Face-to-Face: In Conversation with Hans Haacke

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'State of the Union,' Hans Haacke's first solo exhibition in New York City in eleven years, was installed at the Paula Cooper Gallery from November 5 – December 23, 2005. While his critique of the G.W. Bush administration appeared obvious, the nature of division intimated by his display was more nuanced. Several critics referred to the symbolism of a divided nation much as newscasters spoke of red states and blue states on the night of the 2004 presidential elections; and while the flag field of the exhibition's signature piece, *State of the Union* (2005), was torn neatly in half, the condition represented by other works in the show such as the broken desk, the kicked-in locker and the torn flag in *Ripped* (2004) suggested that their condition was one of degradation and deliberate dismantling more than division.

I requested to meet with the artist in New York City to discuss his exhibition. We talked about his process, his commitment to provocation, his tactical mixing of the symbolic with the real, and the *experience* versus the *reading* of art. I found the artist extremely kind and unassuming; he was also nimble as a fox: when I steered the conversation in one direction, he took it another; if I tried to pin him down, he gently undermined my question. There was nothing malicious or deceptive about his intentions: clearly, he understood the value of upsetting expectations. I realized that I was there to learn and his anecdotal response to my questions made the experience not only profitable but also enjoyable. This is followed by a reflection on both the exhibition and the conversation recorded in the summer of 2008.

Kathleen MacQueen I'd like to begin our conversation with a quote from Yasmin Sooka, now head of South Africa's Foundation for Human Rights, formerly a juror on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

> I would do it completely differently. I would look at the systems of apartheid—I would look at the question of land, I would certainly look at the role of multinationals, I would look at the role of the mining industry very, very closely because I think that's the real sickness of South Africa… I would look at the systematic effects of the policies of apartheid, and I would devote only *one* hearing to torture because I think when you focus on torture and you don't look at what it was serving, that's when you start to do a revision of the real history.[1]

This was the connection you were making in *A Breed Apart* (1978) and in *MetroMobiltan* (1985) and in a great deal of your work throughout the 1980s. Does it hurt that it takes so long before a broader consciousness catches up? And have we even begun to contend with the systemic connections between terror and economics?

Hans Haacke I am glad to be—for a change—on the winning side. The points made in the quote are absolutely pertinent. When we talk about Abu Ghraib, for instance, we can talk about 'bad apples' ad infinitum. But what led to the insanity of the invasion of Iraq with its horrific consequences is in danger of being forgotten. When trying to explain how art works—together with millions of other things—can contribute to gradual shifts in the public consensus, I often resort to the image of a mosaic: the more stones of a particular color are added the more its overall color changes.

K.M. And the clarity of that picture…

[1] Jasmin Sooka quoted in Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 211.

H.H. The visual arts are part of the mosaic. Just like what we read in the newspapers, what we see on the tube, and what we hear in church—the visual arts play a role in shaping our view of the world and thus can affect how we act.

K.M. Yasmin Sooka is quoted in Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*, which connects economic globalization to the reshaping of democracy as a capitalist project rather than a self-governing project and as a brutal terrorizing project as well. This information has been out there a long time—you have found it—but it took work to piece it together and then, of course, there is such an active project to discredit anyone who might frame democracy in a more strategic rather than an essentialist light.

Could you discuss your efforts to highlight the connections between democracy, democratic symbols, and terror in your installation: 'State of the Union'?

H.H. That's a big question. Let me try.

The title 'State of the Union' is of course derived from the State of the Union address traditionally delivered by the President to Congress in January of each year. At the beginning of Bush's second term, this exhibition was my own assessment of the State of the Union. I used two different images: one for the announcement of the show and its title and the other for a work in the show.

Most immediately, the image on the announcement was my response to how the Bush administration reacted to hurricane Katrina. Beyond that it served as a metaphor for the general state of affairs. In the American colors, red, white, and blue, you see a huge expanse of blue water, a red sky above, and in the typeface used by fraternities, sports clubs and the military, in white

was spelled out the title ('State of the Union') with stars in the letters. The words were sinking into the blue sea, the Union was drowning.

For the work in the exhibition, I used the star field of the American flag; not because I was afraid I would get into trouble over a presumed violation of the sanctity of the American flag, but because the star field is full of meanings. Of course, in the flag the stars represent the 50 states of the union. But all over the world stars have many other meanings as well, including political and religious connotations. A single star is often associated with the star of Bethlehem, the arrival of Christ, and salvation.

