



an international and interdisciplinary journal of postmodern cultural sound, text and image  
Volume 4, March 2007, ISSN 1552-5112

## Hans Haacke, or the Museum as Degenerate Utopia

[Travis English](#)

*To control a museum means precisely to control the representations of a community and its highest values and truths.*

Carol Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual"<sup>[1]</sup>

Since the early 1970s, much of Hans Haacke's work has focused on demystifying the relationship between museums and corporations. Museums present themselves to the public as the autonomous realm of the aesthetic, as the purveyors and protectors of cultural artifacts, while corporations present themselves as enlightened benefactors—patrons—truly interested in the cultural well-being of the community-at-large. In this sense, these two realms—cultural and corporate—do not hide their relations. In fact, most museums display the names of their corporate sponsors proudly on bronze plaques that imply the permanence of a grave marker, as if a symbiotic relationship has always existed between the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Bank of America, along with a host of other global corporations. Haacke's work relies upon the strategies through which museums and corporations naturalize their interdependent relationships with each other.

For Haacke, this relationship between museums and their corporate *sponsors* is one of exchange and not simply one of patronage. He writes, "...it is important to distinguish between the traditional notion of patronage and the public

relations maneuvers parading as patronage today. [...] The American term *sponsoring* more accurately reflects that what we have here is really an exchange of capital: financial capital on the part of the sponsors and symbolic capital on the part of the sponsored.”<sup>[2]</sup> This shift from traditional patronage to sponsorship is a relatively recent development, one that emerged from the global capitalism which has characterized our cultural, social, and economic *milieu* for at least the past thirty years. As it goes in capitalism, gains in capital are directly proportionate to gains in power. As museums gain financial capital, they are more readily able to expand their cultural respectability. More financial capital means bigger shows (the “blockbuster” exhibitions which have characterized the past few decades) and in turn, a larger audience. And as Pierre Bourdieu writes, “Museums need cultural respectability to be able to influence their sponsors.”<sup>[3]</sup> This respectability translates into symbolic capital for sponsors, who gain it in exchange for financial capital. Thus we have yet another circular model of capitalist exchange.

In this system of exchange, art becomes commodity, however much the museum – and the corporation, albeit to an arguably lesser extent -- would like to conceal it. Haacke’s work focuses on the system of exchange between the museum and the corporation and the commodification of art that takes place within this circulation. Given that this system of relations between museums and corporations is a fairly recent development, should it change our conception of the space of the museum, from a space devoted to the timeless spiritual qualities of the aesthetic to a space devoted to capitalist exchange? It seems that the two are incommensurable, a dialectical clash between the sacred and the profane. In order to maintain their status as the protectors of beauty and culture, museums sublimate the exchange that takes place within their hallowed walls. Using Haacke’s work as an entry point into this system, as a critical rupture within the system, I will analyze this exchange and how it could, perhaps should, alter our conception of the museum from that of a space of aesthetic autonomy to a space devoted to capitalist exchange and commodity fetishism. In other words, what Louis Marin calls a “degenerate utopia.”<sup>[4]</sup> But before I explore this notion further, a brief examination of some of Haacke’s work within the historical context of corporate sponsorship is necessary to better understand its critical position in my

argument.

### **Art as Social Grease**

Since the 1970s, corporate sponsorship of the arts has increased dramatically. The reasons for this expansion are many and complex, having to do with the desire on the part of museums to produce ever-more ambitious exhibition programs, the changing political climate during the 1970s and 1980s, and not least, the changing nature of global capitalism. As Haacke explained in his 1986 essay, "Museums, Managers of Consciousness,"

In an ever-advancing spiral the public was made to believe that only Hollywood-style extravaganzas were worth seeing and that only they could give an accurate sense of the world of art. The resulting box-office pressure made the museums still more dependent on corporate funding. Then came the recessions of the 1970s and 1980s. Many individual donors could no longer contribute at the accustomed rate, and inflation eroded the purchasing power of funds. To compound the financial problems, many governments, facing huge deficits—often due to sizable expansions of military budgets—cut their support for social services as well as their arts funding. Again museums felt they had no choice but to turn to corporation for a bail-out.<sup>[5]</sup>

What at the beginning may have been seen as corporate "bail-out" soon became the norm of arts funding, a part of the Neoliberal corporatization of the American city and its traditionally non-corporate institutions. And while both museums and corporations may have been at first hesitant about their relationships with each other, both quickly saw the benefits to be reaped from their newly acquired status as bedfellows.

