

DAN GRAHAM IN VANCOUVER

Ian Wallace

The work of Dan Graham has long been recognized as an important influence in the development of photoconceptual art in Vancouver. This began in the late 60s when *Homes for America*, Graham's canonical work of 1966-67, suggested a way of working that could serve as a bridge between the zero-degree of late modernist monochrome painting and the photo-document as a form of political realism. Similar work by other artists at the time also made a significant impression, particularly Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), Robert Smithson's *The Monuments of Passaic* (1967), and *Piles* (1968) by N.E. Thing Co. of Vancouver. Notably all were autonomous works of art presented in publication format. Jeff Wall was inspired in part by the mock-journalistic style of *Homes for America* for the photo-documentary technique of his publication work *Landscape Manual* (1969). I was attracted to Dan Graham's reference to formalist minimalist typologies in the photographs of tract housing featured in *Homes for America*, particularly of the serial structures of such artists as Don Judd. Using the camera, Graham directed his attention to the social landscape to reinterpret what the primary structures of minimalism extracted from the inner logic of art itself. The factual character of the photographic elements in *Homes for*

America avoided expressionistic, sentimentalized or picturesque interpretations of the subject, an attitude shared with minimal and conceptual art. More importantly, the ability of the photo-document to directly reference social subjects opened up a political practice for contemporary art that was attenuated in the melancholic endgame of late modernist minimalism, which took its cues primarily from within the world of art. Since it was simultaneously self-referential and able to comment on the physiognomy of the social landscape, this new "photoconceptual" practice was able to have it both ways. It allowed for a social critique without sacrificing totally the formalist substructure of modernist art and thus produced a kind of "cool" or "critical" pop art which, in turn, established the foundations for a semiotic or post-modernist practice that prevailed in the 70s and 80s.

In the late 60s, descriptive methodologies borrowed from journalistic, scientific or academic literature and applied through photography and conceptual art practices paralleled pop art's interest in advertising and popular entertainment models. In Vancouver, Iain and Ingrid Baxter of N.E. Thing Co. had already developed a prolific body of photoconceptual work from 1968 on that used such informational modes of address. But Dan Graham's influence, more overtly intellectual and political in intent, made for a form of "critical" pop art that encouraged the theoretically-informed photoconceptual art characterizing the so-called "Vancouver School" as it developed in the late 70s and early 80s. This was enhanced by his involvement with the studio program at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design

(NSCAD) in Halifax where, in 1974, he came into contact with Jeff Wall, who was also teaching there at the time. In 1979, NSCAD published a selection of Graham's essays, touching upon a wide range of topics from popular entertainment and politics to architecture and design. These texts, both analytical and a direct extension of his artistic practice per se, demonstrate Graham's ability to blend into a single praxis an intellectual critique articulating issues relating architecture, design, cinema, television, popular culture and punk music. All of this was discussed within an expanded concept of conceptual art practice and provided a catalyst for much new art at the time.

Beginning in the late 70s, when Graham visited Vancouver as a part of a visiting artist program established by Simon Fraser University, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design and the University of British Columbia, this more intellectual aspect of his work instilled a direct and lasting impression on a younger generation of artists who continue to experiment with new ways to think about art. Dan Graham's "laboratory" method and mimicry of debunked behaviorist psychotherapy techniques, especially in works such as *Body Press* (1970-72), and in the video and mirror performances that followed, heightened the self-reflexive dimension essential to modernist art. He introduced a strategy of self-critique that was extracted from the intersubjective relations between artist, audience and the material character of the work itself. The hyper-self-reflexivity that characterized his later architectural/sculptural work, particularly the mirror-pavilions

which have been the core of his production since the 80s, also created a resonance for Vancouver artists. This aspect of Dan Graham's work has been thoroughly commented upon by Jeff Wall, and traces of his mirror-pavilion work can be found in the work of Vikky Alexander, Rodney Graham, and Ken Lum.

Dan Graham's influence extends beyond the specific qualities of his artwork per se. His ability to communicate wide ranging ideas in a variety of media – from publication to performance, video to architecture – reveals an original and particular view of the world. His sense of the moment, coupled with an ability to identify fundamental trends that are the substrate of contemporary life, has provided inspiration for a divergent audience of aspiring artists. For Jeff Wall and a number of other Vancouver artists (myself included), having come to contemporary art with an education more in art history and theory than studio training per se, this concept of "praxis" or the merging of theory and practice, essential to Dan Graham's outlook, has allowed for the viability of a self-reflexive practice that could be played out in the work itself. This amalgam of the conceptual and aesthetic was a significant factor in the subsequent and necessary legitimization of an overtly critical function for art in the face of prevailing anti-intellectual and often conformist attitudes of the regional art scene and late modernist art in general.