

## **Face-to-Face: Hans Haacke Confronts War, Democracy, and the State of the Union**

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Hans Haacke's *State of the Union*, exhibited at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York City from November 5<sup>th</sup> to December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2005, manipulates the supposedly 'untouchable' symbols of patriotism in order to emphasize the Bush administration's significant undermining of the principles those symbols represent: free speech, civil liberties, human rights, justice, and true democratic representation. These issues along with our individual ethical positions in regards to collective responsibility circulate throughout Haacke's 'State of the Union' where he uses assemblage both to accumulate meaning through emphasis and to jar our perception through incongruity. Haacke has, in his work which explores social systems, recreated the material conditions of social relations necessary for a democracy; now, in this compilation installation, he makes us aware of the tenuous nature of that democracy itself.

« State of the Union », l'installation de Hans Haacke exposée à la Galerie Paula Cooper, du 5 novembre au 23 décembre 2005, manipule les symboles réputés « intouchables » du patriotisme américain. Il s'agit de souligner comment l'administration Bush ébranle systématiquement les principes que ces symboles représentent : la liberté d'expression, les libertés civiles, les droits de l'homme, la justice, ainsi qu'une véritable représentation démocratique. Ces thèmes, associés à nos positions morales individuelles face à une responsabilité collective, parcourent toute l'installation. Utilisant la technique d'assemblage, Haacke accumule du sens à force d'insistance. Ses juxtapositions incongrues secouent nos perceptions. Dans ses œuvres passées

qui exploraient les systèmes sociaux, l'artiste recréait les conditions matérielles des relations sociales nécessaires à la démocratie ; à présent, dans cette installation/compilation, il nous fait prendre conscience de la fragilité de la démocratie elle-même.

So what exactly is the ‘rub’ of Hans Haacke’s installation and where do we find it? His remarks during our conversation were at times puzzling. They seemed to open trap doors rather than land me on my feet running. I had a feeling that even in the space of a studio interview Hans Haacke was up to something. I also had the distinct impression that I would not find my ground during this process but that Haacke had offered me instead a handful of stars. All right then, let us begin with stars and mosaics adding a roll of the dice.

In a paragraph of 100 words, I have used half a dozen or so colloquial expressions. In 1995, Umberto Eco gave a talk to representatives of both the Italian government and press entitled ‘On the Press.’ He discussed how the Italian press had abandoned their cryptic language of the 60s and 70s in which they spoke in code to politicians, over the heads of everyday readers, within the columns of their journals: a kind of intra-political speech rather than clear and open discourse. These so-called ‘parallel convergences’ referred both to a political process of the rapprochement of incompatible units and also to an indirect means of address.<sup>1</sup> By the mid-90s, Eco accused the press of speaking in aphorisms and clichés in order to appeal to ‘that magmatic entity known today as “folks”.’<sup>2</sup> Both speech practices—elitist and colloquial—undermine the possibility of an inter-political dialogue or practice of open speech between

<sup>1</sup> ‘Parallel convergences’ is a difficult term to define as it has both general and historically specific meanings. In the case of Italian politics it represented the efforts of the Christian Democrats to remain in power through coalitions with the Social Democrat, Socialist, and Communist parties. The strategy of ‘parallel convergences,’ also known as ‘the historic compromise’ ended with the kidnapping and death of the Christian Democratic leader, Aldo Moro, by the Red Brigades in 1978. Generally speaking, the term refers to non-converging dialectics. The US Congress has also been accused of speaking in code when specific issues cannot be broached due to legality or security as in the recent nomination hearings for Judge Sonia Sotomayor’s Supreme Court nomination. See David Novak of the Washington Post with Steve Inskeep on *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, July 15, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Umberto Eco, ‘On the Press’ in *Five Moral Pieces* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2002), 36.

government and constituencies: a dialogue that instead of running parallel, crosses and overlaps in points of exchange.

American television and radio media (both news and talk shows), more than ten years later, refer with abandon to American citizens as ‘folks.’ To me, ‘folks’ has always had a condescending tonality, connected to clichés such as ‘salt of the earth’ or ‘down home’—removed from the centers of judgment, economics, education, and power. It is a term that Hans Haacke approaches critically. Eco published his essay in a compilation entitled, *Five Moral Pieces*, a title I cannot avoid associating with Bertolt Brecht’s 1935 essay entitled ‘Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties’—a major influence on Haacke. In order to combat lies and ignorance one must, according to Brecht, overcome five difficulties: ‘He must have the *courage* to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed; the *keenness* to recognize it, although it is everywhere concealed; the *skill* to manipulate it as a weapon; the *judgement* to select those in whose hands it will be effective; and the *cunning* to spread the truth among such persons.’<sup>3</sup>

In describing his work, *Der Bevölkerung*, proposed in 1999 and inaugurated in 2000, Haacke distinguishes between the inscription on the façade of the Reichstag building in Berlin, *DEM DEUTSCHEN VOLKE* (*TO THE PEOPLE*) with his own inscription grounded on the floor of an open-air interior courtyard, visible to the public from the roof, *DER BEVOLKERUNG* (*TO THE POPULATION*). Haacke uses a tactic of inversion: in lieu of the people dwarfed by the building looking up to the inscription, the people are elevated looking down to the foundation, the metaphorical positions reflecting

