

Hans Haacke: Institutional Critique as Civic Engagement

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Civic dialogue plays an essential role in the workings of democracy, giving voice to multiple perspectives on challenging issues.

– Christine J. Vincent.¹

This statement is found in the preface of a report commissioned by the Ford Foundation entitled *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue*. Civic dialogue has occurred in many different forums since the inception of North American democracy. Only recently, however, has it become a trend in museums across the country. Where did this trend in civic engagement come from? Did the public demand it? Did it enter into the ideology of the museum from the artists displayed within the museums, or from a dialogue within the museum field?

While each of these factors may have contributed to the development of civic engagement within museums, it is no coincidence that museums reached out to the public after an era, from the 1960s into the present, of institutional critique in which many artists from many different movements challenged the museum's role in society. Hans Haacke, an artist intrinsically involved with institutional critique, creates art for display in museums that forces viewers, the museum and the media to assess the museum's position in society. It is evident from looking at some of Haacke's projects, writings and group affiliations that he creates civic dialogue within and beyond the museum by challenging the museum as a player in, as Haacke puts it, the "consciousness industry."²

While Haacke's early works didn't necessarily confront the museum's social role directly, they did express reaction to the exhibition environment. Kirsten Stiles writes that, "In the early 1960s, Haacke worked with organic processes, energy, growth, movement and kinetic technology. Those interests led to his exploration of the dynamic intersection and interaction of physical, biological and social systems."³ One of Haacke's early challenges to spaces of display such as galleries and museums was his 1963-65 piece *Condensation Cube*. For this work he constructed a cube from Plexiglas and sealed water inside. The sculpture is affected by the humidity and heat of the surrounding environment, so that as more people enter the gallery around the cube, more condensation develops inside it. By changing in direct response to the number of visitors, it articulates an organic dialogue with the typically controlled atmosphere of the museum. It furthermore illustrates that an object on display does not exist atemporally in a static state, and suggests that the narrative of an object is created by those who view it.

Museums hold great power over the display of objects. A museum may load an object with meanings and messages via didactic wall text and visitor guides, it may completely decontextualize an object and strip it of meaning, or it may change an object's meaning entirely. To allow the object to react to its viewers was a revolutionary concept. In so doing, Haacke shifted the traditional notion of the object in the modern museum display, or white cube, which creates an "exclusion of all reference to the wider world beyond the domain of pure form" and "reinforces the decontextualization traditionally effected by the museum."⁴ Discussing his ability to reassert meaning and to reference the greater world through his work, Haacke states,

A sculpture that physically reacts to its environment and/or affects its surroundings is no longer to be regarded as an object. The range of outside factors influencing it, as well as its own radius of action, reach beyond the space it materially occupies. It thus merges with the environment.⁵

In *Gallery Goers Birthplace* Haacke further developed the theme of allowing the art object to be defined by and reactive to its viewers. In the first part of this two-part piece, Haacke asked participants to indicate on a map the locations of their birthplace and their currently place of residence. By thus involving the audience actively in his art, Haacke allowed the art to be defined by viewers' experience, rather than by the museum. Hence the art, rather than the museum, created a civic dialogue.

Haacke proceeded from using organic materials to create reactive art to directly confronting the institutions that frame and display that art. In 1970, Haacke participated in the Museum of Modern Art's *Information* exhibit. His contribution, *MoMA Poll*, was positioned at the show's entrance. Again utilizing a Plexiglas box, he invited gallery goers to cast ballots in response to the question "Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?"⁶ The ballots were color-coded according each visitor's status as full paying, a member of the Museum, a holder of a courtesy pass, and so on. Visitors were not only physically casting a ballot, but were also themselves commenting on the institution of the museum, as Nelson Rockefeller's mother was a founder of the museum and Nelson himself a trustee from 1932 until his death in 1979.⁷ Haacke thus aligned the museum with politics, and again created an artwork that invoked civic dialogue.

He went on to make the environment react to his art. Haacke's work from the 1970s and '80s has forced museums to participate in civic dialogues concerning issues of the museum itself, such as financing, management, ideology, and more broadly, the museum's social and political position. One such work was not warmly accepted by the museum.

