

Second Conversation: Hans Haacke with Pablo Helguera

13:00 – 14:00

Pablo Helguera: Hans, thank you so much for being with us. As we discussed we will go through only a number of projects, of the multiple projects you have developed, so we have more time to discuss them in depth, that's actually an aspect of your work that is extremely important to address. How much context is behind historical information context of each one of the things that you have done. So if you like to talk about this first project.

Hans Haacke: Yes, let me start by thanking you and SITAC for inviting me and also the audience who came to listen to all of us, and the patience that everybody has shown.

As Pablo said we are looking at a few works of mine, since all of them are *site-specific* as one call them these days, each requires a little bit of background information because *site-specificity* is not only related to the architectural setting, the institutional setting, but also to the historical setting, and this is one of the subjects that we are talking about today. Historical setting in the sense that at the time and in the place where this works were shown for the first time, the audience was aware of the references that were incorporated in the work, and therefore, on the other hand, these works do not travel well, as one says, that is to say that one has to give quite a bit of background information for another audience, in another place, at another time to understand what was at stake.

Having said that, I would like to venture the thought that similar problems exist not only for these types of works, but also for all works. Even though we'll believe we can naively look at Minimal Art, Abstract Expressionism or any other type of work, and we know exactly what is there. We don't.

(1)

What I'm projecting here is the exterior of the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1993. As was mentioned yesterday, in one of the presentations, Nam June Paik and I were invited by the then commissioner of the German pavilion to play the pavilion, so to speak. The choice of the two of us, starting with the background, was rather unusual: Nam June Paik doesn't have a German passport. He spent sometime in Germany, has worked there, he was a professor for a while, but he is not a German national, nor does he consider himself to be German. I have been living abroad since 1965, and probably, I should say, I did not ingratiate myself with the powers that be, there or on a couple of other places. So it was an unusual move by Klaus Bussman, the commissioner that brought us to work in the pavilion. The reason for this is significant, the German pavilion is owned by the German State, and is usually administered since the last twenty years or more by the Foreign Office. The cultural officer of the Foreign Office approached the commissioner asked him—we are talking about 1991 or 1992—"now, that East Germany and West Germany are united wouldn't it be appropriate to exhibit in the German pavilion an East-German and a West-German artist?" The commissioner (Klaus Bussman) was outraged to be asked to play a national game in the German pavilion and he went as far out of his way as he could.

As I usually do, I had to go to the place where I was planning to perform, so to speak. I spent some time in Venice; I went to the archives and familiarized myself with the history of the pavilion. Hitler visited

the pavilion, which until his visit was a Rococo little palace with parquet floor and kind of salon interiors, originally it was a Bavarian pavilion. In 1934 he visited Venice to meet his buddy Mussolini. And as we know Hitler had artistic ambitions in his earlier years and actually he considered himself an architect, and he didn't take much to convince him that the Rococo pavilion had to be changed and given the kind of look that the new Germany, his new Germany, was to have and how to represent that Germany in the world.

So the façade of this pavilion as I photographed it in 1993, is the façade that was introduced into Venice in 1937.

(2)

This is the approach to the entrance. Above the entrance I discovered a hook and also discovered a drawing on which the Nazi insignia, mainly the eagle and the swastika, had been installed. This hook, I used for the display of a new German symbol that appeared to be appropriate shortly after the reunification of the two parts of Germany, namely the one demark that was the pride of the West Germans and that the East Germans, beside from their urge to be liberated from the oppressive regime under which they had been living, was a goal.

That was a Demark Nationalism and I put a large facsimile of the German demark above the entrance with the date of 1990, the official reunification of the two parts of Germany and also the reunification of the currency, namely, the old West German currency.

(3)

Here I commemorated Hitler's visit at the Venice Biennale in 1934. He appeared in civilian clothes, hat in hand, catalogue under his arm, surrounded by Fascist officers, Italian Fascist officers.

