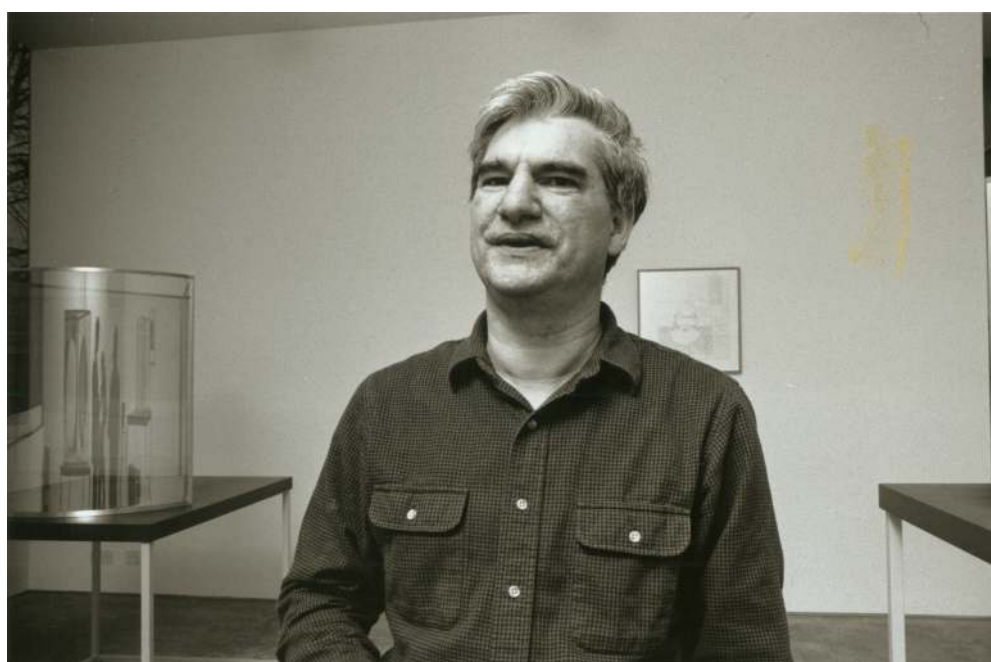


# Dan Graham, 1942–2022. Partially reflective mirror-writing

Jeff Wall



Dan Graham, mid 1970s, photographer unknown. Courtesy of Studio Dan Graham and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris. Copyright: Dan Graham.

Dan Graham and I were friends for about 50 years. We began a correspondence in the late 1960s and met for the first time in London in 1972, when he had his first exhibition at the Lisson Gallery, which had opened five years earlier. In his later years Dan became increasingly forthright about the psychological problems he experienced for most of his life. But for the first 20 years or so, I knew him as an energetic, brilliant, generous and untroubled person, enthusiastic about the work of other artists and writers, who he constantly tried to connect with each other and with people who could appreciate and support their work. Dan was one of those anomalous talents who found an identity and a metier in the expanded field of art that opened during the 1960s. He never

completely identified himself as an ‘artist’ because he was always very clear about the character of the new field and what was at stake in exploring it. As time passed, he was very aware of the processes of acceptance and canonisation of the art that began as a challenge and even an affront to the very notion of the ‘canon’ and, for the most part, accepted and comprehended the inevitably marginal position he had earned for himself. So, he never attempted to redesign his work to find a niche in the leader-board version of artistic supremacy that has emerged since around 1980. But he found one anyway, not because his work mutated to resemble more obviously conventional forms but because his singular genius for perceiving and broadcasting affinities, rein-

ventions, likenesses and echoes between aspects of mass culture, critical histories, aesthetic involutions and intellectual manners won him an audience with three or four generations of younger artists, writers and museum people who kept finding new ways of thinking and seeing from his work, his writing and the great stand-up comedy routines of his public talks. Underlying this is the fact that he managed to keep the dissensus invented by the art of the 1960s on younger people's agendas through an era where those values have been dismissed, reinvigorated, diluted and reshaped, seemingly in a single culture-war process. Dan was devoted to the stakes he and his colleagues played for in 1965. The fact that he kept redefining them over the years is part of their nature – they couldn't be static.

