

**THE CHILDREN'S PAVILION**  
**JEFF WALL**  
**AND DAN GRAHAM'S COLLABORATIVE PROJECT**  
**BY NANCY SPECTOR**

Photos of children these pages and over: Jeff Wall *Little Children* 1988. 3 of 9 portraits from *The Children's Pavilion*. Cibachrome transparency, fluorescent light, display case. Diam. 47 in. each.

Jeff Wall and Dan Graham *The Children's Pavilion* 1988/89 Exterior plan view. Photo: Pedram/Fred. Courtesy: Galerie Roger Pailhas  
 Over: Jeff Wall and Dan Graham. *The Children's Pavilion* 1988/89. Interior view of installation at the Marian Goodman Gallery, January 1990. Wood, cibachromes, light boxes. Photo: Michael Goodman. Courtesy: Marian Goodman Gallery, N.Y.

Children are the hope of the future" is an aphorism employed, even exploited, by Madison Avenue advertisers — Benetton comes to mind as the worst offender — to sell products by promoting a politically correct, benign image. Regardless of the motivation, this focus on children reflects an increasing global and cross-disciplinary need to address the care, the education and the protection of our youth at a time of economic, political and social upheaval.

The regard for family values and the preservation of an environment conducive to raising children are not familiar topics in contemporary art discourse. Other than Group Material's *Democracy* project, presented at the Dia Art Foundation in New York in 1988, which featured a section on public education, the nurturing of our young has received little attention. While our system is crumbling at its very roots — the streets are filled with homeless families, schools have become battlegrounds, babies are born with AIDS and children are selling crack — the seeming numbness of much of the art world is troubling but not entirely unexpected.

Canadian artist Jeff Wall and American Dan Graham's collaborative project, *The Children's Pavilion* (1988-89), is a significant exception to such apathy. While not a blazing example of social reform, the Pavilion nevertheless provides a resonant note in an otherwise nonexistent discourse. It is a "model building," as Jeff Wall puts it, a "hypothetical structure" designed to raise consciousness about the present situation and to promote speculation about future possibilities.

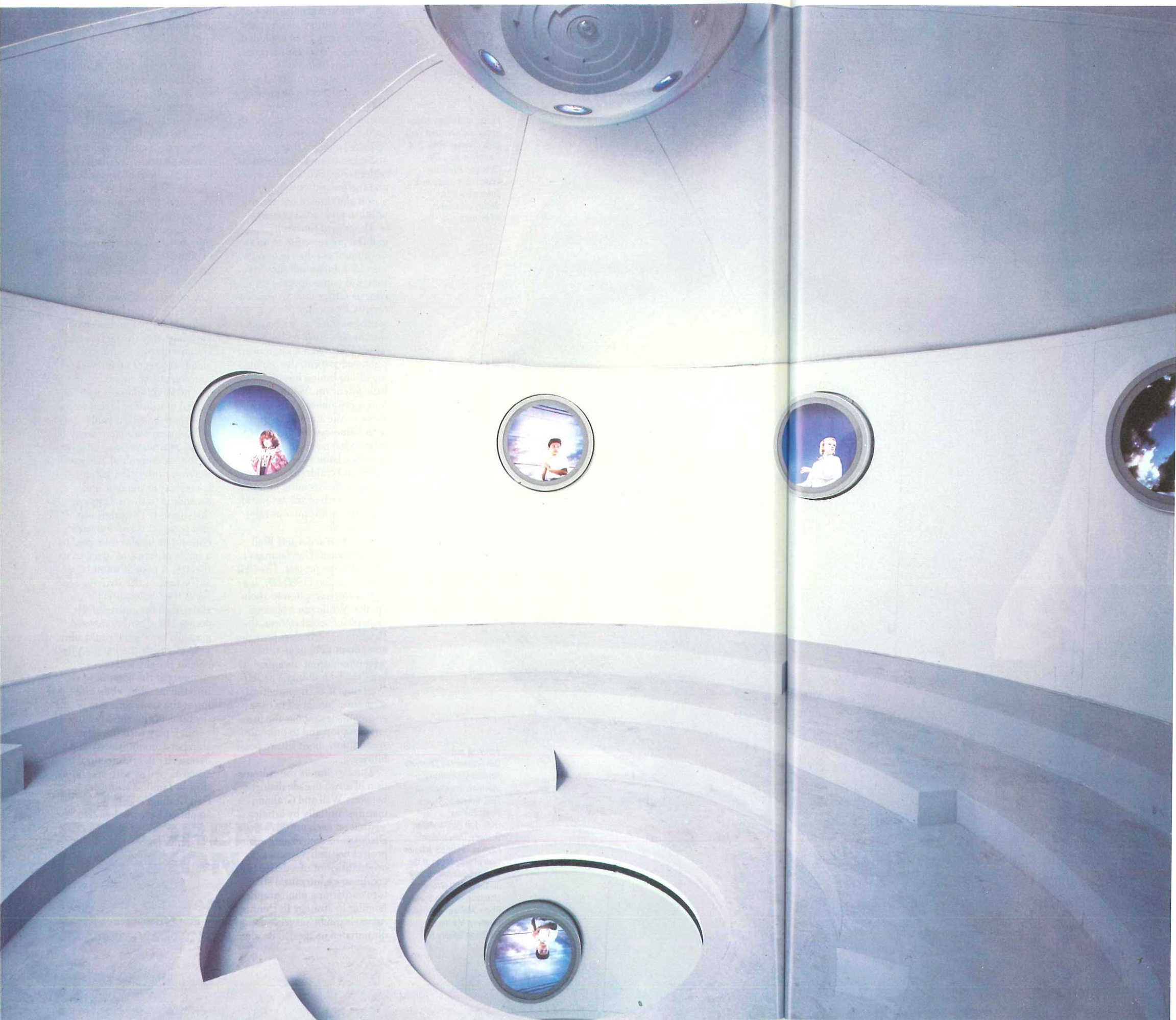
The Pavilion is the culmination of a two-decade dialogue between Wall and Graham, manifest initially by articles written on each other's work. Discussions concerning a joint project began five years ago, originating out of a desire to create an architectural structure containing photographs (similar in strategy to Dennis Adams's public projects using illuminated images). The idea

