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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. Writing 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.” 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—a 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 installation 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 wave 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 emotively to 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 1991), the pavilion form originated in the Renaissance, and has its consistency 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 iconic 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 much 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-future vision of cold-war housing, re-humanized 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 disembodied commerce and its relation to 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 concept by Confucius, yin and yang represent the duality that constitutes 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 and oriented from above, form a 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 it is always characteristic of his work, Graham operates both within and from without—in a 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 particularizes its experience to be spied upon from above or below, 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 is a documentary sculpture, crystallized as if on display to the citizens in the surrounding neighborhood. Holl’s core notion of porosity, or transparency—that recent lexicon of postmodernismhall, 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 much 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.

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Dan Graham's Yin and Yang

My work is for children and parents on weekends.

—Dan Graham

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PublicWorks

DAN GRAHAM
Yin/Yang Pavilion
A Commission for Simmons Hall

Architect: Steven Holl Architects