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Disrupting Utopia: Hans Haacke's *Germania* or Digging Up the History of the Venice Biennale

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Entering the German pavilion at the 45th Venice Biennale, visitors were confronted by a life-size photograph of Hitler's June 14th visit to the pavilion during the 1934 Biennale. At this point in time, Hitler had been appointed chancellor of Germany in January 1933, but he would not officially become Führer until August 1934; Hitler's visit to the Biennale took place only sixteen days before The Night of the Long Knives, when Hitler murdered Ernst Röhm and eliminated the threat of the SA, securing his power and leading the way to his becoming Führer.¹ This photograph, framed by the classical doorway of the pavilion, is directly juxtaposed with an oversized plastic reproduction of a Deutschmark coin occupying the former location of the eagle and swastika that previously adorned the entrance.² The coin and the photograph, representations of commerce and politics, are subtexts of the art world that Haacke continually references in his artistic practice. The only way to enter the space of this pavilion was to walk under the enlarged Deutschmark and confront the evidence of the photograph – documenting the fact that Hitler stood in this very site and used the Venice Biennale, as he used many international exhibitions, as an apparatus for disseminating Nazi ideals – which Haacke recontextualizes with his installation. In this manner, Haacke forces us to confront the historical and political context of the German pavilion as a site before we physically enter the space of his 1993 installation *Germania* – the title ironically recalling Hitler's grandiose vision for a renamed Berlin, which would be 'capital of the world'.

Before discussing this installation, it is important that we investigate the context Haacke is calling attention to through *Germania*, specifically the history of the Venice Biennale. Similar to the international exhibitions that preceded it – such as the 1851 Great Exhibition of the Arts and Manufactures of All Nations at the Crystal Palace in London, the 1867 Paris World's Fair, and the 1873 Vienna World's Fair – the Venice Biennale was created in 1893 to be an attraction of international proportions, one focusing on art as commerce. In "Gondola! Gondola!" Haacke describes the birth of the Biennale as a "desire for a global love-in.... It still moves masses of visitors to Venice a hundred years later. Riccardo Selvatico, an author of comedies and mayor from 1890 to 1895, together with local artist-friends, invented the Biennale as an international sales exhibition."³ The first foreign pavilion to be built was that of Belgium in 1907, followed by the British, German, and Hungarian Pavilions all in 1909. The Biennale currently hosts 29 pavilions, representing countries around the globe.⁴

It is significant to note the correlation between the exhibition of art at the Venice Biennale and the representation of nationhood through the establishment of these pavilions. To exhibit within the context of a national pavilion is to represent that nation; this organizational strategy has been used in most, if not all, international exhibitions since the Crystal Palace. Discussing the representation of nationhood within early international exhibitions – specifically referencing the Crystal Palace – Tony Bennett points to the principles organizing representations of "nations and the supra-national constructs of empire and races," which he points out are "developed into that of separate pavilions for each participating country."⁵ This pavilionization of the space of international exhibitions, far from a 'natural' process, cultivated a distinct relationship