<sup>3</sup> Bertolt Brecht, ‘Appendix A: Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties’ (1934/35) in *Galileo* (New York: Grove Press, 1991), extracts in *Hans Haacke* (New York: Phaidon, 2004), 94–96, emphasis in the extracts.

strength rather than baseness. Brecht had written in 1935: ‘In these times, the one who says *Bevölkerung* (population) instead of *Volk* (folk or people) [...] already does not support many lies.’<sup>4</sup> He was referring to the dangerous tendency to categorize people, including sameness (ethnicity, values) and excluding difference (ethnicities, education, class). Eco’s ‘magmatic entity’ and Brecht’s ‘population’ allude to the indissoluble grains of difference rather than the blended mix of assimilation or the singularity of ethnic purity. The politician’s ‘indirect address’ alludes to jargon as exclusive language.

Eco considers the media as a fourth estate, a critical examiner of the other three (traditionally speaking: royalty, clergy, and commoners). Haacke’s ‘direct address’ is his effort to instill a level of truth seeking to the material practice of art. In his own assessment, the artist has said that we should not leave politics to the politicians.<sup>5</sup> This suggests the need for a critical practice to deal with issues affecting humanity. For Haacke, the press is needed for tactical complicity but he does not see journalists as absolute free agents. Journalists face difficulties in *writing the truth*.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore up to artists both to maintain their status as free agents and also to engage in a practice of social and institutional critique, highlighting complicity when agency is not free.

<sup>4</sup> Bertolt Brecht quoted in Hans Haacke, ‘Thoughts about the Project, 1999-2000’ in *Hans Haacke* (New York: Phaidon, 2004), 141.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Experience tells us that one should never leave politics to the politicians. Aside from the trouble this can get us into, such abdication would also be in conflict with generally held notions of democracy. But it would also be dangerous for art. Shutting out the social world would reduce it to a self-consuming “art for art’s sake.”’ Hans Haacke is quoted in the press release for *State of the Union*, Paula Cooper Gallery, November 5-December 23, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> This is clearly in evidence in spring 2009 as investigative reporting is no longer supported by the majority of media outlets in the United States.

Rosalyn Deutsche argues that democracy is a theoretical principle underlying all of Haacke's oeuvre and that direct address was his 'maneuver in a campaign to form his audience into a public.'<sup>7</sup> She explains that *Gallery Goers' Birthplace and Residence Profile* was Haacke's first work to take the social world as its object of study, implementing a new tactic in Haacke's art—that of direct address—in which the imperative 'indicate' suggests the second-person pronoun 'you.'<sup>8</sup> Haacke asked the viewer in *Gallery Goers' Profile* to indicate on a map his/her birthplace with a red pin and his/her place of residence with a blue pin. Subsequently, Haacke would use both the imperative and the interrogative form of address. The questionnaire for the planned *Guggenheim Poll* (1970), for example, was a single sheet of paper whose twenty questions were to be answered by checking the appropriate yes/no response. In *MOMA Poll* (1970), in *Visitors' Profile, Documenta 5* (1972), and in *John Weber Gallery Visitors' Profile I and II* (1972 and 1973), Haacke implemented as Deutsche suggests 'the apparatus—ballots, ballot boxes, keypunch cards, questionnaires—of some of the core institutions of representative democracy—voting, demographic studies, opinion surveys—to foster the growth of direct democracy'.<sup>9</sup> By acknowledging his viewers' presence, by asking them questions, by giving them a right of response, Haacke not only creates through the polls the material conditions of social relations necessary for a democracy but he also makes us aware of the tenuous nature of those conditions.

<sup>7</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, 'The Art of Not Being Governed Quite So Much' in *Hans Haacke, for real, Works 1959-2006* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2007), 69.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 64. *Gallery Goers' Birthplace and Residence Profile* (Part I) took place in 1969 at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York City.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 66. All these art works are illustrated in *Hans Haacke, for real* (2007).

In his proposed questionnaire for the Jewish Museum 1970 'Software' exhibition, Haacke asks: 'In your opinion is the moral fabric of this country strengthened or weakened by the U.S. involvement in Indochina?' and 'Is the use of the American flag for the expression of political beliefs, e.g., on hardhats and in dissident art exhibitions, a legitimate exercise of free speech?'<sup>10</sup> (One notes how closely those questions correspond to the circumstances of the 'State of the Union' exhibition by replacing Iraq for Indochina). Speech is the ideological basis of a democracy but it is not always its functional foundation, for speech can be denied to large portions of the population. We can also cease to exercise our right of free speech giving over that expression to national icons, as Haacke alludes in 'State of the Union.'

In *Five Moral Pieces*, Umberto Eco reflects on contemporary ethical issues, contemplating war, moral belief, the press, fascism, and intolerance as significant weak points in our society. In his essay on war, Eco refers to conflict as a *game of weights*. Is this literally a game or is Eco referring to the concept of balance in game theory? In French and Italian, weight and power are often amalgamated, suggesting a distribution of power, judgment, or aptitude.<sup>11</sup> There is also the connotation of *value* or that to which we give *weight*, or a sense of standards as in *weights and measures*, and again the *weight* of concern. In Eco's concerns, I recognize the weight I feel in confronting the exchange of information, consideration and categorization of peoples, aggression, political malfeasance, and our ethical positions in regards to both personal and collective responsibility. These issues circulate throughout Haacke's *oeuvre* in general and in 'State of the Union' in particular where he

<sup>10</sup> Hans Haacke quoted in Deutsche, 'The Art of Not Being Governed,' 64.