As corporate sponsorship of the arts developed, so did a specific rhetoric melding funding of the arts with good business practice. One work of Haacke's which highlights this rhetoric is *On Social Grease* (1975, Collection of the Gilman Paper Company, New York).<sup>[6]</sup> It consists of six rectangular magnesium plaques,

each engraved with a different quotation from businessmen and politicians concerning the validity and importance of the arts to business practice. The plaques would fit more perfectly within the lobby of a multinational corporation's headquarters than within a gallery or museum. One of the most striking quotations is from David Rockefeller, who was at the time of the work's creation vice-president of the Museum of Modern Art and chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank. It reads,

From an economic standpoint, such involvement in the arts can mean direct and tangible benefits. It can provide a company with extensive publicity and advertising, a brighter public reputation, and an improved corporate image. It can build better customer relations, a readier acceptance of company products, and a superior appraisal of their quality. Promotion of the arts can improve the morale of employees and help attract qualified personnel.<sup>[7]</sup>

Rockefeller's words speak directly to the exchange of financial capital for symbolic capital enacted between museums and corporations. Perhaps more striking is that corporate sponsorship of culture can have an anesthetizing effect on the public and its perceptions of corporations, quelling critique and even—in a sort of public relations placebo effect—producing “superior appraisal” of a company's products. To put it simply, art has the potential to expand commodity exchange and also deaden the critique of capitalism as a system of domination.

Another quotation, the one from which Haacke takes this work's title, is from Robert Kingsley, then a manager in Exxon's Department of Public Affairs. “Exxon's support of the arts serves the arts as a social lubricant. And if business is to continue in big cities, it needs a more lubricated environment.”<sup>[8]</sup> What exactly is social lubricant? It first seems humorously appropriate that an oil company manager would use this metaphor. But far more harrowing is the notion that art, or at least sponsorship of the arts, can be used to pacify society, to make corporate expansion and proliferation go on with indifference. Sponsorship of the arts provides the lube necessary for corporations to more easily fuck the public.

Another work of Haacke's that deals more directly with the museum's use

of this rhetoric, but also the mystification of corporate practices is *MetroMobilitan* (1985, Owned by Hans Haacke).<sup>[9]</sup> Here Haacke utilized the now proliferate practice of displaying large banners advertising exhibitions at the entrance to the museum. This practice began at the Metropolitan Museum of Art under the directorship of Thomas Hoving (1966-1977), who is credited with being one of the first museum directors to court corporations and their money.<sup>[10]</sup> The work implicates the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Mobil Corporation, which sponsored an exhibition of ancient Nigerian art at the museum and has provided numerous other grants and support to the Metropolitan.

At the time when Mobil sponsored the exhibition of ancient Nigerian art, it was selling oil to South Africa's Apartheid government, military, and police, and was one of the largest U.S. corporations present in the nation.<sup>[11]</sup> When asked to prohibit sales to South Africa's government, Mobil responded with "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..." This retort appears on the left banner in Haacke's work, which contains three of these banners. The central banner advertises the "Treasures of Ancient Nigeria" exhibition, with an image of a sculpture from the exhibition, and the right banner contains Mobil's reasoning for not prohibiting sales to South Africa's government. "Total denial of supplies to the police and military forces of a host country is hardly consistent with an image of responsible citizenship in that country." All three banners contain the Mobil corporate logo. Hanging behind and visible through the spaces between these three banners is a large photomural of a funeral procession for black victims shot by South African police officers in 1985.

Above the banners is a fiberglass mockup of an entablature, echoing the Beaux-Arts classicism of the Metropolitan Museum's architecture. In the center of the entablature is a plaque which reads,

Many public relations opportunities are available through the sponsorship of programs, special exhibitions and services. These can often provide a creative and cost effective answer to a specific marketing objective, particularly where international, governmental or consumer relations may be

a fundamental concern.