I wrote 'Partially reflective mirror-writing' in 1999, at Alex Alberro's invitation, for a collection of Dan's writing, *Two-Way Mirror Power*. (Jeff Wall, 'Introduction: Partially reflective mirror-writing', in *Two-Way Mirror Power: Se-*

*lected Writings by Dan Graham on his Art*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), x–xvii.) I did it almost 20 years after having managed to finish 'Dan Graham's Kammerspiel'. That essay was written in a tense, lofty style marked by my admiration for Adorno's prose (in translation) which was the only way I could express those thoughts in 1980. 'Partially reflective mirror-writing' treats what I consider the fundamental problem and achievement of Conceptual Art in a comic mode, one shaped by me hearing Dan's voice in my mind, maybe reciting 'Dean Martin/entertainment as theater' or 'Eisenhower and the Hippies'. I believe Dan lost interest in me as an artist as the years passed and I think I understand why. But I kept his esteem because he knew I appreciated his devotion to the decisions he made about what to do in art right from the beginning of his career. Reading 'Partially reflective mirror-writing' again in the shadow of his passing, I felt that it sounded the way he would like that devotion talked about.

## Partially reflective mirror-writing

In the early 1960s, Dan Graham, who then thought of himself as a writer, fell in with a group of young literary-artistic types who were interested in making some new alliances between word and image, word and thing, people like Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner and Robert Smithson, among others. He began writing things and taking photographs and, in the spirit of then-emergent Conceptual Art, proposed that at least some of the things he made from writing be considered as works of art. He has never gone all the way to claiming that his photographs are works of art, calling them a 'hobby'.

The idea that a written essay or commentary could be validly considered as an art object the way a painting or a sculpture had been is now part of the lore of the 1960s. It has been ignored, dismissed, studied and researched, and has become a kind of falsehood that will not disappear. The claim thus constitutes a moment of unknowability, in which the logic of what we call 'art' appears to re-invert itself. We think we know, without really having to prove it, that an written essay cannot, as Art & Language termed it, 'come up for the count' as a work of art, even a work of art like a Readymade. Essays are about art objects,

therefore they cannot be art objects. But an art object can be 'about' its own status as an art object, so why can we not accept the fact that the written text as art object just makes all that perfectly explicit? And so the argument goes on. The experimental claim made in Conceptual Art can neither be proven nor disproved. Rather, it has the status of a vanishing point in the logic of aesthetics, a vanishing point which may have in fact vanished, since it is hardly taken seriously any more, but which nevertheless informs the whole spectrum of contemporary practices in which virtually anything, any thing, gesture, event or action, can be and is considered to be an art object, for example Vanessa Beecroft's performances or Damien Hirst's shark in a tank of formaldehyde.

There is a relationship between the conceptual 'degree zero' of the essay-about-its-own-status-as-an-art-object-as-art-object and the juggernaut of total artistic liberty that has characterised the past thirty years. Duchamp invented this liberty of course, but, because he did not care to explain himself, left implicit the logical problem he raised. The movement from implicitness to explicitness was therefore placed on the historical agenda,

and the generation that made Conceptual Art addressed itself to the question, giving it what seems to be a definitive answer. The content of that answer, that there is no logical or theoretical barrier to making the claim that a written text on the subject here at hand can and even must be considered an art object, showed that Duchamp's Readymades were not special Readymades and that, indeed, in the words of the French artist-group, 'Readymades belong to all', they could be made and remade by any artist because there was no means to invalidate the repetition of the practice of making something that evoked, more or less explicitly, art's dubious, unprovable logical status. This 'could', this implicit liberty, of course, has tended to become a 'should', a 'must', a kind of categorical imperative, one that it seems less and less easy for any artist to avoid.

In the 30 years since Donald Judd championed art which had the 'look of non-art', almost all new art has taken on that appearance, so much so that the 'look of art' – lushly made oil paintings or bronze sculptures – now almost has the look of non-art. Dan Graham is one of those who took most seriously the look-of-non-art approach. This was, in part, natural for him, since what he was making was, in the terms of the time, not art, but journalism, poetry, criticism or photography. He was therefore one of those who abandoned the older aesthetics of representation or the slightly less older one of expression. Along with Nauman, Matta-Clark, Weiner, Smithson, Bochner, Kosuth and others, he experienced and helped to instigate the freedom from the aesthetic which opened so many doors in the 1960s.