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Caroline Bem and Katie Mace for pointing out the nuance in translation and use of the term.

uses assemblage both to accumulate meaning through emphasis and to jar our perception through incongruity.

So let us address the frictions—the tension among and between accumulated works—in Haacke's 'State of the Union' exhibition. On entering the Paula Cooper Gallery in Chelsea in the fall of 2005, the viewer confronts first an image hastily shot and casually pasted askew wrapped across the corner of an entry wall—a re-photograph of a television screen showing George Walker Bush delivering his 2004 State of the Union address to the American people. His eyes are closed, his expression vacant. We are presented not with the President propped up by the trappings of Congress, ovations, and the American flag, but with a president who so often seems but an error in transmission, inadequately aware of the ramifications that his actions (and his rhetoric) cause. This insignificant presentation (small print, wheat-pasted onto the wall in a hasty gesture as if it were a bit of guerrilla art on the scene) suggests the status of a carnival barker or a confidence man selling tonic to a duped crowd.

In the main gallery to the left hangs the eponymous piece, *State of the Union* (2005): an enormous drapery is suspended consisting only of the star field of the American flag, the fifty sewn panels of fabric and the fifty stars have been torn in half, down to the lower fifth of the panel.<sup>12</sup> Half the flag is suspended from the girders of the hornbeam ceiling held aloft in spite of the gravitational pull of the cascading stars; half the flag (as well as the rope that hoisted it) lies flaccid on the ground—wilted, collapsed, stricken, wounded, inert, lifeless like so many soldiers sacrificed in the so-called war on terror, expressionless like the Katrina victims dumbstruck in disbelief as their

<sup>12</sup> A more complete selection of images from the artist's *State of the Union* exhibition can be found in *Hans Haacke, for real*, 232-238, 242-245.



country abandoned them. Our view of the extreme visual strength of his Union Jack is skewed by other works within the main gallery space.

These other pieces are literally dwarfed by the flag but in turn their needling presence draws attention away from this metaphorical deposition.<sup>13</sup> *Untitled #1* (2005)—an overturned desk with the flag lapel pin and a broken light bulb in the spilled and upturned drawer—suggest the jagged infrastructure of the World Trade Center towers, visible once the lingering dust and smoke cloud lifted from ground zero; *Untitled #2* (2005) is a utility locker, battered, degraded, lying prone on the ground small change spilling as blood from a wound, a gilded eagle on a broom-stick staff the possible weapon of attack; and finally a potted miniature mock-orange plant hints, as its title states, *Life goes on* (2005), even in small and seemingly inconsequential ways. It ‘mocks’ our resolve while affirming our resiliency.

In the smaller side gallery to the right of the entrance and directly behind the large, primary installation space, three images of a vertical rectangular format are mounted off kilter (one a little high, the other a little low, the third without regard to parallel or level proportions). Neither as a triptych nor an installation, *Stuff Happens* (2003), *Star Gazing* (2004), and *Ripped* (2004) are nonetheless visually and thematically linked as representations of iconic symbols, the central image a disturbing portrait photograph of an individual ‘hooded’ by the star field of the US flag. This image functions as interpellation, a kind of ‘Hey, you! Over there! Come and stand face-to-face.’ It draws us to it; we then stand as if facing an opponent whose position is neither reflective nor mimetic but a challenge to our interpretation. On the one hand,

<sup>13</sup> I use ‘deposition’ in the sense the art critic Jan Avgikos likened the visual impact to a Pietà and also in the sense of testimony. See Jan Avgikos, ‘Reviews: Hans Haacke’ in *Artforum* (February 2006): 208.

the installation reveals a remarkable visual unity with the repetitive use of stars, its thematic unity carried by the title which references the annual State of the Union address by the President of the United States to Congress. On the other hand, there is an almost awkward display of chance in its composite and seemingly casual nature (most works in the exhibition positioned without regard to traditional formal alignment). The constellation he constructs is uncharted, incomplete, and ruptured. It is painful. Let us consider this a metaphor rather than a cliché.

In conversation, Hans Haacke suggested that the division he saw as a wound in 2005 was healing through the candidacy of Barack Obama. As I write in May 2009, just over 100 days into the Obama presidency, the divisions created by the actions of the Bush administration regain the spotlights of blogs and the headlines of print and television media. At the time of the 2005 State of the Union address, one of the principal conflicts in public opinion was the degree to which accepted ethical standards of conduct could be adjusted in the name of national security. Three months into a new presidency, the conflict rides on the threat that full policy disclosure poses to national security. Then and now, torture is the subject of the debate. Haacke's exhibition as a whole speaks of democracy, division, and the nature of symbolic language, while its details expose just what has undermined the integrity of our democratic institutions—infringement on civil rights including free speech, *habeus corpus*, transparency, and a willingness to uphold international codes of ethics in regards to torture.