between nations and the exhibition of culture, one based upon the spatial embodiment of political and economic progress. In other words, the pavilion of a country at an international exhibition, such as the Venice Biennale, is not simply a space for exhibiting artwork or cultural artifacts, but functions as an arena for the construction of a national or *supra-national* identity. This identity, predicated upon the political and economic motives of the specific country exhibiting, forms a representation of the nation as a progressive and cultural empire or enterprise; the effects of this separation of spaces into national areas or zones imposed a rhetoric of progress onto “the relations between races and nations by superimposing the associations of the former on to the latter.”⁶ Through the *rhetoric of progress*, therefore, the implementation of pavilions within international exhibitions, in this case the Venice Biennale, allows for the formation of an idealized and even utopic representation of national identity through the controlled construction of *supra-national* displays of nationhood.⁷ These displays of national identity presented a form of international self-representation that functioned as constructed utopias, specifically designed to reflect the ideals of the country. This can be seen most prevalently in the history of the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Originally designed by Daniele Donghi, an architect of the Venice City Council, the 1909 “pavilion initially hosted Bavarian art, and starting in 1912, works from all over Germany. Closed during the war, it reopened in 1922 exhibiting works from the then Federal Republic of the German Reich. Property of the Venice City Council, in 1938 it was taken over by the German government, and rebuilt under Hitler's order substituted by a more modern design by Ernst Haiger.”⁸ The pavilion was renovated as part of Hitler’s ambitious plans to build the new empire of the Third Reich in the image of Nazi idealism. These cultural developments were part of an aggressive “foreign policy” by the Nazis’, which was influential on German participation “in world expositions or international exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale,” which “conveyed messages that did not go unnoticed” by the rest of the world.⁹ Through the use of architecture, art and culture Hitler orchestrated the widespread propagation of German propaganda both within Germany and outside of it, disseminating the Nazi ideals of *Volk*, “one of the key words of National Socialist philosophy, meaning ‘folk and folkdom,’ the totality of the German people and the German race.”¹⁰ At the Venice Biennale the reconstruction of the German pavilion in 1938 functioned as a direct reflection of the ideology of the “German people and the German race” under Hitler’s aegis, the classical design of the original building was altered in order to transform the structure into the embodiment of Nazi utopian ideals. As Walter Grasskamp observes, the redesign of the pavilion by the Nazis’ entailed the removal of “the ornate antique frieze,” which was replaced with the “*New Sachlichkeit* classicism of the thirties, so typical of the Fascist architecture of Italy and the Third Reich in Germany... celebrating concepts of social order through its formalism. Its main aim is to intimidate the observer.”¹¹ Aside from the removal of the swastika eagle from over the entranceway in 1945, which was left empty, the structure of the pavilion remained the same from 1938 until Haacke’s intervention in 1993.

Haacke’s invitation to represent Germany at the 45th Venice Biennale came as quite a surprise given the reunification of Germany and the fact that Haacke was not previously a “German national artist,” but for all intents and purposes he became one “with his 1993 installation at the German Pavilion in Venice.”¹² As is typical of Haacke’s artistic practice, the installation at the Venice Biennale called attention to the tortured

history of Germany, specifically as embodied within the German pavilion, through which he highlights the ideologies of political and commercial interests that were the underlying subtexts of the site. He accomplished this by a surprisingly simplistic and direct means of confronting the history of the space: he dug up the floor. As Benjamin Buchloh argues, “it is only in Haacke’s systematic removal of yet another architectural surface ... that the full depth of historical and ideological inscriptions within a seemingly nondescript and noncoded institutional space are fully articulated.”¹³ The sight of this broken foundation is startling, especially since the interior is not visible from the doorway of the pavilion, because the view is blocked with a large red wall bearing the photograph of Hitler. Visitors must literally get around the Nazi history of the site before entering the main space of the pavilion.

The juxtaposition between the documentary photograph of Hitler visiting the Biennial in 1934 and the disruption, both physical and symbolic, of the demolished floor elicits a number of associations and interpretations, most prominently based within the irreconcilable divide between the Nazi past and present usage of this site of exhibition. “Inside the building, Haacke created a metaphor for German history. The buildings floor slabs had been taken up, some of them badly damaged in the process, and left lying as a field of rubble. This produced a distressing terrain that evoked a large number of associations.”¹⁴ The most obvious association being the destruction that resulted from the Nazi campaigns of World War II; there is a stark visual parallel between Haacke’s destruction of the floor and images of bombed out cities, with buildings throughout Europe reduced to rubble in the name of German nationalism, that dominate histories of the war. In this manner, Haacke visually repositions or relocates the historical remnants or traces of the devastation caused by the war into the idealized space of the German pavilion. As Pierre Bourdieu states, Haacke “transforms the recreation of the memory of the past into a critical questioning of the present by making a few minimal but decisive modifications in the old setting.”¹⁵ By destabilizing the ground of viewing, a neutral perspective cannot be firmly established, and visitors are left to, physically and symbolically, pick up the pieces of German history.

The act of placing an oversized Deutschemark coin over the doorway to the pavilion, the location previously occupied by the imperial eagle, gives visitors a hint as to the direction Haacke believes that German history has progressed – or not, depending on your interpretation. Haacke calls attention to the parallels between the political past of the German Pavilion and the commercial interests that dominate a reunified Germany. This is most evident in Haacke’s decision to fill “the place once reserved for the eagle on a swastika with a simple coin,” a union of past and present through which he questions “whether the national spirit that the pavilion embodies to this day was representative,” as well as whether that Nazi spirit “still haunts the uneasy country this pavilion is supposed to represent. As the face value of a corporate identity of the state, the coin replaced the traditional symbolism of the state with a sober heraldry of economic life.”¹⁶ In *Germania*, the destruction of the *form* of presentation, that of the German space of exhibition at the Biennial, serves to reveal the hidden or unnamed *content* of the space itself as an economic and political representation of a German utopia or ideal.

