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Haacke

Edward Fry

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This essay, written in the 1980s, is being released courtesy of the family of Edward Fry (d. 1992).

Hans Haacke's most recent works continue and extend his longstanding commitment to a renewal of the critical and emancipatory role of modernity. His focus combines both Enzenberger's concerns for the operations of the "consciousness industry" and the analyses of Frankfurt School Critical Theory of myth and instrumentalism. These points of reference, along with related positions held by Althusser and Bourdieu and the artist's own critical/theoretical conclusions, are the foundations of his art.

With twin anchors in the conceptual tradition established by Duchamp and his latter-day descendents among the Conceptualists of the 1960's, Haacke reaches out to investigate the distortions and manipulations of both facts and cultural values in society at large as well as within the art world itself. His mature work began in the late 1960's with an interest in systems, starting with the inorganic and then progressing to the biological and finally to human social systems. At first working descriptively, Haacke discovered during the early 1970's that human social systems by their very complexity only reveal their full political and economic structures when they are in some way disturbed or otherwise caused to react. Haacke's method for accomplishing this end has always been rigorously empirical, based on intensive and detailed research, the results of which are then reinserted into the social framework of his subject but also always from within an aesthetic context. The result is emancipatory both with respect to the social issues addressed and also for the role of art in the overall structure of the culture. Exemplary of such efforts is his recent *Global Marketing* of 1986, in which he uses a large black cube reminiscent of Tony Smith's 1962 *Die*, a landmark of minimal sculpture, on which Haacke inscribes in another shade of black—an additional art reference, to the late works of Ad Reinhardt—the details of the involvement by the international advertising firm of Saatchi and Saatchi in the racial policies of the South African minority government toward the black majority.

Advertising, publicity and other forms of instrumental manipulation of the public consciousness continue to be a prime target of Haacke's work, but he is also particularly sensitive to the economic and ideological pressures exerted on art itself. These include the role of collectors such as the Saatchis or Ludwig, whose non-collecting roles interact directly with their art activities; and also the now pervasive influence of corporations not only as collectors but as patrons of museum exhibitions. The frequent result is that museums exercise self-censorship and that corporations use the substantive tradition of artistic integrity in order to further commercial ends and to cloak questionable activities with cultural respectability. Haacke is also alert to residual myths within the art world itself and also within the attitudes of artists themselves. Prominent in this area is Haacke's critical focus on the dangerously mythic content of claims for the existential authenticity of subjective expression, of the related concept of "genius" and of the dubious interpersonal communicative value of such subjectivity. To this end he always strives to achieve a non-specialized, non-aesthetic discourse which is accessible to all and not just to the art world alone.

Haacke realizes that all social acts, including art, are political, whether explicitly or implicitly; but he also realizes that the field of art is now an ever more crucial and endangered resource for the struggle to maintain and renew the emancipatory traditions of the Enlightenment. His unique fusion of Anglo-American empiricism with Continental theory exactly parallels the work of such social philosophers as Habermas in the search for a continuation of the project of modernity.

Note: *Edward Fry (d. 1992), a Philadelphia-based art historian and curator, published widely on Cubism and contemporary art. Curator at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, he was fired in 1971 after the cancellation of his Hans Haacke exhibition.*