*Star Gazing* literalizes the metaphor 'seeing stars' (often invoked in descriptions of pain): Haacke's mesmerizing 'starry sky'—a figure blinded by a hood of stars—winces under the threat of torture. As the artist suggests, 'Everybody who saw the images coming out of Abu Ghraib understands that

my arranged photograph alludes to those “facts on the ground”.<sup>14</sup> In discussing torture in her book *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry details the relationship between pain and language, particularly in the signification of the tools and emblems of torture but also in the complicity between pain and interrogation. Pain is used to control the language of the victim thereby gaining agency over that individual’s ability to create a relationship to and within the external world. Torture therefore, according to Scarry, deconstructs an individual’s worldview by destroying the building blocks of sentience (vision, hearing, touch, smell, taste) and symbolically shredding what is civilized through the localized example of a body, or set of specific bodies. Torture always displaces the responsibility onto the victim, not only destroying the physical body (individual) but also the social body (worldview) and the juridical body (legitimacy). Scarry explains this relationship between the physical and the verbal:

Torture consists of a primary physical act, the infliction of pain, and a primary verbal act, the interrogation [...]. The connection between the physical act and the verbal act, between body and voice, is often misstated or misunderstood. Although the information sought in an interrogation is almost never credited with being a *just* motive for torture, it is repeatedly credited with being the motive for torture.<sup>15</sup>

The Bush administration failed to understand history: they credited national security as a just motive for information and information as a just

<sup>14</sup> The artist in conversation with the author, August 7, 2008. For the exposé of torture in Abu Ghraib prison see Seymour M. Hirsh, ‘Annals of National Security, Torture at Abu Ghraib’ in *The New Yorker* (May 10, 2004): 42-47 and Hirsh, ‘Annals of National Security, The Gray Zone’ in *The New Yorker* (May 24, 2004): 38-44. It was, according to an anonymous media analyst, after the *New Yorker* disclosed it would print the images coming out of Abu Ghraib that CBS decided to air its story on *Sixty Minutes*, April 29, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 28.

motive for torture. They paraded information—known in the field as ‘intelligence’—but they sought legitimization.<sup>16</sup> Haacke identifies trauma as both the cause and the condition of the division within our nation-state: we have a flag that has wrapped itself around the notion of torture, hiding its effect and masking its intent. For the intelligence gained from torture is a negative sentence—a display of authority and power (a game of weights)—an actuality of little worth which hides its true ideological purpose of breaking the resolve of the opponent and substantiating the legitimacy of power’s rationale. So Haacke presents us with division—two sides bearing the same standard, two sides in which opposition resembles its foe. All this in the context of an endless stream of information—its own form of intelligence—the infiltration into the aesthetic space of the gallery of alternative information networks of news and ideas. *News* (1969/2005), a teletype machine placed behind the monumental star field—the flow of Reuters, Associated Press, and other agency’s messages accumulating in a mound in the main gallery—is representative of Haacke’s defiance of the spaces of exhibition as enclaves with boundaries, forging instead a connection between the outside world and the inner sanctum of art spaces.

<sup>16</sup> Recent news goes further by suggesting a link between the frequent use of torture and the need to establish a legitimate justification for the invasion of Iraq. See, for example, Jonathan S. Landay, ‘Report: Abusive tactics used to seek Iraq-al Qaida link’ in *McClatchy Newspapers*, Tuesday, April 21, 2009, [http://www.mcclatchydc.com/staff/jonathan\\_landay/story/66622.html](http://www.mcclatchydc.com/staff/jonathan_landay/story/66622.html). See also Brian Knowlton, ‘Report Gives New Detail on Approval of Brutal Techniques’ in *The New York Times*, April 21, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/22/us/politics/22report.html>. See also Joshua M. Marshall, ‘Bubbling’ and ‘Neocons Gone Wild’ in the *TPM Blog*, May 14, 2009, [http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/week\\_2009\\_05\\_10.php?ref=fpb](http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/week_2009_05_10.php?ref=fpb) lg. See also Frank Rich, ‘Obama Can’t Turn the Page on Bush’ in *The New York Times*, May 16, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/17/opinion/17rich-5.html?emc=eta1> (all accessed May 18, 2009).

Early in his career, Haacke discovered that only a critical position provides the means to knowledge and the possibility for action: to be a fully operative participant in society it is necessary to ask questions. In 1969 when the artist produced *News*, he was a member of the Art Workers' Coalition formed in January of that year in response to a conflict between the artist Takis and the Museum of Modern Art over the use of his work in the exhibition 'The Machine at the End of the Mechanical Age' curated by Pontus Hulten. The Art Workers' Coalition strove to establish art, artists, and the cultural sphere as an operative force in society rather than as an autonomous sphere that was somehow isolated from the messy business of war, economics, and social politics. As a coalition, it encouraged debates among members and also between the various spheres of the art world, held interventionist performance protests, distributed questionnaires, and sought to influence museum policy in the display of art and the contractual arrangements with artists. They also considered the viewing public by asking, for example, what demographics were encouraged by museum admission policies.<sup>17</sup>

It is useful to consider Haacke's visitors' poll for the Museum of Modern Art, in 1970, in light of his activism, though his commitment to the Art Workers' Coalition was far from straightforward.<sup>18</sup> The impingement of external forces on the production and reception of art provided an impetus for Haacke's visitor profiles dating from 1969 to 1973. These asked multiple questions about the race, gender, age, socio-economic class, education, and professional status, as well as the political opinions, of the participant while

<sup>17</sup> See Lucy Lippard, 'The Art Workers' Coalition: not a history' in *Studio International* 180 (November 1970), reprinted on the occasion of the exhibition 'That Was Then... This is Now' at PS1/MOMA, June 22-September 22, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> See his own remarks in Carl André, Hans Haacke, John Perrault, and Cindy Nemser, 'The Role of the Artist in Today's Society' in *Art Journal* 34, no. 4 (Summer 1975): 327-328.