(4)

This is what the visitors of the pavilion saw and could navigate in and over once they came around the barrier with the image of Hitler. The writing on the wall in the back is a reproduction of the typeface and the inscription on the façade of the pavilion, "Germania", the Italian word for Germany but also the name that Hitler was planning to give to Berlin once he had conquered the world and would have established a different kind of Berlin as we know it. It is a fascist typeface that was developed in Italy.

PH: **We haven't talked about the other contexts of your work, but there is a sense of use of image that's very abstract in this project. I think it has been commented on, it looks like a Cubist painting or something like that. How was the process for coming up with this image? What was the process for arriving at that final decision about the floor?**

HH: There are perhaps two reasons that I could name, probably many others that, I'm not aware of, that are no relevant at the moment. One is that the floor, the original floor that was installed in the pavilion in 1937, and in literal terms one can say this is the Nazi floor. That I broke up. It also refers to the wreckage of Germany in 1945 that I linked in my thinking to be still present in 1989, when the Wall fell between East and West, because that wall and what led to this wall is part of the wreckage that Hitler caused.

There is a third thing that I'm thinking about, there is a fantastic painting by Caspar David Friedrich in Hamburg at the Kunsthalle, *The Wreck of The Hope*, is one of the titles. And in effect, it is a ship overwhelmed by ice flows and it is also the wreckage, and interestingly enough the mass of this ship is not what we would expect, it is trees, with cut-off branches.

PH: **There is also something that's an ongoing subject in your work. The official text, and the official building that you intervene. You seem to have a particular interest in the role of architecture and public space as a symbol for imposition of power or oppression. Is that true?**

HH: That goes through the site-specific aspect of what I mentioned earlier. Usually an artist doesn't have the option to choose a building and play around there. In this case, as in few other cases, it had to be by invitation, and it had to be somebody with a budget willing to spend money on what I, or others, would propose. But it is the institutional framework as much as the architectural aspect, yes.

PH: **Well, in speaking of those two things. I think we are interested in going to the next version, which also involves, I guess, the artistic intervention of a building.**

(1)

HH: This is very much as you say. It is a somehow far more imposing level than the German pavilion in Venice. This is the façade of the Reichstag as it has been rebuilt or renovated by Norman Foster. In the late 90s,—I should go further back—... when East and West Germany were reunited, a few years later the German Parliament decided to move the capital back from Bonn to Berlin, where it had been since the 1870s, and to move back into the building that had been completed in the last decade of the eighteenth century, that had been built as the house for the German Parliament. The Reichstag. That building had been severely damaged during the war and could not be used, but contrary to some assumptions, popular assumptions, the building is not representative in any way of the Nazi history. In fact there are theories according to which the Nazis burnt it down and started the persecution of Jews in Germany because supposedly it was a Dutch Jew who had been the arsonist. This building was not used by the Nazis after it got ruined. When the German government moved back to Berlin and with it, of course, the Parliament, they decided the building should also have works by contemporary artists installed permanently in this building. Four artists from abroad were invited representing the four occupation powers of Germany, and a number of German artists among them, myself. I was, I believe, the last one who was invited. We were assigned specific spaces in the building, I was assigned a courtyard open to the sky, to make proposals, which then were to be reviewed and approved or disapproved by the art committee of the Parliament.

(2)

I had spent sometime in Berlin around 1984 preparing an exhibition and during that time on a Sunday afternoon, I was walking through what is similar to Central Park, perhaps not as large but it is in the center of the city and came across the then still-ruined Reichstag. It was a sunny day, and as has being the

case for a decade or more before also on that sunny Sunday, the area around it was populated by Turks. Berlin has the largest Turkish population of any city outside of Germany. Turks were brought in to help with the industry, construction and other things, doing jobs that the Germans will no longer willing to take. These Turks were there with their families. They were grilling lamb; the kids were playing soccer on the field; there were handsome uncles. It was a large Turkish family. And I looked up at this ruin, which was situated right up against the wall that divided the city, and I saw the inscription *Din Deutsche Folke*, "To the German people." And it struck me: even though it was not intended, originally in this fashion, this meant that all this Turks, enjoying themselves in a Sunday afternoon were told "you are not part of this. You stay out. This is only for the Germans."