Haacke has excerpted this passage from a pamphlet distributed by the Metropolitan Museum to corporations titled “The Business Behind Art Knows the Art of Good Business—Your Company and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” We see that the museum also embraces the rhetoric combining sponsorship with good business practice, that sponsorship provides a boost in public image.

In combining these rhetorical elements with the photomural, Haacke lays bare the process of mystification that takes place with corporate sponsorship. He shows that these seemingly disparate elements—violence in South Africa and an exhibition in New York—are related to one another *vis-à-vis* the financial ties of the corporation to the Apartheid government as well the Metropolitan Museum. It also shows that while culture may be the superstructural expression of a social order, at its base is the economic reality of domination, colonization, and bloodshed. The museum, however, assures a positive image for the corporation that would otherwise be seen badly for its involvement with South Africa’s oppressive government. Sponsorship not only provides a boost in public relations, indirect profits but also, as Bourdieu writes, “permits it ... to conceal certain kinds of actions.”<sup>[12]</sup> It is no small wonder why corporations are willing to pay such high prices for the art commodity given the powerful return of symbolic capital that their financial investment guarantees.

### **Relations and the Space of the Museum**

Put most simply, Haacke’s work is one of institutional critique. As can be seen in the above examples of his work, at the heart of Haacke’s project is the critique of institutional practices, practices that mystify the “true” nature of institutions’ relations to one another. Here it is helpful to use Michel de Certeau’s and Henri Lefebvre’s terms of *strategy* and *tactics*. De Certeau defines strategy as the mastery of space; strategy defines space so that actors within that space can pursue objectives through the accumulation of advantages, allowing for the further expansion of strategy; strategy has imperialistic undertones. Tactics, on the other hand, are isolated actions that advantageously use the gaps within a strategic

system in order to generate differing outcomes in the hopes of disrupting such a system.<sup>[13]</sup> Museums and corporations *strategically* mystify their relations in order to expand those relations. Strategy, according to Lefebvre, is what institutions use to maintain power.<sup>[14]</sup> Therefore, Haacke's work is *tactical* in that it demystifies their power, finding the points of correspondence and connection within a network that would otherwise go unnoticed due to their concealment by the institutional strategy. Whereas the strategy of the museum is to appear culturally autonomous, and that of the corporation is to appear as artistic patron, Haacke's tactics of demystification show that neither is the case.

The space of the museum is created by the relations enacted within it, embodied within it, as is the case with any other social space.<sup>[15]</sup> For Lefebvre, "...any space implies, contains and dissimulates social relationships—and this despite the fact that a space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things..."<sup>[16]</sup> He calls for a new form of spatial analysis not dependent upon the notion of space as thing-in-itself which only serves to isolate space in abstraction, keeping us from true analysis that "uncovers the social relations imbedded within [space]."<sup>[17]</sup> The "networks and pathways", the *rhizomatic* structure--to borrow a term from Deleuze and Guattari--of relations bring what would otherwise be an abstract concept of space into "real existence."<sup>[18]</sup> The social relations of the space of the museum not only include those of the museum to its corporate sponsors, but also the audience that enters the museum and partakes in the "aesthetic ritual," the artists whose work is displayed there, the network of buying and selling works of art, etc., all interpenetrating and superimposing one another. There are in any social space, according to Lefebvre, "a host of [social relationships] that analysis can potentially disclose,"<sup>[19]</sup> a host of relationships that far exceeds the simplification of my analysis.

To see the museum as simply the autonomous realm of culture is to maintain the abstract notion of the museum as thing in itself, or space in itself. Haacke's work denies both the cultural autonomy of the museum and the autonomy of aesthetic experience; an idea that has its origins in Kant's aesthetics, which examines the work of art as a sort of *ding-an-sich* and the aesthetic experience as disinterested and separate from the everyday world of practice.<sup>[20]</sup>