Haacke’s act of digging up the floor of the German pavilion is a destruction of the foundation sponsored and built by the Nazis in the 1930s; this literalized disruption physically hindered visitors from the *aesthetic* experience of the space due to the lack of

solid ground on which to stand. In this manner, *Germania* raises questions concerning the relationship between history and the present, specifically when they coexist within the same site. The German pavilion as a structure was built to represent Nazis ideals, yet this same structure, in a virtually unaltered state has continued to be used as a representation of Germany within the context of the Venice Biennial. The liberating result of *Germania*, according to Bourdieu, is that it “frees the present which is enclosed in the past, and which simple commemoration leaves untouched. It forces us to confront what the past, apparently dead and buried, has to say about the present.”¹⁷ Haacke manages to disrupt the utopic vision of the pavilion as an representation of German *supra-national* identity by locating the site within its own history. Why not simply destroy the building and construct a new pavilion? As Haacke states: “When I was asked in 1993 at the Venice Biennale whether the German Pavilion, which had been remodeled by Hitler, should be torn down, I replied that you cannot do away with German history that way.”¹⁸

¹ For a thorough account of these events, see Max Gallo *The Night of Long Knives: June 29-30, 1934* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

² The oversized one Deutschmark coin that Haacke places above the doorway is dated 1990, referencing the date of German reunification, which took place on October 3, 1990. As a point of interest the obverse side of the Deutschmark coin is an imperial eagle.

³ Hans Haacke, “Gondola! Gondola!” *Free Exchange*, eds. Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), 139.

⁴ For a history of the Venice Biennale, see <<http://www.labiennale.org>>.

⁵ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 81.

⁶ Bennett, 82.

⁷ There is an obvious hierarchy resulting from this process: the countries that construct their own pavilions possess the ability to build and disseminate representations of themselves, whereas countries or races that do not have their own space within these international exhibitions are denied this ability. For a discussion of this cultural marginalization, see Bennett’s chapter “The Exhibitionary Complex.”

⁸ “Biennale Art History: The first foreign pavilions,” *La Biennale di Venezia*, 4 March, 2008: <<http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/history/900/en/3122.html>>.

⁹ Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: Univeristy of North Carolina Press, 1996), 263.

¹⁰ Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 9.

¹¹ Walter Grasskamp, “No-Man’s Land.” *Bodenlos*, eds. Klaus Bussmann and Florian Matzner (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1993), 52.

¹² Walter Grasskamp, “Kassel New York Cologne Venice,” *Obra Social: Hans Haacke* (Barcelona: Fundaciõ Antoni Tàpies, 1995), 21. Along with Haacke the artist Nam June Paik was asked to represent the recently reunited Germany at the Venice Biennale in 1993. As Walter Grasskamp points out this strategic selection “sidestepped an unpleasant argument: Given the reunification, should both a West German and an East German artist be shown at the German Pavilion of the Biennale?” by asking Haacke and Paik, “a German artist who had been living in New York since 1965 and a Korean who had had his artistic development in the Rhineland and was teaching there at present. Thus, Germany appeared as a country of both emigration and immigration. It was also a

specifically aimed gesture, given the recent violence against foreigners and political refugees.” *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³ Benjamin Buchloh, “Hans Haacke: From Factographic Sculpture to Counter-Monument,” *Hans Haacke for real: Works 1959-2006*, eds. Matthias Flügge and Robert Fleck (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 2006), 54.

¹⁴ Walter Grasskamp, “Real Time: The Works of Hans Haacke,” *Hans Haacke*, eds. Walter Grasskamp, Molly Nesbit and Jon Bird (New York: Phaidon, 2004), 75.

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), 115.

¹⁶ Walter Grasskamp, “Kassel New York Cologne Venice Berlin,” *Hans Haacke for real: Works 1959-2006*, eds. Matthias Flügge and Robert Fleck (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 2006), 33.

¹⁷ Bourdieu and Haacke, 115-6.

¹⁸ Hans Haacke, Matthias Flügge, and Michael Freitag, “To Whom Do the People Belong?” *Hans Haacke for real: Works 1959-2006*, eds. Matthias Flügge and Robert Fleck (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 2006), 298.