It dawned on me that the term "Folke" which is in most other countries a rather innocuous term for people, was heavily burdened by the History of Germany in the twentieth century. "Folke" was interpreted by the Nazis in ethnic terms: one had to carry an ethnic passport in which one had to prove that one was German ethnically for generations German, and not from any other ethnic extraction. It was dividing the population of Germany into two, and the other part, the supposedly not Germans where eventually excommunicated, or worse. So there was something in this inscription that bothered me a great deal, and when I was considering what I would do with the invitation for the site that I was assigned, eventually I came up with an answer. And the answer is related to what I remembered having read in high school, an essay by Berthold Brecht very beautifully titled "The Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth." He said there—and this was written when he was in exile from Germany in the 30s—he said, "one way to avoid a lie today is to replace the word 'folke' with the word 'befolkeron', to replace 'folke' or 'people' with the term 'population'." And I realized that this perhaps is the answer and I went with it.

(3)

This is the site that I was assigned. There are two interior courtyards open to the sky, and that can also be viewed by the visitors of the Reichstag on the roof. Very beautiful! If you ever get to Berlin, don't miss going out to the roof; you can also go into the dome all the way up you can look all over Berlin.

(4)

This is the drawing that I attached to my proposal. I proposed that in the center of that courtyard, in the same typeface of the façade, should be the dedication to the population, which would include everyone who was living in Germany and is living in Germany. And in effect, today nine percent of the German population is of foreign extraction. I should also mention in this context, and it's very relevant to the Parliament and the Reichstag history, that over 100 members of the German parliament, in the 30s, were stripped of their German citizenship. And over seventy of them did not die a natural death. And a number of them, in addition, committed suicide. It was, speaking about something that was closely associated with the history, not only of Germany but of that particular institution.

(5)

The art committee of the Bundestag, the German Parliament, discussed this proposal. There were two sessions, which I attended, I answered questions they had. Then the committee voted overwhelmingly with one dissenting vote that this proposal should be realized.

And when I left Berlin for New York, "well", I thought, "now I get a contract in the mail and we get going." I was disabused of this very soon, the one dissenter, a member of the Christian Democratic Party, a conservative but very large party in the German Parliament, started a media campaign, very successfully, which eventually led to the German papers, the media, to be full of this debate over my proposal, for four months. The by-laws of the Parliament require that if 150 members of the Parliament want to discuss and then vote on an issue that the committee had already approved, then it will be open to the entire body of the Parliament and a vote will have to be taken. And it actually got to that.

I'm showing, very quickly, how the media then, presented on the day when, for an entire hour, the German Parliament discussing this proposal and eventually voting for it with a majority of two votes. How this appeared in the media and how the speakers looked when they participated in this.

(6)

This is the TV News.

PH: **What were the arguments against the proposal?**

HH: There were several. The main argument against it was: "we are done with talking about the horrible past, the Nazi period. We are now a normal country like everyone else, and we are proud of being German and one should not question this anymore." That was the main argument of the dissenter, who started the media campaign against it.

The other argument, I'm glad that your question prompts me to speak about that, because my proposal did not only mean that the inscription would be paraphrased in a manner that I would accept, maybe dedicating this thing to the population. I also proposed that all the members of the Parliament be invited, as well as those who would be elected in the future. They were invited to bring 100 pounds of soil from their constituency to this site, which would be spread out around the letters, and eventually would become a wild, uncontrolled jungle, no gardener was supposed to interfere with this. And, of course, the pigeons that also exist in Berlin, would add their share.