As Fredric Jameson writes, “With Haacke’s installations...we approach an extreme point in which it is no longer clear at all that the rapt attention ideally bestowed on a traditional art ‘masterpiece’—whether Holbein or Cezanne—any longer comes into play.”<sup>[21]</sup> After viewing one of Haacke’s installations, the commodity-nature of a traditional work of art is highlighted. Perhaps on first encounter, Haacke’s work denies us the privileged aesthetic experience through its matter of fact, appropriation of the typically non-aesthetic—whether advertising banners, corporate plaques, or, as in the case of some works, advertising images and fact sheets—but it then more importantly dissolves the illusion of the barrier between the autonomous space of culture and, for lack of a better term, everything else. For Jameson,

What happens here...--and here we anticipate the other dimension of this work that has to do with the critique of institutions—is that the elements of the former work of art now enter the ‘real’ object world around them; they enter a space which is no less narrowly specified and spatially and institutionally differentiated than the living room of the middle-class family: that is, of course, the museum.<sup>[22]</sup>

That the museum is denied its status as autonomous is paramount in Haacke’s work. Denied its “institutional differentiation,” the museum becomes yet another relational space of everyday life.

As with much Conceptual art, Haacke’s work is often viewed as the inheritor of the Duchampian *ready-made* tradition. However, an important distinction must be drawn here between Duchamp’s intent and Haacke’s. In fact, Haacke’s work, although formally indebted to Duchamp’s appropriations, actually *inverts* the conceptual framework behind Duchamp’s use of the ready-made. Duchamp’s *Fountain*, for example, to the chagrin of his critics, actually serves to legitimize the aesthetic context of art. His placement of an everyday object in the gallery or museum changes the object’s function; it no longer exists in the world of use value, but is now elevated to the realm of the aesthetic, where it is imbued with all of the symbolic value of any traditional work of art. Art, as Duchamp brought to



our attention, is not about precious materials, artistic genius, originality, etc., but about the context into which it is placed, that of the aesthetic.

Haacke, however, shows us that the legitimacy of the autonomous aesthetic realm only exists if we cling to the illusion that the museum is a *space in itself*, set aside and apart from the spaces of everyday exchange. He not only brings the objects of everyday life into the aesthetic context, but also the processes of the everyday, the exchanges that take place within this supposedly autonomous realm that are normally considered outside from it. Duchamp reifies the object, empowering it with the aura of the aesthetic; Haacke brings to our attention the fact that the aura is illusory. Furthermore, Haacke demonstrates that the aura of the aesthetic is not only illusory, but that it is used strategically by institutions—both the museum and the corporation—to maintain their power and to sublimate the reality of their relations.

### **Transaestheticization**

We can come to a similar conclusion about the autonomy of the aesthetic through very different means. If Haacke's work opens up the space of the museum to critique by tactically exposing its covert relationships with other institutions—the network of activities covered up by institutional strategies—it is to show that aesthetic autonomy is but an illusion that suppresses the actuality of its relations. If these networks of exchange have always existed, whether or not they have always existed between museums and corporations, then one would begin to think that aesthetic autonomy is and has never been anything more than an ideological construct. But what if the autonomy of the aesthetic is not destroyed by capitalist relations but proliferated by them to the point that the autonomy itself no longer exists because *everything*, even the everyday, has become aestheticized. Whereas Haacke's work speaks to the corporatization of the museum, of the interpenetration of its aesthetic autonomy by the forces of global capital, perhaps we should examine the antithesis and think in terms of the museification of the corporate, of the aestheticization of capitalist exchange. This would be a strange inversion of Jameson's thought as cited above, in which the museum is no longer anymore differentiated than the living room, not because of a loss of the aesthetic,

but because the living room is now just as much the realm of the aesthetic as the museum was before. The primary loss is the loss of the museum's privileged position as the sole realm of the aesthetic.

In order to conceptualize this antithesis, we need not look further than another of Jameson's texts, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural logic of Late Capitalism*. In Jameson's seminal analysis, transaestheticization is one of the characteristics of Postmodernism, otherwise known as Late or Global Capitalism. He writes,

What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. Such economic necessities then find recognition in the varied kinds of institutional support available for the newer art, from foundations and grants to museums and other forms of patronage.<sup>[23]</sup>

What is key to Jameson's analysis is the notion that with Postmodernism we have experienced an unforeseen expansion of global capital into realms that it had never before colonized—among them, according to Jameson, is the aesthetic.