In 1971, Haacke was invited to exhibit at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. For this show, Haacke created *Shapolsky, et. al., Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*. His contribution displayed photographs of 142 properties, many which were slum buildings, alongside the public records of these properties. These records made clear that many of the property owners were on the Guggenheim's board of directors. The museum did not respond well to this piece, cancelling the show and ultimately dismissing the curator, Edward Fry. Nonetheless the work still created a stir outside the museum. Haacke accomplished a presentation of facts that shed light on the social roles of a museum and those who govern it. In an untitled statement, Haacke explains the power of this type of display:

I do not want to practice agitation which appeals or accuses. I am satisfied if I can provoke a consciousness of a general context and mutual dependence by *facts* alone. *Facts* are probably stronger and less often comfortable than even the best intended opinions... I would like to make the *processes themselves appear*.⁸

While it was prevented from facilitating discussion within the museum, *Shapolsky, et. al* did create discussion outside, and implicated the role that art plays within the museum, an arena often defined by corporate power.

Since museums did not struggle with problems of funding until recently, the corporatization of the museum is an issue that only within the past thirty years has become

a debated topic. In an institutional history of the Museum of Modern Art, Sam Hunter explains,

... the costs of maintaining its programs and services had also grown proportionately, producing expenses-over-income too large to be covered as in the past by a few affluent and dedicated patrons. Major efforts were launched to broaden the Museum's base of financial support and contributions... increasingly significant were grants from two sources from which support had been negligible or nonexistent in prior years: government and corporations.⁹

While government and corporate support has been beneficial, it has also created a number of issues regarding the "independent" ideologies of the museum, which now must answer to powers outside the art world. Haacke's response brought forth these issues for contemplation.

A 1975 work, *On Social Grease*, confronted the effects of the changing sponsorship of museums. Haacke engraved six large metal plaques with quotations from executives regarding the advantages of funding of art museums for their corporation's public image. One statement from executive Robert Kingsley stated, "Exxon's support of the arts serves the arts as a social lubricant. And if business is to continue in big cities, it needs a more lubricated environment."¹⁰ By presenting this concept within the museum, Haacke spotlighted the institutional framing of art and demonstrated that the museum experience is not free from outside forces.

Haacke has not limited confrontation of such issues to his art. In 1969, he organized the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), a group that protested MoMA heavily. Membership and leadership of the group "was kept deliberately loose; no list of members was drawn up, and no officers were elected or appointed. Decisions were made on the basis of 'participatory democracy.'"¹¹ The AWC took on similar issues as Haacke's art, but sought to fundamentally assess MoMA's viability as an institution for defining and displaying modern, and contemporary art. While the museum did not respond favorably to the demands of the AWC, it began a trend in the field of museum practice that recognizes the museum as a dynamic place for civic engagement.

In their list of demands for art museums in general, the AWC agitated for a change in the demographics of museum directors to include artists and museum staff and to better represent minorities (including black, Puerto Rican and female artists), whom they viewed as more fit to decide the operating functions of a museum. The AWC listed nine demands for museums, the majority of which focused on the public face of the museum, ultimately insisting that museums attempt to represent and attract a wider and more dynamic population. While museums may not have immediately responded to these demands, over the past several years it is evident that museums are revamping their public presence and reaching out to a greater cross-section of the population. In many institutions, public programming has become almost as important as curatorial departments.

Haacke confronted these issues and provoked the public to approach them through his signature style of audience participation. Throughout his work, the underlying theme has been to "... make something, which experiences, reacts to its environment, changes, [and] is nonstable."¹² The unstable nature of Haacke's work is what allows it to be so engaging. Haacke recognized the social power that museums possess and wanted the museum audience to address these issues.

The trend in civic engagement did not come directly from artists, but it is through the institutional critique of artists such as Haacke that this type of dialogue has become

increasingly important. Museums represent cultures as well as culture, and if we are not awake to the powers that frame these institutions, then we are ignoring the messages that our culture sends. Haacke realized this, and the concept is being explored today as museums strive to establish a public arena for civic engagement.

¹ Christine J. Vincent, "Preface," *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue* (compiled and edited by Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Cheryl Yuen, and Pam Korza), Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 1999.

² Kristin Stiles, "Language and Concepts," in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristin Stiles and Peter Selz, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996, p. 812-3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Emma Barker, *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 31.

⁴ Hans Haacke, "Untitled Statement" in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristin Stiles and Peter Selz, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996, p. 874.

⁶ Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: a History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998, p. 270.

⁷ It is noteworthy that "68.7 percent of those who participated rejected Rockefeller." Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s*, New York: Harper Collins, 1996, p. 15.

⁸ Hans Haacke, "Untitled Statement" in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, p. 874.

⁹ Sam Hunter, *Museum of Modern Art*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984, p. 33

¹⁰ Sam Hunter, John Jacobus and Daniel Wheeler, *Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture*, New York: Vendome Press, 2000, p. 364.

¹¹ Sandler, p. 15.

¹² Haacke, in Stiles and Selz, p. 872.