of constructing a space for and about youth evolved slowly, inspired in part by Wall's intention to create a photographic portrait series of racially dissimilar children with the only similarities between images being the age range of the sitters and the pictorial composition. He was also motivated by a desire to "rethink the categorical portrait," realized earlier in his 1978-83 series *Young Workers*. While not yet constructed, the Pavilion now exists as two half-scale models accompanied by four presentation drawings which have been exhibited during the past year and a half in Santa Barbara, New York, Marseille and Lyon. The project has been funded by Galerie Roger Pailhas, Marseille. The Pavilion is also on view mid-May through to mid-October in Newcastle, England, as part of an international group show.

The Pavilion has been designed as a domed structure to be situated inside a landscaped hill covered with large areas of grass. Stairways traverse its exterior concrete shell, descending toward the circular entranceway at the base and ascending to the walkway at the summit. The interior is composed of three descending concentric levels connected by a series of stairs, as in an arena theatre. A pool of water lying at the base of the structure reflects the oculus directly above it in the centre of the dome. The slightly mirrored glass of the oculus would allow visitors inside the Pavilion to peer at the sky and those standing at the summit to see into the interior, while offering at the same time dim reflections of the viewers.

Such play with the relationship between interiority and exteriority in architectural space as well as with spectatorship — familiar strategies in Dan Graham's work — is amplified here by the inclu-





sion of Wall's nine circular photographic images of ethnically diverse children. These transparencies, the diameters of which equal that of the reflective pool of water, are individual portraits of children standing against an open sky. Weather conditions vary dramatically from image to image. Shot from below and installed well above eye-level, these pictures simultaneously operate as metaphorical mirrors — reflecting the upturned faces of visiting children — and imitation windows that open to the sky. As with all of Wall's illuminated photographs, the children depicted in the Pavilion tondos represent generic types rather than specific individuals. They are emblems, not simply mimetic reproductions of empirical reality. The meaning of Wall's work, usually inferred through an analysis of the narrative gestures found in his fabricated scenarios of social inequity, depends here upon an examination of the pictures within their architectural setting.

The Pavilion is replete with art historical and architectural references, which, when assessed collectively, provide a possible reading of the artists' intentions. Firstly, the building resembles certain civic monuments of Western culture that specifically symbolize political and ecclesiastical domination: the Pantheon, Brunelleschi's Duomo, the U.S. Capital and so on. The affinity between Wall's pictures and the countless *putti* populating decorative Baroque ceilings reinforces the allusion to such structures. The Pavilion's drum shape also recalls examples of utopian architecture — Etienne-Louis Boullée's circular monument to Sir Isaac Newton, Bruce Goff's interlocking spheroids that make up the Ford House in Aurora, Illinois, Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes — which demonstrate a faith in the teleological unfolding of history and the advancement of society. Additionally, as a structure associated with world expositions, the pavilion itself has become an architectural trope that signifies the kind of organized cultural hegemony promoted by such

international events. (Dan Graham has previously explored the social implications of pavilion architecture in works such as *Pavilion/Sculpture for Argonne* [1978-81] and *Two Adjacent Pavilions* [1978].)

When perceived within a space so infused with references to European architectural tradition, Wall's multicultural assembly of children becomes a photographic microcosm of world culture, glimpsed through the haze of Western hegemonic vision. This vision may be defined as the dominating gaze that has traditionally subjected other societies to its own cultural value system. The fact that *The Children's Pavilion* resembles a giant eye — a symbol of the ocular technology of power described in Michel Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon (specifically, Bentham's circular prison with central guard tower) or George Orwell's all-seeing Big Brother in 1984 — strengthens such an interpretation.

Conversely, the eye motif may refer to Georges Bataille's concept of the upturned, unseeing eye, a symbolic challenge to Western society's privileging of vision (representative of the rational, Cartesian self) and subsequent repression of sensuality, laughter and hysteria. Bataille's emphasis on pleasure and utter transgression may be translated here, in the most innocent of terms, in the Pavilion's playground aesthetic. It is, after all — despite the historical references — a space designed as an adjunct to leisure activity.

Wall and Graham intentionally embrace the ambiguity between social critique and utopian vision present in the Pavilion. The structure may evoke a recognition of traditional architectural and visual manifestations of power but it is also about children and amusement and, therefore, it is about promise.