The aesthetic has become a powerful tool of the corporate world, not only in the production of more aesthetic commodities, as Jameson remarks, but also in the idea of aesthetic judgment, in the realm of taste associated with high culture and the world of fine art. David Harvey has analyzed how both the aesthetic, and in a broader sense, the consciousness industry are utilized by corporate America. "...[T]he knowledge and heritage industries, the vitality and ferment of cultural production, signature architecture and the cultivation of distinctive aesthetic judgments have become powerful constitutive elements in the politics of urban entrepreneurialism in many places..."<sup>[24]</sup> Commodifying the aesthetic is of interest to corporations because with the aesthetic comes gentrification of the urban landscape, as can be seen in any number of New York City neighborhoods that

were once poor and industrial, providing cheap alternative spaces in which artists could live and work. After the arrival of the artists, it is only a matter of time before galleries move in, bringing a “high culture” audience and with this audience, financial capital that corporations can exploit. Greenwich Village, SoHo, Tribeca, then become the desirable places to live, causing land values to soar and the poor to take flight.

Corporations must make a foothold in the cultural realm simply because that is where financial capital is. But perhaps more importantly, aside from gaining financial capital from the cultural realm, corporations gain hoards of symbolic capital there as well. Harvey writes,

There is much to achieve, for example, by appeals to fashion (interestingly, being a centre of fashion is one way for cities to accumulate considerable collective symbolic capital). Capitalists are well-aware of this and must therefore wade into the culture wars, as well as into the thickets of multiculturalism, fashion and *aesthetics* [emphasis added], because it is precisely through such means that monopoly rent is always an object of capitalist desire, and the means of gaining it through interventions in the field of culture, history, heritage, aesthetics and meanings must necessarily be of great import for capitalists of any sort.<sup>[25]</sup>

Harvey uses the term “monopoly rent” to describe the way in which corporations and other “social actors,” in the drive to monopolize a given market and increase their incomes (both financial and symbolic), will lay claim to “some directly or indirectly tradable item which is in some crucial respects unique and non-replicable.”<sup>[26]</sup>

In Harvey’s model, what may have been unique and even transgressive is bought up, giving the corporation control over the symbolic value of uniqueness and hence, emptying it of its true significance as a cultural product, producing from it yet another capitalist commodity. In an important twist, we see that although transaestheticization may be taking place, the aesthetic loses its meaning in the process of commodification. In the end it matters little whether the autonomy of

the aesthetic is lost because it never existed, or because of the proliferation of the aesthetic; in both cases, the aesthetic loses its power in the exchange processes of global capital. A paradox is created. As Jean Baudrillard writes, "...everything will be culturalized, every object will be a so-called aesthetic object, and nothing will be an aesthetic object."<sup>[27]</sup>

For Baudrillard, Duchamp initiated this end of the aesthetic through transaestheticization. With Duchamp's introduction of the readymade, the banal object is transformed into an aesthetic one, which "turns the entire world into a readymade." Starting with Duchamp, "all the banality of the world passes into aesthetics, and inversely, all aesthetics becomes banal: a commutation takes place between the two fields of banality and aesthetics, one that truly brings aesthetics in the traditional sense to an end."<sup>[28]</sup> Perhaps it was Duchamp's gesture and the aestheticization of the object world that have led inversely to the commodification of art. However, art has tried to escape this by clinging to its privileged status as the realm of the aesthetic, the spiritual; hence the museum's mystification of its relationships with the corporation. When art becomes commodity, it becomes important for its value: its monetary value, but more importantly, its symbolic value. In this shift towards the art commodity, it is ever more vital for the museum to maintain its status as the autonomous realm of the aesthetic. Arthur C. Danto has explained the reasoning behind this insistence on "purity:"

The museum's spiritual authority is essential if the corporation is to enjoy any of the economic [and symbolic] benefits of its investment in culture. Small wonder that museum directors and curators must insist on the purity of their institutions! Small wonder the museum must represent itself as the shrine of "objects of pure creativity"! It could not serve the end of crassness if it were perceived as crass in its own right.<sup>[29]</sup>

According to Danto, the museum places evermore stress on its supposed aesthetic autonomy, "requiring the ideology of disinterestedness," in order to preclude the fact that the museum "has been transformed into a showroom for classy investments."<sup>[30]</sup>