This freedom – to make things as art which did not resemble art – was animated by the desire to have art draw itself closer to everyday experience. The contradiction here was that everyday experience had, for centuries, included the experience of works of art as they had been. The young artists of the 1960s protested that too few people in modern societies were able to have that experience, being barred from it by social and political factors, and so art as it had been was irrelevant to those people, and, if that was the case, it was irrelevant to the artists too. It had been for some time, they – or we – argued, but now it was being recognised and radical action was being taken, and so, in the wake of Pop Art, the new experimental art moved towards its engagement with new cultural forms.

Although some of the new forms were in fact familiar from their history in popular culture, they were unfamiliar in the guise of works of art. This unfamiliarity was interpreted, correctly, as a new version of the 'defamiliarization' process to which the earlier avant-garde movements, like Constructivism and Surrealism, were so committed. The look of non-art was the new version of modernist 'difficulty'. A difficult work is one which cannot be experienced as a work without some insight into the historical conditions to which it is responding and which, in that sense, have brought it into being. The new look-of-non-art art succeeded in forcing new patterns of perception, but these were not spontaneously available. Explication was required. Such works, not being familiar, demanded a new social role for commentary, primarily written commentary.

The legitimation of an art requiring, and therefore including, a moment or process of explication was one of the achievements of 1960s–70s art. It might be a dubious achievement. The idea that a work of art required some kind of explanation – as part of the experience of the work – was and remains hotly contested, since it appears to violate one of the canonical aesthetic rules: that a work of art is self-sufficient and need be experienced, not necessarily understood. The fact that it can be experienced successfully without really being understood has always been considered a mark of its self-sufficiency, its distinctness from other kinds of practice, like science or philosophy. The new art, deriving as it did from an intellectual apprehension of the historical, logical and structural problems of the notion of art – the Duchampian strain – was driven to challenge this criterion.

The new argument, derived from aspects of structuralist and post-structuralist theory, claimed that all works exist in a constant atmosphere of commentary and evaluation, and indeed would have no meaning outside that. The meanings we appreciate in art appear to us in the necessary form of commentary. Necessity becomes a virtue, no apology is made for the commentary required to legitimate the new forms. Instead, the new idea of commentary is woven into a concept of the socially-necessary process of experiencing art. The commentaries which were always outside the experience of the work were, after and with Derrida, recognised as an interior, and even an anterior, condition of experience and perception. The idea that an unfamiliar experience

included the commentary that it would provoke a viewer to call for, emerges from the same dynamic in which an essay could itself be seen as an art object.

Over the past 20 or 25 years, Graham, of all his generation, has been perhaps the most consistently involved with this problematic of the commentary. Although during the 1960s and early 1970s he made a number of significant purely conceptual works in language-form, his writing soon moved in a different, even opposite direction, into the genre of the commentary.

The transition from linguistic conceptual work to the commentary form was rather gradual, emerging from both pragmatic production conditions and philosophical questions about the autonomy of the work of art – the ways in which its content could be experienced in the absence of a commitment to representation or expression. Graham's commentaries were written during and then after the establishment of the legitimacy of the essay-as-a-work-of-art, and they continually respond to that problematic legitimacy. Once a written text could be accepted, or rendered acceptable, in these terms, a new question emerged, one which, again, could probably not be answered: under what conditions, now, could an essay *not* be considered a work of art or an art object?

This question seems absurd, since almost no essays achieved such status, but the absurdity doesn't really affect the fact that, for an artist like Graham, there had to be a means to either establish definitively the identity of every text as now an artwork akin to a drawing, or to withdraw a text, a group of texts or even a class of texts, from that condition without necessarily returning them to the identity they held previously – that is, as writings simply outside the work of art. Since most of the world never accepted, or even took seriously, the inclusion of a text as an artwork, there was no problem in continuing with an external relationship. But, for those whose artistic direction had been, at least to a degree, defined by experiments of this kind, a return to the social or cultural status quo was not an acceptable option. For Graham, as for the others, there was never any question of being a writer. What artists wrote was not literature, not even art criticism; somehow it was art, or at least it had an internal, and maybe a historically new, relation to art.

Graham was not the only artist who understood that a text could be an artwork only under certain very specific conditions, conditions he helped to define with early

pieces like *Schema (March 1966)*. The first condition was, as we have noted, that the text refer exclusively to its own status both as text and as proposal for an art object. Only if this condition was met was it possible for the text to take its place in a historical development which originated with the Readymade, and included the other extremist formulations of art's boundaries – the monochrome and the unrealised work which may not aim to be realised, like Tatlin's tower. Kosuth or Art & Language wrote this kind of text, published it and attempted to think through the ways in which the ideas presented in these texts-as-art-objects could be developed in other texts, and whether the subsequent texts would also be art objects, or have to be art objects.