*MOMA Poll* asked but one 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?'<sup>19</sup> A 'yes' ballot was deposited in the left transparent acrylic box and a 'no' ballot was deposited in the right one. Photoelectric counting devices tallied the votes in real time.<sup>20</sup> The artist interrogates his public, persuading 12.4% of them to participate, but by making the results visible he curtails any apparent sociological accuracy in the findings since any participant might be influenced by the results. Data collection would, therefore, be a by-product rather than a purpose of the procedure. What then is he up to?

One can read this work literally as an incursion into the cultural sphere of a ballot procedure making the viewing public participant in the democratic process. The question, however, begs a more allegorical reading, and helps us to better understand the visual language of Haacke's composite installation, 'State of the Union'. In *MOMA Poll*, the artist is direct: he asks a question, through his art, in order to elicit a response from his audience. He asks his viewers to consider a position; by prompting an action, he is shaping a public. Nonetheless, he phrases his question in the negative: 'Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina policy [the absence of a position] be a reason for you not to vote for him [the absence of an action] in November?' Haacke's question is a form of direct

<sup>19</sup> The question was precisely calculated in relation to the Museum of Modern Art which was founded by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller whose son Nelson Rockefeller, four-term Republican Governor of the State of New York, ceded his ten-year presidency of the museum in 1948 to his brother, David, also chairman and CEO of the Chase Manhattan Bank at the time of Haacke's poll.

<sup>20</sup> For a description of the political and cultural context of the question as well as the results of the poll see the caption information, *MOMA Poll*, 1970 in *Hans Haacke*, 8-9.

address because the piece requires an answer in order to complete (or extend) the work of art; his double negative on the other hand is indirect address speaking in code to the possibility of dissent—contradicting the system, emphasizing non-action through a negative and action through a response. Haacke’s deceptively simple procedure allegorically masks a much deeper subversive message of political participation through dissent.

In ‘State of the Union,’ Haacke did not choose to involve his public actively by using either the imperative or the interrogative address; however, with the inclusion of *News*, he did suggest the active infusion of external ideas and opinions. Visitors might read a Reuters report of a recently declassified document concerning the connection of members of Bush’s current administration to the Iran/Contra scandal of the mid-1980s.<sup>21</sup> This news would probably not make it to the pages of any major dailies, and it was just as likely to be lost to memory recall as easily as it slipped into the coiling miasma of endless information. Here was the state of our union: intricately connected to a historical past obfuscated by a multitude of partial, hidden, and forgotten details. While significant in their informational detail, the fathomless sheets of news feeds are also like so many pools of tears, a serious reminder that there are grave conditions to attend without any clear indication of the means to do so. But while *News*, when first created, made use of current (if hardly ground-

<sup>21</sup> This was the item I read by chance when viewing the exhibition; it may have referred to John Negroponte, National Intelligence Director; Robert Gates, Secretary of Defense; and Charles E. Allen, chief intelligence officer in the Department of Homeland Security. None of them had been convicted of involvement in the Iran/Contra scandal but all were high-ranking Reagan administration officials.

breaking) telecommunication technology,<sup>22</sup> when recreated it provides a dated physicality to the infinite stream of information that now circulates as part of the internet information age: an invisible technology with no physicality but with enormous consequences in the (re)shaping of industry, economies, and political revolutions.<sup>23</sup>

Along with the communication systems of global capitalism, the composite 'State of the Union' installation also reveals the abstract concepts of iconic language systems, memorial, political satire, and critical inquiry through the iconography of patriotic symbols, the material means of detritus, and the guerrilla tactics of wheat-paste artists. The connections between formal imagery, allegorical intimation, and real world events reflect a broader philosophical basis to his work than direct political advocacy would imply. The artist goes beyond the phenomenological status of the world to the invisible and non-concrete interrelations of forces: materialistic and physical, but also relational, economic, and political. As the artist stated in our conversation: 'As with all other things: look at the individual works, the whole, and the historical context.' Haacke, through his own interference with the sanctity of national symbols, intimates G.W. Bush's interference with civil liberties and human rights impacted by the Patriot Act. Patriotic icons are the symbolic language of the state but Haacke co-opts them here to create his own symbolic language of representation.<sup>24</sup> Although, Haacke has used the image

<sup>22</sup> Descended from the stock ticker machines of the 1870s used to transmit stock exchange trades, the teleprinter or teletype machine was adopted by the Associated Press in 1914 for its coverage of World War I as a means to receive and transmit information across a dispersed network of locations.

<sup>23</sup> I am referring here to the use of Twitter and other instant messaging trends that counteracted a ban on the reporting of political protests resulting from contested elections in Iran in June 2009.