## Disneyfication and Degenerate Utopias

What happens in this process of transaestheticization is that, according to Baudrillard, “art substituted itself for life in the form of a generalized aesthetics that finally led to a ‘Disneyfication’ of the world: a Disney-form capable of atoning for everything by transforming it into Disneyland...”<sup>[31]</sup> And while Baudrillard’s conclusion that the whole world is “Disneyfied”—made into one great image simulacrum—may seem extreme, one place thoroughly implicated in this “Disneyfication” is the museum. As Rosalind Krauss writes, “it...does not stretch the imagination too much to realize that this industrialized museum will have much more in common with other industrialized areas of leisure—Disneyland say—than it will with the older, preindustrial museum.” While the preindustrial museum may have been concerned with aesthetic and spiritual transcendence, this new museum “will be dealing with mass markets, rather than art markets, and with simulacral experience rather than aesthetic immediacy.”<sup>[32]</sup> The museum in our time of global capital becomes yet another market in which commodity exchange takes place.

In his book *Utopics: Spatial Play*, Louis Marin analyzes these spaces of exchange and how they relate to hegemonic ideology. In his analysis of the “degenerate utopia,” Marin first establishes what exactly a utopia is. A Utopia serves as a discursive space in which ideology is played out; “it is a stage for ideological representation.” Ideology is also the representation of how social actors imagine their relationships against the “their real conditions of existence.” For Marin, “a degenerate utopia is ideology changed into the form of a myth.” Myth develops from ideology that serves to mollify and resolve “formally a fundamental social contradiction.”<sup>[33]</sup> While a utopia is ideology enacted spatially, it becomes degenerate when there is at its ideological basis the desire to exclude, conceal, sublimate some sort of contradiction or difference that would serve to compromise the hegemony of the given dominant ideology. Marin’s intent is to show how utopia degenerates, “how the utopic representation can be entirely caught in a dominant system of ideas and values and, thus, be changed into a myth or a collective fantasy.”<sup>[34]</sup>

Marin's model for a degenerate utopia is Disneyland. Disneyland's ideological function is to portray the dominant capitalist American ideology of consumption, technological progress, morality, etc. in a non-conflictual way, while the reality is that these qualities are had through global domination, "obtained by violence and exploitation." Through ideology, Disneyland mystifies the relations of global capitalist domination, presenting a superstructural myth that sublimates the real conditions at the base of capitalist exchange. Visitors to Disneyland enact this myth without realizing that they are enacting the myth of American domination. "They are captured, like a rat in a maze, and are alienated by their part without being aware of performing a part."<sup>[35]</sup> The visitor thus performs the narrative without realizing its mythic quality or, for that matter, its narrative quality; ideology serves to naturalize constructedness, to deceive the visitor into seeing harmony between real tensions and conflicting elements. It is only through meta-analysis that this mythic structure is exposed, and along with it the tensions and contradictions, the *real* relations of capital, begin to emerge.<sup>[36]</sup>

Using Marin's model, Harvey writes that a degenerative utopia is "a supposedly happy, harmonious, and non-conflictual space set aside from the 'real' world 'outside' in such a way as to soothe and mollify, to entertain, to invent history and to cultivate a nostalgia from some mythical past, to perpetuate the fetish of commodity culture rather than to critique it."<sup>[37]</sup> The degenerate utopia is a place where "the dialectic is repressed" and difference and conflict are sublimated in an ahistorical spatial organization. It certainly does not offer a critique to capitalist exchange, and allows no room for such critique to come into play. It is a space singularly devoted to commodity fetishism.

Harvey raises the question as to whether when an imagined utopia will ever be anything more than degenerate in its materialization as spatial form. "Perhaps Utopia can never be realized without destroying itself."<sup>[38]</sup> If this is the case, then Disneyland for Harvey is but the most extreme and blatant example among many capitalist degenerate utopias; a variety of contemporary spaces have achieved a relative level of "Disneyfication." Within the present situation of global capitalist domination "many other cultural institutions—museums and heritage centers, arenas for spectacle, exhibitions and festivals—seem to have as their aim the

cultivation of nostalgia...the nurturing of uncritical aesthetic sensibilities, and the absorption of future possibilities into a non-conflictual arena that is eternally present.”<sup>[39]</sup> The dominations and struggles that have marked history are excluded in the degenerate utopia, along with the current forms of domination repressed by the dominant ideological myths perpetuated by it; conflict and critique are exorcized.