A new situation emerged, in which it was conceivable that texts could be written which could not be withdrawn from the condition of being art objects. To follow the argument, if an essay on the conditions under which an essay could be legitimated as an art object should actually achieve such status – to the extent not only of being presented as such, but actually accepted as such, by being exhibited by reputable institutions and acquired in art collections – then could another essay on the same topic, even if written from a somewhat different point of view, be excluded from such status? Several possibilities appeared, each comparable to other accepted artistic practices. For example, could the same artist rewrite essentially the same text, with maybe a few minor textual variations, and present it as another work of art, related to but distinct from the first essay? At the same time, On Kawara was making paintings bearing only the date on which they were painted, after having made other, very similar, paintings on previous dates. Each of these paintings was accepted as a discrete work, related to but independent of each other regardless of the repetition involved. In this context, how could a slightly different essay be ruled out if a previous one was accepted? There are obviously other possibilities, each as dizzying as the previous; all of them resemble the model of the extremist, experimental art object or gesture which, once established as an expression of the boundaries of art, can and even must be repeated in order for the seriousness of the reflection on the logical problem of art to be conveyed. Buren's stripes, Kawara's, Opalka's, Charlton's canvases, or Toroni's brush marks, gain rather than lose aesthetic lustre by their having been repeated over what

are now long periods of time. Nothing like this has ever happened, explicitly at least, in art before now. I say 'explicitly' because repetition has always been present in art, but not as a mark of art's legitimacy. The repetition of stereotypical formulae by mediocre artists is just as consistent and relentless as Buren's repetition of his motif, but Buren has taken on that negative energy in art and worked dialectically with it, turning it into something else. In the post-Buren, post-Kawara, post-Ryman, post-Toroni, post-Art & Language period, repetition tends towards the inescapable, and most artists have included it in their practice in one way or another.

The critical literature on Graham has clearly established the fact that his work is ambivalent about these strategies of repetition in an important, exemplary way. As time has passed and we can experience the continuation of projects like Buren's or Toroni's, we understand that, regardless of the apparently unbreakable legitimacy they have achieved, they are nonetheless limited. After some decades it is now the insistent, even the resigned, theatre of repetition which we accept in these works. The fact that they have abjured, apparently for good, any involvement with the world outside the methodological possibilities established 30 years ago, is both a mark of achievement and a reason for now looking elsewhere for seriousness in art. Graham articulated this kind of discontent at the very beginning of the process, in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, unlike most critics and opponents of Conceptual Art, he did so from a position almost indistinguishable from those from which he was seemingly taking his leave.

Graham's aim was to remain involved with the wider world as a subject and occasion for art, but to structure that involvement in the rigorously self-reflexive terms made mandatory by the intellectual achievements of Conceptual Art. *Schema* was made at the same time he was writing articles for art magazines on his own and other artists' work, as well as what used in the magazine world to be called 'think pieces' – discursive essays on phenomena or epiphenomena of culture – pieces like the famous 'Eisenhower and the Hippies' (1968), 'Dean Martin/Entertainment as Theater' (1969) and 'Homes for America' (1966–7). The think pieces were both actual essays on actual topics and at the same time glosses on the artworks or photographs Graham was then making or preparing to make. He has consistently referred to these writings

as 'journalism'. And they are journalism, except they are also not quite journalism, in the sense that, with them, the category 'journalism' is re-articulated and re-legitimated in terms established by the self-reflexivity of the category essay-as-a-work-of-art. This implies that a work of art is to be made through the principle of 'the look of non-art' in the sphere of the written. Just as Flavin made sculptures by repositioning common lighting equipment, Graham moved towards making textual artworks or 'magazine pieces', as he calls them, by writing about various subjects as if he were writing the essay about its possible status as a work of art. This process of mimesis, of constructing journalism in the 'as if' mode, was a way of testing the new category of the essay-as-a-work-of-art. It is clear, maybe only in hindsight, that the outcome of the test was known in advance. That is, to reiterate, the essay-as-a-work-of-art can only be an essay about the proposal of that essay as a work of art; it can't be about any other subject. Nevertheless, Graham seems to have thought, if an artist could write an essay about another subject, but write it 'as if' it were an essay about the proposal of itself as a work of art, would the resulting essay then be able to be experienced as a work of art the way the accepted essay-as-a-work-of-art is experienced? The answer seems clearly to be 'no', but it is a complex 'no' nevertheless, especially if we imagine the resonance of that 'no' around 1969 or 1970.

