



Dan Graham Science Fiction

Mark von Schlegell

1. INTO THE MAELSTROM

The basic test that distinguishes reality from hallucination is the *consensus gentium*, that one other or several others see it too. This is the *idios kosmos*, the private dream, contrasted to the shared dream of us all, the *koinos kosmos*.

—Philip K. Dick, *The Dark-Haired Girl*¹

In a most peculiar fashion, Dan Graham's artworks are nothing if not active critical engagements with their sources. One of their important sources is science fiction. As a genre of its own, science fiction has an *idios kosmos*, an alternative history from where one can help qualify the nature of this engagement and consider what it might mean for the larger history of the *koinos kosmos* for it to be an art.

I recently met a Norwegian who had anecdotal evidence concerning the local effect of Graham's 1996 *Two-Way Mirror Triangle with One Curved Side* (fig. 1), an outdoor sculpture on Norway's remote Lofoten Islands. Apparently, the work continues to blow minds to this day. In the midst of the remote Arctic wilderness, it appears as an unannounced and undesired gap in a landscape unarguably sublime. It perplexes members of the local scene busy working ancient fishing grounds and managing for scientifically inclined tourists the world's second-most beautiful island.²

Like in a funhouse in the middle of nowhere, engineered to last and made out of sleek stainless steel and two-way mirror glass, *Two-Way Mirror Triangle's* reflections outrageously warp the ever-changing high Romantic landscape. The distortions are presented framed for viewing, as if a hyperreal museum had intervened in nature, intent on

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- Notes
1. Philip K. Dick, quoted in Paul Williams, "The Most Brilliant Sci-Fi Mind on Any Planet: Philip K. Dick," *Rolling Stone* (6 November 1975): 93.
 2. "20 Paradise Islands," *The Observer* (London), 28 September 2003.

opposite, fig. 1

Two-Way Mirror Triangle With One Curved Side (1996); two-way mirror and stainless steel; 8 1/4 x 9 7/8 feet; collection Vågan County, Norway; installed in Lofoten Islands, Norway

transforming the Pop optimism of the Hudson Valley School into the darker "phantasmagorical" skyscapes of nineteenth-century English painter John Martin.

Graham has likened Martin's nature works to "lurid paperback covers of cheap American popular sci-fi."³ The Lofoten Islands are nearest to the site of the actual Maelstrom, the paranormal setting of Edgar Allan Poe's "A Descent Into the Maelstrom" (1841)—a tale whose mixture of science and horror still draws visitors to the islands' shores today. Looking over Lofoten's crags, Poe's narrator reflects, "a panorama more deplorably desolate no human imagination can conceive."⁴ If there is something lurid and perverse about *Two-Way Mirror Triangle* and its spectacular sci-fi views, something American and cheap, then in more ways than one, as has been said of science fiction itself, "Poe is the source."⁵

2. NEW JERSEY

The conceptually oriented, self-replicating genre that Poe jump-started became by the time Graham was growing up in New Jersey an integral facet of the American cultural landscape. As an adolescent, Graham found himself drawn to the sci-fi magazines available in local bus stations and candy stores. *Astounding Science Fiction* in particular caught his eye.

During the late 1950s, *Astounding* was coming down off a ten-year reign as the single most important organ of American science-fiction. There is no figure more responsible for the genre's economic and literary success than the magazine's legendarily despotic editor John W. Campbell, Jr. Campbell single-handedly shaped the careers of Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, and Theodore Sturgeon during the 1940s, conceiving, rewriting, and commissioning seminal works that raised the bar considerably. By the 1950s, the genre was expanding in new unexpected directions, and Campbell was displaying a new interventionist intensity. Still directed at an adolescent male audience, "his editorials—idiosyncratic, deliberately needling, dogmatic and near racist—absorbed much of the energy which had previously gone into the feeding of his authors."⁶ Campbell became increasingly, even bizarrely concerned with the transformation of the real itself by science fiction. He persuaded his old stable hack L. Ron Hubbard to start a religion and published the first article on "Dianetics." He championed the backyard inventions of his readers—teenagers and small town-crackpots—as if their psionic machines and warp drives were real earth-shattering discoveries.