### **The Museum as Degenerate Utopia**

As much as it would like to, the museum does not escape categorization as a capitalist degenerate utopia. Recalling Baudrillard’s and Danto’s comments above, the museum maintains its status as the pure, autonomous realm of aesthetic, spiritual, and transcendent artistic value, although in reality it has become the realm of capitalist exchange. Rather than valuing the aesthetic for its own sake, museums value it for the financial capital gained through art’s symbolic capital, traded off to corporation in order to increase the museum’s financial capital. Thus the ideology of aesthetic autonomy perpetuated by the museum becomes myth, “resolving” the contradictions raised by the real conditions of its relations with the corporate. The museum stages this myth within its walls where visitors perform and enact it through the aesthetic ritual of a history of art that has no grounding in social conflict and domination, but only in the conflicts between contemporaneous artistic trends and the dominations of one style over another.

It is important to museums and their corporate sponsors to maintain this myth in order to maintain the perpetuation of capitalist expansion. To return to Haacke’s work, art serves as *social grease*; art offers to corporations the possibility of mystifying the treachery and exploitation at the heart of global capitalist domination. The museum visitor only sees what the hegemonic ideology wants them to see, that the museum is a pure institution and that the corporation is a politically and economically disinterested patron. They see the corporation’s name on the large, colorful banner outside the entrance and on the bronze plaque inside, represented to them as benevolent patrons, and they most likely pay little heed to the symbolic power embodied in the bronze plaque. After all, the public is at the museum to enact the aesthetic ritual, to contemplate truth and beauty in a

space set aside specifically for this purpose; an almost sacred space devoted to preserving great and timeless works of art.



an international and interdisciplinary journal of postmodern cultural sound, text and image  
Volume 4, March 2007, ISSN 1552-5112

## Notes

---

- [1] Carol Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual," from *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998), 474-475.
- [2] Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1995), 17.
- [3] Bourdieu and Haacke, 2
- [4] Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play*, trans. by Robert A. Vollrath (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1984). I was introduced to the "degenerate utopia" through David Harvey's "The Spaces of Utopia," from his book *Spaces of Hope*. My debt to Harvey will become evident throughout this paper.
- [5] Hans Haacke, "Museums as Managers of Consciousness," from *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, ed. by Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1986), 69.
- [6] *On Social Grease* was originally exhibited in Haacke's one-person show at the John Weber Gallery, New York, May 3-May 28, 1975.
- [7] This quotation originally came from a speech titled "Culture and Corporation's Support of the Arts" delivered to the National Industrial Conference Board on September 20, 1966.
- [8] Haacke excerpted this quotation from Marilyn Bender's article, "Business Aids the Arts . . . And Itself," from *The New York Times*, October 20, 1974.
- [9] This work was originally exhibited in a one-person exhibition at the John Weber Gallery, New York, May 4-25, 1985.
- [10] Brian Wallis, "Institutions Trust Institutions," from *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, 51. Wallis cites that corporate sponsorship of the arts grew from \$22 million dollars in 1967 to over \$600 million in 1985.



[11] Hans Haacke, *MetroMobilitan*, from *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, 274. In 1981, Mobil controlled twenty percent of South Africa's petroleum market.

[12] Bourdieu and Haacke, 18

[13] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 116.

[14] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 84.

[15] LeFebvre makes the distinction between natural and social spaces, the second being products of relational activity "which involves the economic and technical realms but which extends well beyond them, for these are also political products, and strategic spaces (84)."