I was accused of having adopted a ritual that the Nazis had: blood and soil, and this is, in fact, Nazi. It's an unacceptable National-Socialist aspect of this work. My answer to this was that everyone living in Germany is living on the territory of Germany, *terra* a Latin word meaning "soil." And this is, in effect, the definition of the extent to which German laws passed by this Parliament reach. The Turks and all other foreigners have that and many other things, of course, in common with the indigenous population.

(7)

This is the gentleman from the Christian Democratic Party who started the whole ball rolling. He is now, he has gained influence now, and he is the second person behind the leader of the Christian Democratic party.

(8)

This is the member who spoke for the Social Democratic Party, who spoke fervently for the proposal.

(9)

This is the representative of the Green Party who spoke against it. Interestingly enough, the members of the Parties were divided over the issue. As to say from almost each of the parties, that was one representative speaking for it and another one against it. This one was the Green Party member speaking against it.

(10)

This is her colleague, again the Green Party speaking for it.

(11)

This is a Liberal Democratic-Party member speaking against it.

(12)

A colleague from the same Party speaking for it.

(13)

A Social-Democratic-Party member speaking against it. (risas)

(14)

The only member of the Christian Democratic Party, former President of the Parliament, who spoke for it, and was also part of the Art Committee and, from the first day, s was a fervent supporter. She was only one in her Party who voted for it.

PH: **Were they supporting your right of freedom of expression? Or were they supporting the notion that you were putting forth about Germany as a...?**

HH: No, they voted on whether or not this project be done. Whether in their house, the Reichstag, this project would be realized.

PH: **But did they agree with your premise that the population is an appropriate word?**

HH: Yes.

(15)

This is the one member of the PDS, Party of Democratic Socialism is a part of the East Germany Government Party. He spoke for it.

(16)

This is the present President of the Parliament. He was the last speaker and the most fervent. Sorry, he was speaking for it, and was speaking for it with the authority of his position as the President.

(17)

So as I said there was a very, very slim majority of two votes. It was passed and then I prepared the site

and half a year later it was inaugurated. You can see here, Wolfgang Thierse, the President, and I bringing the first bag of soil to the site. Thierse picked up soil from the Jewish Cemetery of his constituency in the eastern part of Berlin. There were a number of members of the Parliament who brought soil from former concentration camps sites. Many of them engaged their communities to find locations from which symbolically the soil should be collected. Others just went to their backyard and picked up the soil from there. Altogether about 234 deposited soil from their constituency.

(18)

This is a photograph from the roof into the court the following year.

(19)... (23)

Close ups.

PH: **I understand that you asked for this project not to be taken care at all, in terms of gardening, is that right?**

HH: Right. So this is a wild rose this, as I suspected, would happen. Soil always contains seeds and roots and they sprout. So this is a garden of weeds, so to speak. And actually during the discussion there was also somebody who objected this being weeds that after all, normally should be extracted and thrown away.

(24)

This is the last one

PH: **I just wanted to ask about the decision of leaving the garden without any care. This destroys in a way the project.**

HH: As in other parliaments and government buildings around the world, also this one was under constant supervision for security reasons, and everything pretty much was controlled. And I wanted to introduce something into this high-security precinct that was totally uncontrolled and unpredictable. I also stipulated that the addition of new soil and the free growth of these plants should last as long as the freely elected Parliament meets in this building.

PH: **So effectively when will be the end of this project?**

HH: As I just said, if ever the German Parliament moves into another building or, in my view, it becomes a dictatorial regime, then that will be the end.

PH: **I think these are two interesting examples on your long-time concern with Germany, even though you haven't lived in Germany for many years. And I think it's interesting that you did two to major, major pieces in places that most visibly represent Germany. I think it is a very interesting relationship that you have with Germany in that sense. But I think it would be interesting to discuss how your work not only comments on German history but also history of other places, or corporate interests. Perhaps we can talk about the next piece in that regard.**

(1)

HH: This is a work from the 80s that I produced in New York. It was exhibited in a commercial gallery in Soho, when Soho was still a gallery district. It is called *MetroMobil*, in one word. The old company Mobil

at that time was a separate oil company, one of the seven big ones, now it is merged with Esso or Exxon, as is known in other countries. It was also a time when many companies around the world, big ones, multinationals, oil companies and others, collaborated with the apartheid regime in South Africa.