Reading *Astounding*, a fifteen-year-old Graham noted that Campbell had been born in nearby Newark. In fact,

he still lived there and was listed in the phonebook. Graham arrived at the Campbell residence via public transportation on a weekend afternoon, approaching an ordinary New Jersey house of the sort he would later photograph. He found Campbell at home alone. An enormous man, hawk-nosed, crew-cut, pink-skinned, and tending to the obese, Campbell wore a tight black suit, a tie, and thick horn-rimmed glasses. He moved about his empty house with a restless bitter energy. Chain-smoking from a cigarette holder clamped between his teeth, he talked about science fiction in a constant monotone. During the unceasing harangue, it was unclear to our young friend exactly what Campbell was saying or to whom. He found, essentially, a disconnect—and let himself out.⁷

3. SCHEMA

On some shelf in some hexagon (men reasoned) there must exist a book which is the formula and perfect compendium of *all the rest*.

—Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel"⁸

Graham's *Schema* (1966–67) (figs. 2, 3) can be understood today as one of the origins of Conceptual art. But Conceptual art did not yet exist when it was first published. It was unclear, in fact, whether Graham was a critic, a poet, or an artist. Bordering on the infinite and resolutely plain, the manifested work is a tree of numbers, like a Carl Andre poem or a computer printout.

In its own currency, *Schema* is both a set of directions and a set of examples of their implementation. A "recipe" or "program" is presented to the editor of a magazine, instructing the formulaic arrangement of various editorial and design features of the issue's textual content. But the actual schematization, publication, and dissemination are all performed by the magazine itself, for its own ends, and *Schema* will presumably move on, always into other versions in a presumed future or preserved past. The work is accompanied by the reflective writings of its author. The fourth and last of Graham's "Thoughts on *Schema* (March 1966)" compares it to Kurt Gödel's "incompleteness theorem."⁹ The Austrian mathematician was then living in New Jersey, only belatedly earning celebrity for his 1931 breakthrough in mathematical logic. By positing that all logical systems are incomplete because they contain the formal language to state of themselves that they are unprovable, Gödel showed that natural numbers, the foundation of rationalism, are themselves irrational.

Not only did Gödel's work result in the development

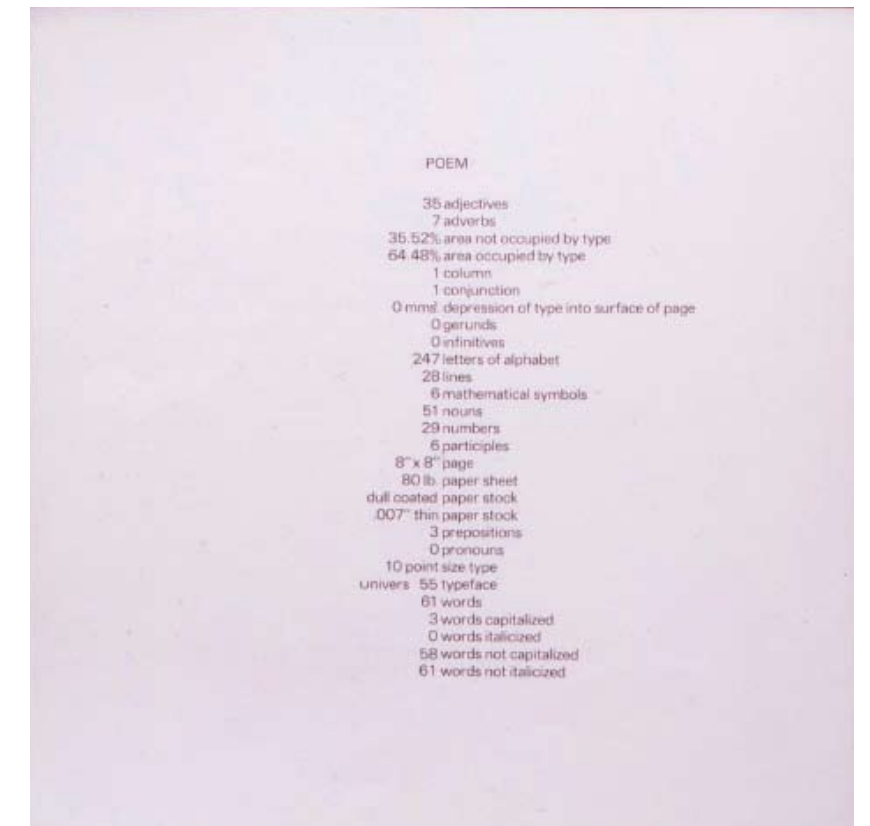


fig. 2
Version of *Schema* (March 1966)
(1966–67) reproduced in *Aspen*, nos.
5–6 (fall–winter 1967)