[16] Ibid, 82

[17] Ibid, 89

[18] Ibid, 86

[19] Ibid, 88. Among Haacke's early works to deal with the networks of relations within the museum is *MOMA-Poll* (1970), in which visitors to the Museum of Modern Art, as part of an exhibition titled *Information*, were asked to fill out a ballot given to them on entry to the museum. The ballot asked each visitor to answer a specific politically-related question dealing with then Governor Rockefeller's stance on Nixon's policies in Vietnam. At the time, the Governor Nelson Rockefeller and his brother, David, were on the board of trustees of the museum. The ballots were tallied at the end of each day. Haacke's purpose was to involve visitors to the museum with a "current socio-political issue," thus, bringing to bear on their visit seemingly "external" relations that might not normally be a part of the museum experience. (Hans Haacke, *Framing and Being Framed: 7 Works 1970-75* (exh. cat.), (Halifax and New York: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University, 1975), 9-10.

[20] Fredric Jameson, "Hans Haacke and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernism," from *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, 40. Jameson places Haacke's work within the context of the questioning of aesthetic autonomy inaugurated by Conceptualism and the critique of ideology and institutions, both of which gained popularity in the social and political tumult of the 1960s.

[21] Ibid, 41. Since their conception in the eighteenth century, modern museums have been viewed as places set apart from the spaces of everyday life. See Carol Duncan's "The Art Museum as Ritual." According to Duncan, the art museum serves as a frame differencing the experience and temporality of the aesthetic *ritual* enacted within from the activities that take place outside its walls. This *ritual*

enacted within the museum is one of enlightenment. In experiencing the museum, the visitor should feel a sense of “exalted happiness,” to quote Kenneth Clark, derived from the timeless presence of great works of art and their relation to the self.

[22] Ibid, 42

[23] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1991), 4-5

[24] David Harvey, “The Art of Rent: Globalization, Monopoly and the Commodification of Culture,” from *A World of Contradictions: Socialist Register 2002*, ed. by Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (London, Merlin Press, 2001), 105

[25] Ibid, 107

[26] Ibid, 94

[27] Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer, trans. by Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), 52.

[28] Ibid

[29] Arthur C. Danto, *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste* (Amsterdam: G and B Arts International, 1998), 134-135.

[30] Ibid, 133

[31] Jean Baudrillard, 53

[32] Rosalind Krauss, “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum,” from *October 54* (Autumn 1990) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 17. In this article, Krauss considers the transition of the museum from keeper and protector of cultural heritage to investor and trader in cultural goods. Interestingly, she associates the commodification of art with Minimalism and its industrially-produced art objects that allow for current collectors to reproduce them or replace their deteriorating parts. She also analyzes the growing trend towards placing museums devoted to ever-more specific types of contemporary art in large, formerly industrial sites.

[33] Louise Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play*, trans. by Robert A. Vollrath (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1984), 239.

[34] Ibid, 240

[35] Ibid

[36] Ibid, 241

[37] David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 166-167. It is David Harvey's analysis that led me to Marin's text. Within the context of his argument, I think David Harvey explains Marin's theory of "degenerate utopia" better than Marin himself does.

[38] Ibid, 167

[39] Ibid, 168. "The multiple degenerate utopias that now surround us—the shopping malls and the 'bourgeois' commercialized utopias of the suburbs being paradigmatic—do as much to signal the end of history as the collapse of the Berlin wall ever did. They instantiate rather than critique the idea that 'there is no alternative,' save those given by the conjoining of technological fantasies, commodity culture, and endless capital accumulation."

## Bibliography

Baudrillard, Jean, *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer, trans. by Ames Hodges. New York: Semiotext(e), 2005

Bourdieu, Pierre and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange*. Stanford: Stanford University, 1995

Danto, Arthur C., *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste*. Amsterdam: G and B Arts International, 1998

de Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984

Deutsche, Rosalind, et. al., *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, ed. by Brian Wallis. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1986

Duncan, Carol, "The Art Museum as Ritual," from *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Donald Preziosi. Oxford: Oxford University, 1998

Harvey, David, *Spaces of Hope*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000

-----, "The Art of Rent: Globalization, Monopoly and the Commodification of Culture," from *A World of Contradictions: Socialist Register 2002*. London, Merlin Press, 2001

Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University, 1991

Kraus, Rosalind, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," from *October*

54. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, Autumn 1990

Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith.

Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991

Marin, Louis, *Utopics: Spatial Play*, trans. by Robert A. Vollrath. Atlantic Highlands,

NJ: Humanities, 1984