South Africa until the early 90s was under a racist rule of the minority white Nationalist Party. The indigenous population, black population, had no rights, was sequestered in arid parts of the country and pushed around until the early 90s when Nelson Mandela, the first freely elected black President of South Africa, was introduced. It was a vicious racist regime with which many, very big companies around the world, in the US, in Germany, in France, wherever you go collaborated.

In this case it was Mobil. I asked Mobil about its attitude towards collaboration with a racist regime as there was in South Africa. And the answer, the official answer was: "Mobil's management in New York believes that its South African subsidiaries' sales to the police and military are but a small part of its total sales. Mobil did supply a sizable portion of the gasoline used by the military and the police of the regime," and further, "total denial of the supplies to the police and military forces of a host country is hardly consistent with an image of responsible citizenship in that country." Quite a cynical statement.

What you see here is, in effect, the façade of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where since the emergence of blockbuster exhibitions, these exhibitions were advertised on the façade with huge banners. In this case it was an exhibition of works from Nigeria—where Mobil was extracting oil—that Mobil sponsored. This is also case where oil companies or others sponsor exhibitions of art works of the countries with they do business and so it serves public relations purposes.

(2)

Here's a closer look at the work from the side. You see that there is a large photomural behind the banners.

(3)

Another one from the other side.

(4)

Here, the entire mural that you could see if you looked between the gaps. Here I took them off for informational reasons, so you can see what the entire mural is like. It is a funeral procession in one of the black squatters camps outside of Capetown which was invaded by the police, and I don't remember how many, maybe a dozen of the people there were shot by the police to death. The coffins are been carried away.

(5)

Here on the entablature above the banners I put a plaque, which is probably very difficult for you to read so I'm going to read it for you. It says: "Many public-relations opportunities are available through the sponsorship of programs, special exhibitions and services. These can provide a creative and cost-effective answer to a specific marketing objective, particularly where international, governmental or consumer relations may be a fundamental concern."

I found this explanation for the rationale of the museum who sponsors, and for that matter, giving sponsors a reason to get involved in the arts, in a little flyer published by the Metropolitan Museum in New York with the telling and rather beautiful title: "The Business of Art knows the Art of Business." It couldn't be phrased better to describe the current situation in art institutions both in the US, where private interests always played a major role, but also, increasingly in Europe with State Institutions who are told by the politicians to go out and attract corporate money because they, that is to say, the State, or we the tax-payers, to be more precise, are no longer willing to foot the bill.

PH: *Will you talk us about the reaction of both Mobil and the Metropolitan to this piece?*

HH: The Metropolitan Museum did not react in any fashion. But Mobil reacted. There were a few other works in this exhibition and—I'm mixing two things together but in nature not very dissimilar. The gallery where I exhibited something got a letter from the legal council of Philip Morris that if the gallery would in fact exhibit work that was on the announcement they go after the gallery.

The situation with Mobil was that several Mobil works I had shown in a solo exhibition in the Tate Gallery in 1984 prompted a letter from New York, from Mobil headquarters. One of their lawyers telling the Tate Gallery, the Director of the Tate Gallery, that I had violated various trade-mark and copyright issues, and that the Tate Gallery better withdraw the catalogue from circulation. The Tate Gallery, being a government-founded institution, being careful, not knowing US law, temporarily withdrew the catalogue as was demanded, from circulation. The same was done in Eindhoven, Holland. because the catalogue was a co-publication of two institutions.

And it took my getting support from a New York law firm, pro bono. They sent... one of their partners sent a letter to the Tate Gallery explaining that the US-law on which Mobil claimed to base its claims totally permits what I did.

Eventually that prompted the Tate Gallery and the other museum in Eindhoven to release the catalogue.