<sup>24</sup> A large variety of symbolic icons are just one of many tools in the artist's visual vocabulary and they (like any medium) are always specific to the work.



of the US flag in its entirety in previous works, in ‘State of the Union’ he has specifically limited his visual vocabulary to stars.<sup>25</sup> This apparent limitation broadens the interpretive potential of the work, extending beyond patriotism and binary divisions to a more subtle expression of antagonism, anxiety, and desperate conditions.

In Haacke’s stars, torn to shreds and scattered eclectically throughout the gallery space, we witness a similar analogy to the incomprehensible, indescribable sphere in which pain is linguistically located. Through the visible, Haacke asks us to consider the *unseeable*—both the details lost in an overwhelming and endless succession of excess data and the negation of sentience so determining of the humanity which torture obliterates—and then he asks us to make connections. Consider the response of the author’s thirteen year old son on election day 2005 viewing the image of the figure cloaked in the star field hood: ‘OK, if the hood are the stars, then the shirt must be the red stripes, that leaves the background to represent the white stripes, only they’ve gone black. I think the artist wants to say that America should be ashamed.’ This teenager recognizes the function of symbolic language to metaphorically achieve a message that is not explicit but implicit in the conflict between the juxtaposition of reality and abstraction. Red, white, and blue, the color-code iconically indicative of pride, has been corrupted to red, white, and black, suggestive of shame and mourning. Recall the artist’s own words in our conversation: ‘[...] whereas in *Star Gazing* it serves metaphoric speech while referring to something factual.’ Haacke specifically used a photograph, not a drawing or a painting, or any other medium; this is his

Corporate logos for example have been used in *A Breed Apart* (1978), *MetroMobiltan* (1985), and *Helmsboro Country* (1990).

<sup>25</sup> Works containing the image of the US flag include *Storm* (1991), *Collateral* (1991) and *Sanitation* (2000).

tactical mixing of symbolic inference with concrete actuality. Presence is imperative as an operative system in the real world.

In a question and answer session after the artist presented this work in a New York City conference in 2006, a woman asked if he had not perhaps harmed the model, in the same way captors harm their prisoners, by hooding him.<sup>26</sup> Haacke patiently responded that the model was his son and he didn't mind. The question appears naïve, as it is the job of actors and other aesthetic interpreters to evoke reality without recreating harmful conditions. On the other hand, the question reveals just how closely we maintain the relationship between representation and reality. For the space of a few moments, the son of the author of this text stood face-to-face with the son of the artist (as model for the photograph). This coincidence is the chance roll of the dice setting in motion the intersecting dialog that later evolved into this essay. One child felt himself accountable through his interpretation of another child, face-to-face, in spite of the absence of a reciprocal gaze. Metaphorically speaking, the willingness to put one's own child into this position is akin to a challenge to consider the ethical position of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. When we send our children to war, is the sacrifice we intend to exact on our foes equal to the sacrifice we are willing to make ourselves?<sup>27</sup> Would we substitute the victims of torture with our own flesh and blood?<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Hans Haacke spoke during the Radical Art Caucus panel of the 95th College Art Association Conference, New York, City, February 16, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> In this discussion, I use the words 'child' and 'children' to mean offspring rather than youngsters. In terms of the face-to-face encounter, without referring specifically, I am relying on the ethical set of relations delineated by Emmanuel Lévinas.

<sup>28</sup> This idea played out in a debate between network news hosts when MSNBC's Keith Olbermann responded to Fox News Channel's Sean Hannity's offer to undergo waterboarding for charity. Olbermann offered to donate to the families of US troops \$1000 per second that Hannity sustained the torture. See David Bauder, 'Olbermann pressing on Hannity's waterboard offer,' *Associated Press*, April 29, 2009.

Even for Haacke, while a necessary distance between representation and reality is crucial to his production, representation works as a reminder of the languages we use to articulate our position in the real—it is the means that bears the weight of ethical engagement, as well as its provocation to active response. Haacke does not represent the Other but instead creates an allegorical challenge to our accountability in relation to others. This is his response to the images that flowed over the Internet, leaking out as so much bad blood from the prison of Abu Ghraib—not a repetition of the horror but a reframing as allegory of the denial of responsibility. Allegory is a visual language, historically used to create a diversion: Aesop and La Fontaine fashioned tales of anthropomorphic animals to transmit messages of a subversive political nature; George Grosz and John Heartfield used images ‘cut up at will,’ torn, and pasted ‘in such a way as to say in pictures, what would have been banned by the censors if we had said it in words.’<sup>29</sup>

In his short essay, ‘The Rhetoric of the Image,’ Roland Barthes makes use of an advertising image to show how a representation, although not a discrete semiological code like language, can be read like language. Barthes breaks the image into suggested parts: the linguistic message formed by surrounding text and the iconic message both coded (connoted) and uncoded (denoted). Since images are polysemous, relying on a floating chain of signifieds, they are anchored by the linguistic message. The linguistic message guides the identification of the denoted iconic message along with the interpretation of the connoted iconic message. The text, therefore, has a repressive value in accordance to the ideology of the society within which the image is embedded.

<sup>29</sup> George Grosz, originally quoted in Hans Richter, *Dada: Kunst und Antikunst* (Cologne: Dumont, 1963) quoted in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” *Artforum* (September, 1982): unpaginated.