3. Dan Graham, "Apocalypse Now," *Tate Etc.* (London), no. 8 (autumn 2006): 44.

4. Edgar Allan Poe, "A Descent into the Maelstrom" (1841).

5. Thomas M. Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 32.

6. Malcom J. Edwards, "entry on John Wood Campbell, Jr.," in John Clute and Peter Nicholls, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 187.

7. Graham, interview with the author, 11 May 2008.

8. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel" (1941), reprinted in *Ficciones* (New York:

Grove Press, 1962), 79–89.

9. Graham, "Thoughts on *Schema* (March 1966)," in *For Publication* (Los Angeles: Otis Art Institute of Los Angeles County, 1975).

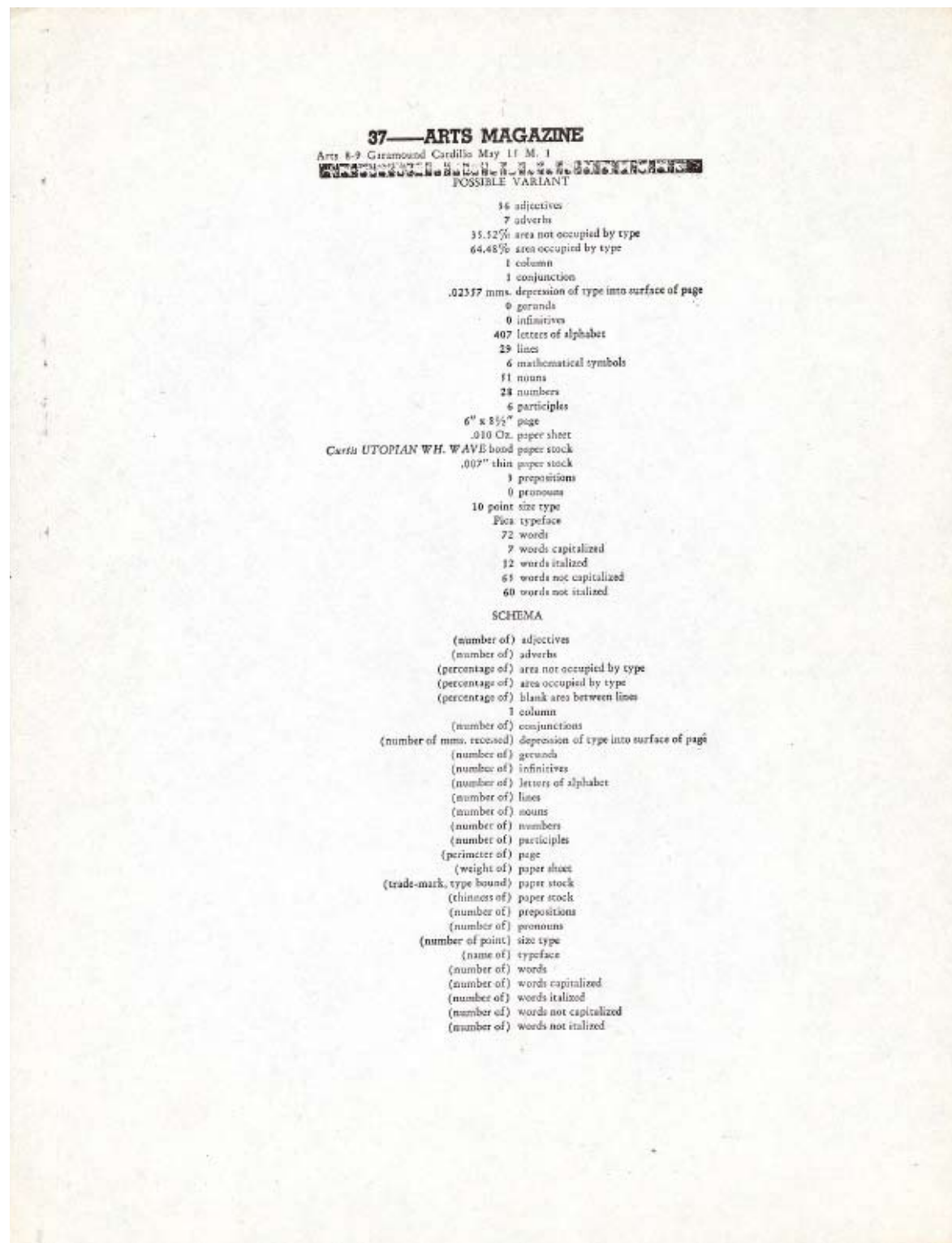


fig. 3
Unpublished mock-up of Schema
(March 1966) (1966–67) for
reproduction in *Arts Magazine*

of algorithmic computer science, but it had large-scale philosophical implications that came down heavily, even scandalously, on the side of Platonism. The most real things in the world, he had proved, were of an ideal order of reality. For many years, Gödel's theorems were kept a quiet secret among a befuddled mathematical academy. But, as Graham has observed, "science became popular in the 1960s."¹⁰ Interested readers benefiting from the miscegenation and chaos of the paperback revolution were discovering the Incompleteness Theorem alongside the Uncertainty Principle on the wings of science-fiction youth culture. Gödel's only close friend, Albert Einstein, had been shattered by the mathematician's propositions of rotating universes and proofs that time did not exist. An apparent paranoid-schizophrenic in his day-to-day life, Gödel claimed his favorite movie was *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*.¹¹

Concerning itself with its own current position in a potentially infinite expansion, *Schema* activates a Gödelian mechanism as an act of conceptual disruption in the mechanical reproduction of the magazine. Having read philosophy (Raymond Lull) and literature (Jorge Luis Borges) that proposed such a machine, Graham found a way to force the magazine to expand into the formula and perfect compendium of all it could ever be. *Schema* is the revelation of the historical materialism of the magazine performed by its own editor's remote topology of an already detumescent organ. An unreal entity with total real-world power, *Schema* ticks out its history like a Turing machine with no halting problem.

4. MAGAZINE PIECES

"Science Fiction, like most branches of art today, is more aware than ever before of its own nature."

—Brian W. Aldiss, 1973¹²

Grandmaster Heinlein wrote in 1947 that he was advised that "any story—science fiction, or otherwise—if it is well written, can be sold to the slicks."¹³ Heinlein wasn't yet hip to what was happening. He would soon discover by way of the new culture he himself had helped to create that science fiction was not simply poised to cross into the mainstream, it was poised to take over the world. By the end of the 1960s, he had established a veritable cult centered around open marriage and libertarian economics.