We have all looked up at the starry sky and been mesmerized. It's a great experience. For all these and many other reasons there are many songs, in which stars are referred to, among them the well-known children's song: *Twinkle, twinkle little star*. Stars have positive and happy connotations.

The star field of the flag could therefore also be a metaphor for the sky. When something happens to this happy sky, it could be understood as a sign that something is wrong. My sense at the time was (and perhaps we are getting out of it as we speak)[2] that this country, thanks to the policies of the Bush administration, was split in half. I did not identify what one and the other half represent. I merely showed a torn sky. We now have to deal with the shreds.

K.M. You have touched on my next question: You consistently make use of the Union Jack as opposed to the full American flag in 'State of the Union'. Was that an aesthetic or a political decision? As you describe it, the decision seems to be quite strongly on the level of metaphorical content.

[2] My conversation with the artist took place just prior to the Democratic National Convention in Denver, 2008.

H.H. I don't like the term *aesthetic*, it lacks…

K.M. Substance.

H.H. Yes, and *political* is too direct and limiting. It does not allow for the play of metaphors and allusions. But, of course, they all have political implications. They invite the viewers to get engaged and draw their own conclusions.

K.M. And we were right in the middle of a congressional debate on whether to amend the constitution to prevent the desecration of the flag. When you had your exhibition the House had already voted but the Senate would not vote until the following year.

H.H. Remember the 60s and early 70s, the time of the Vietnam War, when the American flag was "desecrated" to make a political statement, and the hysteric reaction of those who claimed to protect the honor of the flag, while, in fact, they were the ones who dishonored the flag in Vietnam. By now, the image of the American flag has been used for lingerie, Wall Street, and selling just about everything you can imagine.

K.M. Yes, as long as it's a consumer product, it's okay. If we see then 'State of the Union' as presenting your critical interference with the symbolic language of democracy, this in turns suggests a more severe interference on the part of the Bush administration with democracy itself. Co-optation of the symbols works two ways in 'State of the Union.' Has the flag become just another corporate logo and the government a PR firm?

H.H. I was born in a country that, still today, is a bit shy to wave the flag. The first time Germans dared doing so was during the world soccer championship. But in the US, flag waving is a sign of patriotism. And so, the use of the flag for political or corporate speech is accepted and remains potent. Would the same be true for the Italian flag, the Belgium, or the Dutch flag? Has anyone in France attacked the tricolor?

K.M. The currency is different…

H.H. Yes, it has an emotional resonance for a great number of Americans.

K.M. So you use the symbol to its best avail?

H.H. I hope I do.

K.M. Metaphor is functioning within the space of the photographic images as well, specifically *Stuff Happens*, *Star Gazing*, and *Ripped*. You used to avoid that attribution of metaphor to your work, preferring to keep it on the solid ground of information and concrete fact. Is metaphor a tool for you in producing the work or for your audience in interpreting your work?

H.H. I have used photos in many different ways. For example, with the works on New York real estate, I used photography as a means of documentation, whereas in *Star Gazing* it serves metaphoric speech while referring to something factual. Everybody who saw the images coming out of Abu Ghraib understands that my arranged photograph alludes to those 'facts on the ground.'

K.M. And yet there is something substantial about it: the strong texture, the torso so prominently projected forward: it is almost as if we are standing face-to-face before an individual even though we cannot see that individual. Does physicality influence our interpretation? How much did you want to instill a sense of concrete presence to the image?

H.H. Let me answer by telling you an anecdote. A person at *The New Yorker* was interested in this image for the cover of the magazine. I was asked if I would be willing to turn it into a painting or a drawing or allow someone else to do that for me. I said, "No, that changes it radically." And so, the idea of using it for the cover was abandoned.[3] *The New Yorker* has a strict rule never to use a photograph on its cover.

K.M. Yes, I agree, your image would not be the same as a drawing. *Star Gazing*, like *US Isolation Box*, *Grenada 1983* (1984) and *A Breed Apart* (1978), directly addresses torture. You are willing to address the brutalization of the human body and the dehumanization of the human spirit, yet you make ethical choices when it comes to using photographic images within your works. You critically frame, for example, the work of Benetton and their leading photographer Oliviero Toscani for their role in a grotesque virtual abuse of human bodies. I'm referring specifically to *Dyeing for Benetton* (1994).