The denoted image works on the principle of transparency: the relationship of the image to what it represents appears as innocent. This so-called natural relation to the real renders the connoted image invisible, lying under the plane of directness. Thus, between the linguistic text that directs our reading of the real and the immediacy of the denoted image, the rhetoric of implied messages occurs over, above, around and under the surface of the image. It operates marginally to the analogue nature of the image and seemingly doesn't operate at all. Haacke understands the deceptive nature of representation, whether textual or visual, and punctuates its use as sign in order to decipher and make meaning apparent.

Allegory, as Barthes describes it and as Haacke uses it conceptually, is *a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of representations blend and clash*. It is both pre-text (the idea) and post-text (the complicit response).<sup>30</sup> It is selective, recursive, and accidental. Haacke creates his installations not as 'work' *conveying an intended and pre-existent meaning* but as 'text' in a *field of energy, absorbing writer and reader together*.<sup>31</sup> In this light, let us return to the notion of activism in regards to 'State of the Union.' *The New Yorker* magazine review described the exhibition as functioning as a commentary rather than as direct

<sup>30</sup> 'If allegory assumes context, conceptual writing assumes all context... Thus, unlike traditional allegorical writing, conceptual writing must be capable of including unintended pre- or post-textual associations.' Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Press, 2009), 23.

<sup>31</sup> Roland Barthes writes: 'We now know that the text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of an Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.' Film critic and historian Robert Stam describes Barthes' 'Text' 'as a methodological field of energy, a production absorbing writer and reader together.' Roland Barthes, *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977) quoted in Robert Stam, *Film Theory, An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 186.

involvement.<sup>32</sup> In actuality, Haacke designed a hypothetical intervention into a social arena distinct from the gallery space by proposing a public component for Times Square.<sup>33</sup> *Times Square Star Gazing* was intended to reproduce the image *Star Gazing* in lights on the electric signboard in New York City's Time Square. The incongruity of two strong iconic emblems—hood and flag—existing within the same frame and then placed in the context of entertainment, spectacle, and advertising, creates a discordant echo that was likely to provoke an editorial response on the street, if not in the media as well, and would have played to an audience distinctly different than those who frequent the Paula Cooper Gallery. Haacke is fully aware of the efficacy of such tactics.<sup>34</sup>

'If a war machine could be said to have a body, then tactics would represent the muscles and strategy the brain, while logistics would be the machine's digestive and circulatory systems: the procurement and supply networks that distribute resources throughout an army's body.'<sup>35</sup> Manuel De Landa, while ascribing to war the characteristics of a complex life system, describes the hierarchy of the functions of war in terms of the traditional

<sup>32</sup> *The New Yorker* (11/28/05), 44.

<sup>33</sup> Email correspondence with the artist, Wednesday, September 24, 2008 11:22 PM. This was not an actual proposal but a hypothetical one; a visual representation was on display in his *State of the Union* exhibition.

<sup>34</sup> Pierre Bourdieu speaks of Haacke's 'symbolic weapons'—that art as symbolic language can work powerfully to counteract the equally symbolic speech of corporate or governmental propaganda—advertising, patriotism, or sponsorship. In their discussion they emphasize the chain of action and response that extends the impact of any particular art piece and opens a debate across a broader spectrum of society often with the complicity of the media. As Haacke states, 'However, it does not work well if the press fails to play its role of amplifier and forum for debate. There has to be a sort of collaboration.' See Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 20–22.

<sup>35</sup> Manuel De Landa, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines*, quoted in Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), ix.

philosophical split between mind and body. Strategy also bears the connotation of the function of power designed by government and military leaders, while tactics would be the maneuvers of men and women in the field. In this way, Michel de Certeau differentiates the bird's-eye-view flattening effect of strategic mapping and statistical configurations of institutional positions from the disruptive meandering non-patterns of individuals carrying out their daily lives.<sup>36</sup> The terms 'strategic' and 'tactical' are most frequently associated with war, but are also used to describe the maneuvers in games, whether deterministic as in the non-cooperative game of chess or random as in the mixed strategies of digital gaming. Frequently, strategy refers to the highest and tactics to the lowest level of planning, suggesting a hierarchical split.

Often in casual analogy strategy and tactics are interchangeable, leading a reader to question her understanding of the significance of the term; war as terminology is rarely questioned, yet ought to be. What has now become a truism—that war is politics by other means—is really only half of a dialectical position elucidated two hundred years ago by Carl von Clausewitz.<sup>37</sup> The thesis to this antithesis, as Christopher Bassford points out, is that war is nothing but a duel or a wrestling match (depending on the translation) on a larger scale.<sup>38</sup> The analogy of 'contest' or 'game' is common and this concept of 'determined sides' is picked up both by Elaine Scarry in 1985 and Umberto

<sup>36</sup> See Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City' in *The Practice of Everyday Lives*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984), chapter seven.

<sup>37</sup> The actual quotation is: 'War is merely a continuation of politics with the admixture of other means'. See Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1815-1945* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), on line version <<http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/Bassford/CIE/Chapter18.htm>> (accessed 6/26/09).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Eco in 1991. But while Scarry saw the *doubleness* of war's division as a pairing of opposites, symbolically portrayed in uniforms, colors, geographical divisions, and the polarity of good and evil, Eco recognized that modern warfare had changed significantly from past assumptions so that the division or doubleness of sides had become indistinguishable. Scarry's game of chess or war, the goal of which was to disable the opponent through casualties towards a nonreciprocal outcome, becomes Eco's contest played out on the same network and whose casualties impact both sides simultaneously to the same degree. To reiterate: 'Modern warfare is therefore an autophagous game'<sup>39</sup>—without the necessary means to out-injure the opponent and therefore to reach a conclusion it becomes both a reciprocal and auto-consuming force.