Today it's a truism that everything is science fiction. In the 1960s, the discovery was only just leaking out of the "ghetto genre." Via campy films, comics, and paperbacks,

it was bursting into other arts. Andy Warhol's love of *The Creation of the Humanoids* (1962), a low-budget take on the "Dean of Science Fiction" Jack Williamson's dystopic novels, inspired more than the Factory's forays into low-budget horror. In 1967, French *nouveau roman* author Michel Butor speculated in *Partisan Review* that because of the genre's anti-literary rhetoric, the members of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, if writing in congress about the same fictional city in the same fictional future, might create an actual city out of the present. At last, "SF would be veracious, to the very degree that it realized itself."¹⁴ As one history of early twentieth-century science-fiction put it, already "Science-fiction fans had an enthusiasm for their favorite form of reading unlike any other genre devotees."¹⁵ Indeed, science-fiction readers were the first organized fans in the modern episteme. During the 1960s, as they began to realize science fiction's real-world power, they revised the genre in terms of the new counterculture.

Paul Williams, founder and editor of *Crawdaddy!* magazine, remembered how the 1960s counterculture, in its own self-reflection, was deeply connected to science fiction. He found that David Crosby, "like most mid-60s rock musicians (and underground press editors, political activists, dope impresarios, etc.), was an avid reader of science fiction in general and Sturgeon in particular; and he realized early that the Byrds and other rock groups were living examples of Sturgeon's idea that a group of humans could function as more than the sum of the individuals involved [...] not just more, but *mystically* more... The 'counterculture,' in retrospect, was heavily modeled on a handful of science fiction and fantasy novels."¹⁶

The new generation of writers had utopia on the mind. In England, what would be called science fiction's "new wave" was forged, promoting a story able to trump high romanticism and square low-brow rocketship yarns at the same time. Employing high-concept ideas gleaned from film, paranormal science, the pulps, psychology, art, and literature, pop depths were peculiarly plunged. For the first time, women science-fiction writers were publishing under their own names. Aldiss would call Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) the first novel in the history of the genre, claiming a high-art old-world feminist origin for this most low-brow and American genre.¹⁷ These new literary origins opened up an old anti-utopian radicalism in science-fiction's relation to its present.