You have worked differently throughout your career in your use of the photographic image; how has this process evolved? What context do you create to protect both the image and the subject?

[3] *Star Gazing* was, however, reproduced in the November 1, 2004 issue of *The New Yorker* on page 14 as a half page illustration for the Arts listings, "Galleries-Chelsea," with the caption: '*Star Gazing' by Hans Haacke, in 'Election,' at American Fine Arts.*

H.H. I'm not aware of an evolution in how I use photography. If a documentary image would be the most powerful I take that approach. If, on the other hand, a different tack would be better, I wouldn't hesitate choosing that—including painting an image in oil. I don't have an ideological allegiance to any medium. What I reproach Oliviero Toscani for is that he exploits human suffering to peddle consumer goods.

K.M. So in your sense of it, it is not the image itself but how it is used that makes the difference—what ends it is being used for?

H.H. Yes. The goal matters—and how it is pursued.

K.M. When you use a documentary image, you are very consciously framing that image in a larger context. Is that a means of protecting the content of that image? For example in *Oil Painting, Homage to Marcel Broodthaers* (1982) there is a stark juxtaposition of images of two different mediums face-to-face at opposing ends of the room.

H.H. It was important for me to emphasize that the image of the protest was employing contemporary means of visual communication such as photography versus a nineteenth-century-style of official portraiture in oil. I wanted to position Reagan in the past and with an authoritarian mien. I should add some background information on Documenta in 1982, for which I produced this confrontation. Rudi Fuchs, the commissioner of Documenta 7 had said that one of his goals was the reevaluation and promotion of painting; he, and in particular his collaborator, Johannes Gachnang, were pushing Neo-Expressionist painting of the early 1980s. That was another subtext to my choice of painting as a medium. The emphasis on photography—a reference

to Walter Benjamin—was underlined by my providing portions of the preceding and of the following image on the filmstrip, including its sprockets. The means of the production of this particular image, so to speak, were exhibited together with the image.

K.M. So we're never far away from thinking about the production of the image?

H.H. Yes.

K.M. Going back to the idea of fact and specificity, you recreated *News* for your 2005 show. This was originally presented in Düsseldorf in 1969 and at the Jewish Museum in 1970. We can think of news feed as *factographic* information—data that is concrete rather than empathic, requiring action rather than passive absorption—but we can also understand news language as coded in stereotype, jargon, and sound bites.

The coils on the floor, as they accumulate, begin to resemble a Möbius strip or a snake elliptically swallowing its own tail. How did you intend the news feed to work with or against the pervasive symbols of democracy in the exhibition?

H.H. Let me relate the early history of this work. It was first done in Düsseldorf for 'Prospect 69,' an international selection of art works of the present, and a month or two later, at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York in a solo exhibition, and then in 1970 in the 'Software' exhibit at the Jewish Museum. What concerned me at the time and what is still important for me today is that people coming into a gallery, a museum, or another art exhibition venue, are reminded that these art spaces are not a world separate from the

rest of the world. The world of art is not a world apart. "Worldly" news enters the "sanctuary" and connects it to the world "outside."

K.M. At the exhibition, I picked up a piece of information that connected members of the current Bush administration to the former Reagan administration and the Iran/Contra scandal, giving the present moment a temporal association overlapping with the past.

H.H. There was an evolution in how I dealt with the accumulation of the printouts. Both in Düsseldorf and at the Howard Wise Gallery, at the end of the day, I collected what had been spewed out. I rolled it up and encased it in a clear plastic urn with a date on it. At the 'Software' show, however, I became worried that such an entombment could turn the printouts into precious objects. And so I let the paper accumulate without interruption, day after day. After the show, as was also done at Paula Cooper Gallery, the "fall-out" was gathered and thrown away. You mention a Möbius strip. I did not think of shapes. This was a random accumulation, a rather shapeless mound of paper and old news.

K.M. Yes, this is the state of the union—so embroiled in a massive amount of information that it becomes fathomless and impossible to negotiate. To pull out the particulars to help us to make the necessary connections is a Sisyphean task.

H.H. New information constantly overlays the old and influences how we understand what we heard and read the previous day.

K.M. We spoke earlier about Bourdieu's *habitus* and Walter Grasskamp's writing of the discrepancy between "everyday habitude" and the "formal rigor of art." During my visit to Documenta XII, I noticed an overwhelmingly large portion of the viewing public carrying the heavy catalog. Looking across the spaces, I noticed more noses down in books than eyes looking up at the art.

