

ART

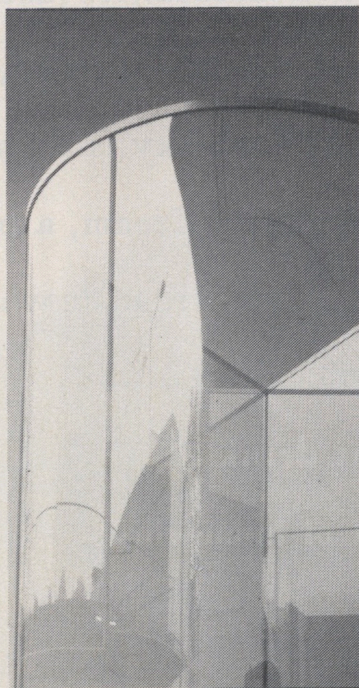
Preview

Acts of faith

DAVID LILLINGTON ON
A TALE OF TWO GALLERIES

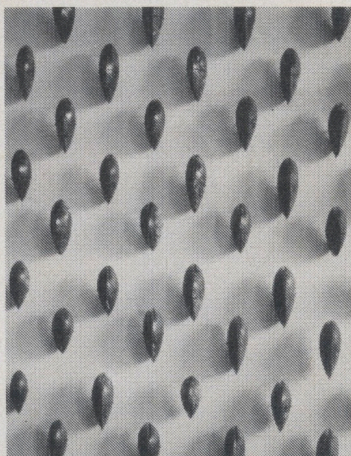
The art world is so strange. Two Saturdays ago the Lisson Gallery held a screening of videos by Dan Graham. One of these was 'Rock my Religion', which was to feature music by Sonic Youth. Since Dan Graham is a minimalist architect and Sonic Youth are a very accomplished, and loud, American guitar band this should have been rather interesting. Graham makes things with names like 'Parallelpiped', while Sonic Youth's songs have titles like 'Expressway to Your Skull'.

Enthusiasm waned a little when for *hors d'oeuvre* we watched an unspeakably dull video of some people walking around a Graham sculpture in Belgium and talking about it. It waned even more when it turned out that 'Rock my Religion' — which connected the Shaker faith with Patti Smith — was atrociously edited. We saw footage of a Shaker meeting, the congregation wildly dancing, soundtrack by the Youth. It seemed like a case of bad scholarship, but it didn't matter as this was all part of a larger picture. What really counts are Graham's sculptures and architectural models. And what matters even more is the architecture itself: unfortunately, you can't see this because it's in America. I'm willing to believe it's wonderful. The metal and glass structures you can see are clever, and play in a hall-of-mirrors way with space. But I still can't summon much enthusiasm.



The Lisson is an important commercial gallery which specialises in minimalism. It's one of those rather intimidating places where you have to use the entryphone to get in. This show is especially important because it's the first show in the newly extended Lisson building. And Dan Graham, who makes work for and about public spaces, is an important artist.

The Adam Gallery is another 'art world' gallery. As if in recognition of its elitist status, it is only open for two hours on a Friday, four on a Sunday, or by appointment. The two artists showing there at present, Roy Voss and Nicky Hirst, are almost unknown. But the work of Nicky Hirst, in particular, is fascinating.



Hirst has taken over two rooms in the gallery. In one there are about 600 mussels, in ranks, on the wall. Each is bound round the middle with a wire. Above the fireplace is a metal handle in which two spoons are balanced. And then there are some metal tools in a frame on the wall. Upstairs there are other, similar things: leaf stomata wallpaper, sieves sandwiched between shelves.

These objects pack power, but conveying it in writing is well-nigh impossible. On one level Hirst's installations are about the contemporary fashion for the supercool. But her work also looks back to Surrealism. What is really noticeable is that Hirst understands metaphors. She can summon and control them. This is a rare gift. What she seems to do is this: she suggests a number of possible metaphors, but fulfills none of them. At the same time she ensures that they are coherent one with another. This sets up a kind of magnetic field of associations in which (the viewer feels) the imagination is held, as if suspended, or floating. And in this way the work's subject becomes not just the connections, but the very idea of connection itself. This in turn becomes metaphorical: it is about language, and human relationships. Ultimately, the ideas are religious. If all this seems far-fetched, I can only say that I saw it with my own eyes.

OK, the comparison's absurd. And Dan Graham's pieces are impressive. He deserves his accolades. But I can't help feeling that there's something odd about it all. I went to two galleries, a rich and famous one, and a poor, unknown one. One had art that genuinely moved me. The wrong one.

Dan Graham's work is at the Lisson Gallery until Jan 18. Nicky Hirst and Roy Voss are at the Adam Gallery until Nov 24.