Graham has pointed to Shelley's later novel, *The Last Man* (1826), as the first sci-fi book.¹⁸ Written after Shelley had met the American fabulist Washington Irving, *The Last Man* is cast in the far future, on a globe ravaged by plague and

10. Alexandra Midal, "How I Learnt to Love Science Fiction: Alexandra Midal Interviews Dan Graham," in *Tomorrow Now: When Design Meets Science Fiction* (Luxembourg: Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, 2007), 116.

11. Jim Holt, "Time Bandits: What Were Einstein and Gödel Talking About?," *The New Yorker* (28 February 2005).

12. Brian W. Aldiss, "The Origin of the Species: Mary Shelley," chapter 1 in *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction* (London: Redwood Press, 1973), 11.

13. Robert A. Heinlein, "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction," in *Of Worlds Beyond: The Science of Science Fiction Writing*, ed. Lloyd Arthur Eshbach (Chicago: Advent Publishers, 1963), 13.

14. Michel Butor, "Science Fiction: The Crisis of Its Growth," *Partisan Review* 34, no. 4 (fall 1967): 602.



fig. 4
Edgar Allan Poe's "The Balloon Hoax," published in *The New York Sun* (13 April 1844)

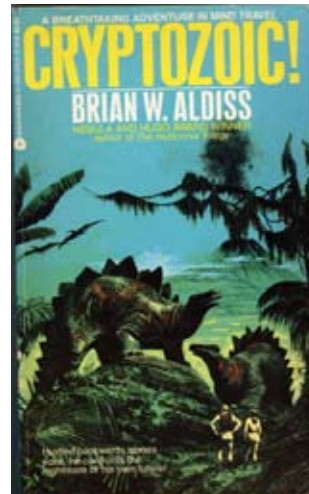


fig. 5
Cover of Brian Aldiss's *Cryptozoic!* (New York: Avon Books, 1967)

natural disaster. Literature defines its own limits from within the apocalypse. "I am able to escape from the mosaic of circumstance," writes her future hero in a text no one else will ever read, "by perceiving and reflecting back the grouping and combined colouring of the past."¹⁹

Eighteen years later, in New York, Poe's first science-fiction story blew a gap into the newspaper culture in which it appeared in a gesture reminiscent of Graham's interventions in magazines of the 1960s. The Balloon Hoax of 1844—a fake report on amateur pneumatic engineers pulling off a crossing of the Atlantic in a balloon—was splashed across the front page of the *New York Sun* as fact (fig. 4). It caused a sensation. The author was reported by a friend to have stood by the *Sun* offices for hours, observing the rioting crowd. Most of all Poe was fascinated by the people who were sure the news was a lie—yet had gathered, fists in the air, to shout at the fiction.²⁰ Biographer Daniel Hoffman considered it the happiest day of Poe's career.²¹ Science fiction, for Poe, did not reveal the truth of the future, but the actual sham of the present. Like Graham's *Figurative* (1968), an ordinary cashier's receipt placed in the aura-rich matrix of an issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, this anarchist, activist, and hyper-rational gesture appeared from out of the body of the real.

5. CRYPTOZOIC!

So fantasy remains ambiguous; it stands between the false, the foolish, the delusory, the shallows of the mind, and the mind's deep connection with the real. On this threshold sometimes it faces one way, masked and beribboned, frivolous, an escapist; then it turns, and we glimpse as it turns the face of an angel, bright truthful messenger, arisen Urizen.

—Ursula K. LeGuin²²

Brian Aldiss's pulp time-travel extravaganza *Cryptozoic!* (1967) (fig. 5) inspired Graham to more directly investigate the relation of utopianism to time.²³ *Cryptozoic!*'s hero, one Edward Bush, is an artist who time-travels to distant epochs to paint landscapes. He begins to encounter other chrononauts from his own future, in which time itself seems to be coming undone. It turns out that at a certain date in Bush's future life, all of humanity, himself included, realize that the perceived arrow of time, the very motion from past to future, is a psychotic disease bred by the "overmind." Time actually goes the other way.