Have we become so afraid to look that we need to first be instructed how to see? What are the conditions that block experience and awareness? Has nothing changed since 1959 when your images of Documenta II also showed viewers reading their pamphlets?

H.H. Many big exhibitions, of which Documenta is one, attract an amazingly large public. The number of people going to Documenta has increased enormously to some 750,000 by now. The overwhelming majority of them have little training in looking at art works. Art is not their daily diet, they are puzzled and insecure; and they may be afraid of missing something. When they are offered guidance, they eagerly accept. That's probably a normal reaction; I wouldn't hold it against them. In fact, it may even be a sign of genuine curiosity and of their taking seriously what they are exposed to.

We would like the public to learn how to see, to decipher, to understand images that speak not only literally but also metaphorically and learn about their historical background. Catalogue texts can be helpful, *if they are done well.* Good texts could introduce visitors to ways of seeing, thinking and a language with which to articulate what they see and to share that with others. Unfortunately, most are not. The most recent Documenta catalogue, in fact, was a cruel joke.

K.M. There's the double necessity of allowing oneself the fresh perception of a child while responding as an intelligent adult.

H.H. I don't know how to solve this dilemma. Let me add, I have had the experience that a good number of art critics and art historians, whose business it is to decipher images, often focus only on journalistic aspects of the works but miss references and signifying formal aspects when they write about my stuff.

K.M. Your work and your writings hold an unwavering conviction for their role as critical intervention. Although I consciously avoid the term *political art*, is it possible to pose a thread from Géricault to Manet to Haacke? While your work defies either the sentimental or the romantic—there is no heroic artist, no mystery, no personal expression or evidence of "hand," no signature, no empathic engagement—can you deny a connection to the political fervor of the Romantics and Realists, those intent on breaking the canon, the control of state patronage, and re-scandalizing the scandal?

H.H. Of course, I am aware of these artists and see myself in that tradition. But I don't like being pigeonholed as a "political artist." Aside from the reductive nature of the label, it falsely suggests that the work of other artists has no political dimension. Most people think they know what is "political" art. In fact, they have a very simplistic understanding. After all, there is no similarity between the work of Tatlin and Heartfield, or Picasso and El Lissitsky, to name just a few. The political references in the paintings of Manet and Courbet are often overlooked. Both were eminently political-minded artists. They infused many of their paintings with overt political messages.

As an aside, I have been making a lot of photographs of nature. I had a show two or three months ago in Germany of 228 photographs that I had taken of the plants that had grown around *DER BEVÖLKERUNG* at the Reichstag in Berlin—close-ups of the flora, but also of snails and spiders. I used one of the images for the announcement—the photo of the only flower I found in bloom in April: a little blue flower. The "Blue Flower" plays a central role in German Romantic literature. I used it ironically but also because I liked the image of this little flower. Maybe it comes as a surprise: I like beautiful things and, deep down, I may be a Romantic.

K.M. I get a sense from you that I should be wary of taking a broad notion and making it too narrow but I should be equally cautious of taking a narrow idea and expanding it out. "Don't box things in." You'd like me to avoid creating limitations; that whenever there is a small note, make it resound.

H.H. I don't like one-liners.

K.M. No *sound bites* then! What would you like me to consider in thinking about 'State of the Union'?

H.H. As with all other things: look at the individual works, the whole, and the historical context. In this sense, I could call it a 'composed' show. It was designed in relation to a given space and how one thing 'rubs' against another.

Hans Haacke is a German-born conceptual artist who lives and works in New York City. He is interested in systems theory and the relationship between art and political structures. He has published a book of conversations with Pierre Bourdieu (*Libre-échanges*, Editions du Seuil, 1994). Together with Nam Jun Paik, Haacke has received the Golden Lion for his *Germania* at the 1993 Venice Biennale. Haacke's works have been featured in countless exhibitions, most notably in solo shows at both the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art.

Kathleen MacQueen (kmq@nyc.rr.com) recently defended her dissertation, *Tactical Response: Art in an Age of Terror*, for a doctoral degree from Stony Brook University in art criticism. Her creative practice, research, and writing all share the expression of contingent truths, a commitment to social and political justice, and formal theoretical concerns. Her research delves into the complexities of creative practice as an intervention infused with both aesthetic philosophy and ethical commitment.