Hans Haacke's 'State of the Union' takes on the topic of division rather than war, *per se*, but it implies the context of the war on terror and its resulting change in infrastructure that lent so much ineptitude to the Katrina disaster: Homeland Security. It also implies the notion of contest as revealed in his font choice for the exhibition announcement, a font used by fraternities, sports teams, and the military on their logos and emblems which promote the morale and team spirit so necessary for the successful outcome of a contest. But a nation divided is a nation at war with itself, even if that struggle remains located in the rhetorical realm of debate (or lack thereof). So Haacke inverts the 'us' and 'them' binary division presented after September 11, 2001 by the Bush administration, by showing that the division in the post-9/11 world order is not between the US and the external world, but within the nation-state itself, and therefore, in many ways, a division of sameness. Both sides bear the same colors; both sides use the same symbolic language, and both

<sup>39</sup> Umberto Eco, 'Reflections on War' (1991) in *Five Moral Pieces*, 13.

sides risk the possibility that the division (in spite of Haacke's own optimism) could persist endlessly.<sup>40</sup>

Eco describes how war causes 'a general redistribution of weights that cannot correspond fully with the will of the contending parties, it will drag on in the form of a dramatic political, economic, and psychological instability for decades to come, something that can lead only to a politics "waged" as if it were warfare.'<sup>41</sup> Though he wrote his essay in response to the First Gulf War his remarks are strikingly prescient of the seemingly endless morass of today's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In this light, the game of weights indicates a distribution of advantages which encompasses both chaotic and deterministic conditions of balance and found itself succinctly summarized in the words of Donald Rumsfeld as 'Stuff happens.'<sup>42</sup> Thus, the contest between two ideologies morphs into a division that is both the product, and the means of production, of chaos. Clausewitz's synthesis of his thesis (war is a brute contest) and of its antithesis (war is rational policy) makes a triangle out of the binary: war is 'a dynamic, inherently unstable interaction of the forces of

<sup>40</sup> 'Overall, the poll portrays a nation torn by conflicting impulses and confusion.' While Haacke visualizes 'a nation torn' in 2004/2005 and I refer to the division that erupted over the release of the so-called torture memos in April 2009, the US suffers a persistent rift endlessly bouncing from issue to issue whether race, health care or the economy as political pundits and talk show hosts find greater political efficacy in division than in finding common ground. The quotation comes from an analysis of a New York Times/CBS poll on health care reform. See Adam Nagourney and Megan Thee-Brenan, 'New Poll Finds Growing Unease on Health Plan,' *The New York Times*, July 30, 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Eco, 'Reflections on War,' 14.

<sup>42</sup> In response to the question: 'Given how predictable the lack of law and order was, was there part of General Franks' plan to deal with it?' Rumsfeld said: '[...] Think what's happened in our cities when we've had riots and problems and looting. Stuff happens! But in terms of what's going on in that country, it is a fundamental misunderstanding to see those images over and over and over again of some boy walking out with a vase and say, "Oh, my goodness, you didn't have a plan.'" See 'A Nation at War; Rumsfeld's Words on Iraq: "There Is Untidiness,"' *The New York Times*, April 12, 2003.



violent emotion, chance, and rational calculation.’<sup>43</sup> In other words, war is prone to irrationality, repetition, and unspeakable pain.

In ‘State of the Union,’ Haacke creates a composite of elements that ‘rub’ against one another. Each is a mosaic piece: part of a larger discourse with social, political, and metaphorical connotations. Consider the parts and the whole: communication, interaction, and links between them are allegorically inverted, appropriated, and collage—*symbolic weapons* with a very firm reference to the real.<sup>44</sup> If courage, keenness, skill, judgment, and cunning are necessary in writing the truth, Hans Haacke has exposed an additional requirement, something he bears as a kind of sixth sense: skepticism. This compels him to ask questions, of himself and his viewers. David Leege and Kenneth Wald, in discussing the meaning of cultural symbols suggest that ‘[t]he most powerful symbols are found not in complicated theories of taxation and economic growth [...] or in strategies for fighting terrorists or winning a war. They are found in pictures and in sounds that tap into primary group experiences of things that promote pride or satisfaction or tap into reservoirs of fear or revulsion.’<sup>45</sup> Through uncanny juxtapositions, Hans Haacke interrupts the unquestioned mark cultural symbols hold within our political consciousness. In using both direct (imperative and interrogative) and indirect address (the code of representational systems) to map the full complexity of the discussion, he confronts democracy urging a rapprochement of parallel convergences. Through works such as *Star Gazing*, Hans Haacke

<sup>43</sup> Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*.

<sup>44</sup> See footnote 34.

<sup>45</sup> David C. Leege and Kenneth D. Wald. ‘Meaning, Cultural Symbols, and Campaign Strategies’, in *The Affect Effect: Dynamics of Emotion in Political Thinking and Behavior*, ed. W. Russell Neuman, et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 296.

urges us to take up a mode of communication that must always remain open and active.

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