Halfway through the fast-moving book, the anti-Oedipal "undermind" passes backwards into the narrative,

mind-fucking all in its path. Bodies cease to age. Impotence vanishes, love blossoms, blooms in adolescence, and expands at last into pure infantile sexuality. The individual is finally taken into the mother's loins, she into "her mother, who would grow young and fair again."²⁴ The liberated self would proclaim, "incest is finally broken."²⁵ Bush appears to be deeply healed: "I saw how most human sin is the result of most human misery; it was misery and above all the mystery of uncertainty that made me do the base acts in my life. Once rid of the overmind, you—everyone can suffer no uncertainty, because you know the future."²⁶

But such breakthroughs by the New Wave led quickly to breakdown. "All voyages to the moon," wrote Marie Bonaparte in *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe, A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation* (1949), "an ever-recurring human phantasy, always, in their deepest sense, represent a yearning to return to the mother."²⁷ Science fiction was now hip to this fact. How odd then that there for all to see via live video feed, in an anti-Oedipal tour de force of science fiction's own making, was the mother herself, the moon, taken by United States astronauts in 1969 (fig. 6) (quoting Arthur C. Clarke in the process). Exactly what had just happened? As the 1960s began to collapse, science fiction found itself without its most coveted fantasy. "Man has invented his doom," Bob Dylan would sing years later, a zombie survivor of his own 1970s West Coast apocalypse. "First step was touching the moon."²⁸

In *Cryptozoic!*'s low-brow trick ending, Bush emerges in the last chapter in an insane asylum in the old time. His father is visiting the hospital, and a doctor is explaining his time hallucinations. "Your son, Mr. Bush—your son knows only one woman, his mother, and all other females he meets are identified with her.... His obsessive-compulsive tendencies have collapsed into schizophrenia."²⁹

6. ANAMNESIS

The split second in time, the attosecond—it's always obsessed painters, much more than anyone else.... If you regard the mind's distortion of time flow as sick, then the frozen time represented by the attosecond is the nearest a deluded mind can come to health.

—Brian Aldiss, *Cryptozoic!*³⁰

Like the relativistic astronaut in Stanislaw Lem's *Return from the Stars* (1961), artists and writers of the 1970s found themselves returning from their heady adventures into a schizophrenic hallucination of ordinary reality. Resisting



fig. 6
Neil Armstrong's photograph of NASA's lunar module on the surface of the moon, 1969

19. Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (Paris: A. and W. Galignani, 1826), 149.

20. Poe, *Doings of Gotham*, by Edgar Allan Poe, as Described in a Series of Letters to the Editors of the *Columbia Spy*; Together with Various Editorial Comments and Criticisms by Poe (Pottsville, Pennsylvania: J. E. Spannuth, 1929), 33–34.

21. Daniel Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 156.

22. Ursula K. LeGuin, introduction to Borges, Silvina Ocampo, and A. Bioy Caseres ed., *The Book of Fantasy* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), 10.

23. Midal, "How I Learnt to Love Science Fiction," 117.

24. Aldiss, *Cryptozoic!* (New York: Avon, 1969), 177.

25. *Ibid.*, 187.

26. *Ibid.*, 177.

27. Quoted in Hoffman, *Poe, Poe, Poe*, 153.

28. Bob Dylan, "Licence to Kill," *Infidels* (Columbia Records, 1983).

29. Aldiss, *Cryptozoic!*, 188.

30. *Ibid.*, 157.

this anti-utopian impulse with group think and personal interaction, Graham's 1970s performances investigated the mechanics of time, consciousness, and the self. In *Two Consciousness Projection(s)* (1972), one participant, a woman, focuses on an image of herself on a television monitor and verbally describes the state of her own consciousness, while a male performer, holding the camera and focused only on her, verbalizes his own state. The audience views the performers and listens to their simultaneous monologues. The structural power mechanics of the gaze-event are revealed, losing control as consciousness is projected. "An abstractly presupposed psychological (or social) model is physically observable by the audience."³¹

In *Past Future Split Attention* (1972), "two people who know each other are in the same space. While one person predicts continuously the other person's behavior, the other person recounts (by memory) the other's past behavior."³² Finding its "ideal medium" in a videotape of the event, the work time-tracks the impossibility of locating the just past in a relativistic universe as it enters the fabric of a local friendship. Transcripts reveal performers diving to ludicrous depths in their own memories among suddenly self-evident Freudian parapraxes.

