed as a deadpan riff on something that would appear in a magazine like *Esquire* during the era.





Greatest hits

Dan Graham is a force as equal in the world of rock and roll as he is in art. He has completed multiple volumes of the project *Dan Graham's Greatest Hits*, a series of mix CDs with songs selected from his personal canon. A fan of Ray Davies, he even named a pavilion work installed on top of the Hayward Gallery in London *Waterloo Sunset* (2002–03), after the track by the Kinks.