Let us follow this unlikely argument one step further. Graham might have thought that, OK, the essay-as-a-work-of-art is definitely limited to the one subject. He might then have thought about the possibility of writing a second such essay, with a few minor textual changes, as mentioned above, and he would have concluded that that essay, too, would obviously be an essay-as-a-work-of-art, for the reasons we have already outlined. A certain perspective and logic necessarily appears to the mind at this point. It would be clear that what has been created is a unique and transformed version of the methodology of artists like Buren or Toroni, but in written form, that is, in a form that will always remain liminal and problematic as visual art or as an art object.

Graham might have thought that this liminal space was both absolutely determined in the terms we have established, but that, at the same time, by being a liminal and problematic category, it contained unknown possibilities. The most immediate way to experiment with those

possibilities was to breach the apparently fundamental rule by introducing another subject matter while still attempting to write, or make, a 'magazine piece' rather than a magazine article, strictly speaking. It is clear that this was a failure, and that the essays have become magazine articles or critical essays, and, generally speaking, this has been the case with Graham's writings. Previous collections, like *Articles* (1978), *Video-Architecture-Television* (1979) and *Rock My Religion* (1993), have treated them that way. We can make no argument against this categorisation, except one.

Graham, like a few other artists of his generation, has appeared to accept the idea that he could do more than one thing, and that he could be an artist and an essayist or journalist or critic. The world has also accepted this, as they have done with Don Judd, Robert Smithson or, more recently, Peter Halley. Nevertheless, we understand that none of these essays would be written, no critiques would have been composed, unless somehow the content of the essay was connected to the inner aspects of the artist's work. This is what distinguishes these artists from others, who have often had far more public and distinguished careers as art critics – artists like Patrick Ireland, Peter Plagens, Thomas Lawson or, among the younger generation, Collier Schorr. Their critical writing must have some relation to their artistic work, but it has been occasioned by the institution of criticism and essayism in a way that Graham's have never been. With Graham, as with Smithson and one or two others, there has always been a resistance against writing on any occasion except one provided by the evolution of their artistic work as a whole. Although we can find that Graham's essays emerge from various specific contexts, we can see that they are not created in response to a summons from the institution of criticism. They may function as criticism, even cultural criticism, but this function can be compared to the function of a work by Buren as criticism. That work might be critical of something – for example, the institution in which it is found – but that criticism is

not made directly, as actual criticism, that is, as writing within the institution of criticism. It is made incidentally, in the process of making a certain kind of work of art, and that art is made within the institution of art. This work of art might be called 'functionalist', or post-autonomous, as it has been. What that means is that it achieves its functional purposes by means of being a work of art, and taking on the form of a work of art, albeit an experimental form. Post-autonomous art achieves its functional aims through the process of nevertheless being created within the framework of autonomous art; that is, it responds to no external functional or practical command, it is freely chosen and made by the artist. The artist chooses to make his or her work useful in some way, or even just to pretend it might be useful, to act 'as if' it could be useful. This pretence invents possible functions, and presents them to the public, which might not have otherwise ever thought of them. In this light, post-autonomous art is only a liminal type of autonomous art. In saying this, I mean no negative criticism of that art. The borderland of these categories generates experiments which might lead somewhere authentically new.

Graham's essays occupy this borderland. They achieve their discursive and critical aims not through the artist's acceptance of his identity or role as critical writer, but rather through his avoidance of it, his stance as a 'writer' in quotes, an artist impersonating a writer in order both to write, freely, and also to work as an artist in the expanded way 'artistic practice' got defined in the 1960s and 1970s. The critical essays and commentaries on his own work are in a permanent state of 'category-shift', in that they are simultaneously about their various subjects and are yet formulations which emerge from contemporaneous aspects of Graham's practice, whether it be in photography, his architectural-pavilion work, performance or video. Graham's writing is not writing about art or even 'art-writing'; rather, Graham's art is an art with writing in it, or, maybe more precisely, an art with the writing it contains glinting in the form of texts.

*Jeff Wall is an artist and occasional writer. Anthologies of his texts include: Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews (Museum of Modern Art, 2007) and Jeff Wall: Works and Collected Writings (Polígrafa, 2007).*