Like other artists and musicians of the 1970s, Graham was reading Philip K. Dick. Books like *Time Out of Joint* (1959) and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), revealing realities as artificial worlds engineered by sinister anti-human forces, had found a cult audience during the 1960s. Paul Williams's 1975 profile in *Rolling Stone*, "The Most Brilliant Sci-Fi Mind on Any Planet: Philip K. Dick," introduced the writer's strange new persona to the mainstream as a kind of performance.

Dick's humanist tours de force of the 1950s and 60s had been fueled by amphetamines, and by the 70s the drugs were taking their toll. He was relatively sober, barely getting by, and convinced secret organizations were burgling his house. He was close to madness, and wrote more exclusively for himself. In fact, Dick's writing had never been stronger, more committed to his own intensely local vision. No longer concerned with the fantasies of the future but with the schizophrenia of 1970s Americana, he celebrated the lower-middle-class Orange County that could not contain his experience as a down-and-out science-fiction author.

For Dick, science fiction now dovetailed perfectly with a pseudo-utopian present that could only be captured by the acknowledgment of its irreality (fig. 7). In a moment that would spark his most mature novel, *VALIS* (1981), he opened his front door to a pharmacist's delivery woman. She was wearing a New Age locket around her neck. The present

31. Graham, text (1979) on *Two Unconsciousness Projection(s)* (1972), reprinted in *Dan Graham: Works 1965-2000* (Düsseldorf, Germany: Richter Verlag, 2001), 138.