PH: *Should we take a question from the audience at this point?*

Audience 1: *I would like to ask, and I implore you, that you do not give me a politically correct answer, what does Hans Haacke think about Beuys's figure as a reference? More than asking about his work, although I would indeed welcome a response in this regard, I would like to ask you how you saw Beuys as a political reference and as a man, a man dealing with a work with political connotations?*

HH: About a year ago I was asked by the DIA Art Foundation in New York to speak. They invited also another artist, to speak about an artist of our choice, represented in the collection of the DIA Art Foundation. I chose to speak about Beuys. It was a not an easy task. I knew, of course, much of Beuys's work, and I had met him a few times personally and we had a number of things in common; but then also I believe our approach to the world is drastically different. He was deeply influenced by Anthroposophy. The common thread is that I grew up in an Anthroposophy household, but when I became a teenager I said, "this has nothing to do with the world as I know it". But he was a convert. He was a Catholic to begin with. He had

a notion of how it affected politics and economics. He was also among the early Green Party members. He, in my view, did not understand how the social world functions. He answered in a rather obscure way, sometimes in alchemy terms, he used alchemical terms to describe the world around him.

A rather significant event occurred in 1982. Both he and I were invited to participate in Documenta. We both attended a rally in Bonn on the occasion for Ronald Reagan's visit to Bonn, to gain approval for the stationing of nuclear missiles on German territory. We were in the same boat as far as this political issue. But he responded at Documenta by melting the crown of a Czar in real gold, that he had obtained from a restaurant owner in Düsseldorf, and cast a rabbit. And a rabbit in his own personal mythology had all sort of qualities that promoted his ideas and he made a thing out of it. Whereas I painted a painting of Ronald Reagan in the old nineteenth-century fashion, with a landscape above it and a red carpet leading from that painting to a photomural of the rally in Bonn that I had photographed. So it was the protesters against the nuclear stationing in Bonn facing the emperor on the other wall being presented in a nineteenth-century fashion. I believe the position of the alchemical rabbit in gold and mine are drastically different in approach and illustrate the difference between the two of us.

Audience 2: **I just want to say thank you for your incredibly articulated presentation. I was wondering whether or not you agree with Benjamin's observation in the author's producer that a correct political tendency is necessarily a correct aesthetic tendency. Are there two rounds separable to you or is it possible for one to have more ways in a work of art than another?**

HH: I don't know what in either case "correct" means.

Audience 2: **I thought you might say that. Well, for Benjamin it means the avant-garde, is the political correctness, is...**

HH: I'm afraid of anybody who claims that he or she knows and everybody else is wrong. In the same sense, I don't believe that it is a connoisseur, a critic or artist who has all the wisdom, and all the others don't have it. This is an open discussion, it's a discourse, and it's a give and take.

Audience 2: **Okay, perhaps the second part of my question. Are these two discourses, the aesthetic, the political, evenly weighted in your work? In your view.**

HH: I try to combine them in a fashion where one cannot take them apart anymore.

Audience 2: **Do you think you've done that more successfully in some works than in others...**

HH: Well, sure. You win some, you lose some...

Audience 2: **Which ones? I mean I think, I'll not inflict my view in the audience, but I think the *Germania* work is more successful in synthesizing this than *Der Bewölkerung*, I think it is also very interesting work. But more interesting in its process than in the monument that resulted from it.**

HH: The situation in Venice as well as in Berlin were rather unique. It is quite rare that an artist has this social institution a political material at his or her disposal. So if you don't have it, well then you have to work with other means: fiberglass and banners and photographs, and what have you.

PH: I do want to ask you one thing. Given the subject of history that we are dealing with, and arts, and the ephemeral, and the site-specific aspect of your work. How do you perceive your work as surviving in the future? Or is this not even a concern of yours, in terms of seeing the work fifty years from now being understood in a context that is appropriate in the future.

HH: I don't think my work is different from any other artist's work, as far as the survival in the future's concern it's anybody's guess, and I would have to talk with people in fifty years.