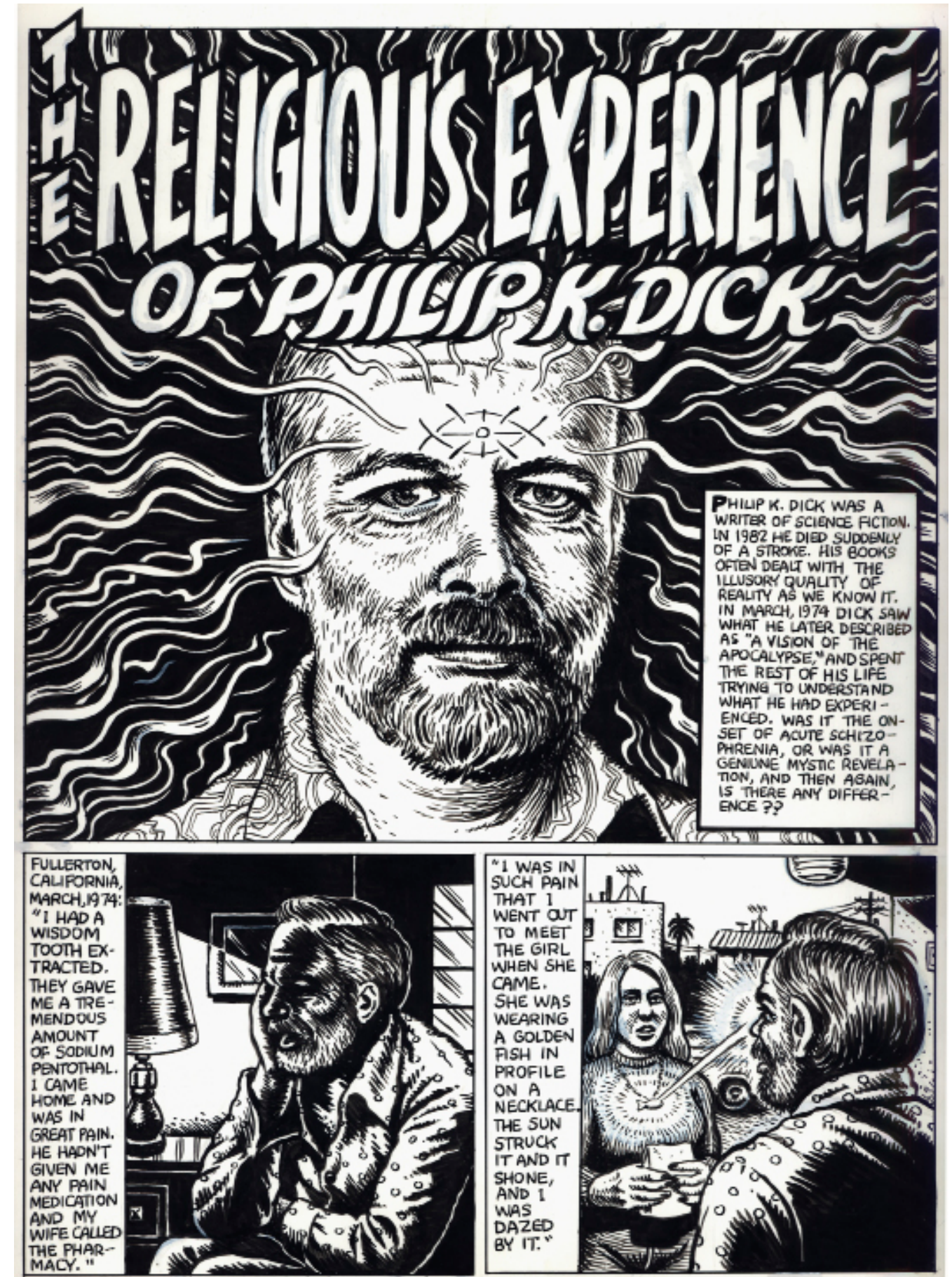


fig. 7
Detail of R. Crumb's *The Religious Experience of Philip K. Dick* (c. 1986); ink and correction fluid on paper; eight pages: 16 15/16 x 14 inches each; courtesy of the artist, Paul Morris, and David Zwirner, New York




fig. 8
Graham performing *Performer/Audience/Mirror* (1977) at Riverside Studios, London, 1979

dropped away as he looked at it. Dick saw that he was not standing in twentieth-century California but in Ancient Rome. He spoke Koine Greek. "In that instant, as I stared at the gleaming fish sign and heard her words, I suddenly experienced what I learned is called *Anamnesis*—a Greek word meaning, literally, loss of forgetfulness."³³ Dick was home, but would die in 1982 from a brain hemorrhage, unable to survive the experience.

In *Performer/Audience/Mirror* (1977) (fig. 8), Graham faced an audience before a mirror and, as the audience looked at Graham and at itself, he described his movements, then the audience's appearance and actions as they occurred. Chasing the present as close as it is possible to come, the performance moved away from science fiction's increasingly bad trip. Promoting self-reflection, group dynamics, and consciousness liberation, the performance entered and made visible the very stream of reality. All of Graham's work is what the artist calls "hybrid"—the offspring or crossing points of different genres. In fact, Graham's performances inspired and were inspired by, New York

experimental rock and roll of the 1970s. Bands that would one day call themselves punks still admitted they were interested in science fiction and fantasy.

Science fiction is itself a self-reflecting hybrid genre. In a Graham hybrid, science fiction reflects the hybrid's self-reflection as the utopian desire for enlightened categories of textual production. It offers direct access to conceptual reality as real-world experience. As its own example, science fiction stands immutably for the present real. It produces its temporary utopias not for the critic or the academic but for the fan, the committed critical amateur whom it spurs forward on the present path to the personal secular sacred. "An idea is important only in how it reacts on people, and in how people react to it. Whether the idea is social, political, or mechanical, we want people involved in and by it."³⁴ So instructed Campbell in 1965, unconsciously miming the coming rhetoric of Conceptual art. 

32. Ibid., text (1981) on *Past Future Split Attention* (1972), reprinted in *Dan Graham: Works 1965–2000*, 134.

33. In R. Crumb, "The Religious Experience of Philip K. Dick," *Weirdo* (San Francisco), no. 17 (summer 1986): 3.

34. John W. Campbell, "The Science of Science Fiction Writing," in *Of Worlds*



Architectural model and view of *Double Exposure* (1995–96); two-way mirror, color cibachrome transparency, and stainless steel; 7 1/2 x 13 1/8 x 13 1/8 feet; collection Fundação de Serralves—Contemporary Art Museum, Porto, Portugal; installation in XXXX