DER BEVÖLKERUNG

HANS HAACKE: Weaponising Design

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Following an hour-long debate on the 5th of April 2000, members of the German Bundestag narrowly approved the installation of Hans Haacke's *Der Bevölkerung* (To The Population) in the open-air courtyard of the Reichstag in Berlin. The artwork – comprising large eponymous neon letters surrounded by a freely growing bed of soil transplanted from different parliamentary constituencies in Germany – had created controversy because of its implicit critique of the nationalist connotations embedded within the 1916 inscription on the entrance of the building, which reads 'Dem Deutschen Volke' (To The German People). By countering this particular inscription, *Der Bevölkerung* seeks to express that the purpose of the German government is to answer to the entire German population, not the 'Volk' — a term tarnished through its use by the Nazis, and one which, for Haacke, does not represent the reality of multicultural Germany.[1] While *Der Bevölkerung* is a complex work[2], much of its efficacy derives from Haacke's astute decision to spell out its message using lettering modelled carefully on *Behrens Schrift*, the typeface that houses the exterior inscription. The artwork thus speaks, through both content and form, to its site-specific context in order to become a critical appendage to that original inscription.

Haacke has often stated that he uses 'context as material'[3] and this work is but one example of the way he draws on the form and contexts provided by design practices — in particular elements of graphic design: typefaces, logos, corporate identities, advertising layout — in order to construct his arguments. Indeed, one of the most salient features of his work is the high sensitivity with which he acknowledges and appropriates design details, using them as raw material to shape and manipulate. He routinely puts into action a view held by the graphic designer and historian Richard Hollis, that graphic images are 'signs whose context gives them a unique meaning... [and] whose positioning can lend them a new significance.'[4] In the case of *Der Bevölkerung*, for example, the choice of typeface functions as an essential formal structuring device through which the work's riposte is carried – linking interior with exterior – while the historical associations of the letterforms themselves provide a further layer of meaning by alluding to the conflicted history of nationalism within Germany.[5] Works by Haacke including *Germania* (1993) and *Und Ihr habt doch gesiegt* (And You Were Victorious After All, 1988), have

1. Hans Haacke, 'Thoughts about the Project 1999–2000' in Walter Grasskamp (et al.), *Hans Haacke*, London and New York: Phaidon, 2004, p. 141.

2. For an in-depth analysis of the various conceptual dimensions of the artwork see Jack McGrath, 'Processing Blood and Soil: The Biopolitics of Hans Haacke's *Der Bevölkerung*' in Rachel Churner (ed.), *October Files 18: Hans Haacke*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2015.

3. Yves-Alain Bois (et al.) 'A Conversation with Hans Haacke', in Churner, ibid., p. 58.

4. Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2001, p. 7.

5. Haacke explains that the choice of *Behrens Schrift* for the exterior of the Reichstag in 1916 outraged conservative politicians who argued that the inscription should be set in a Fraktur (calligraphically derived) typeface, which they regarded as more 'German'. See Haacke, op.cit, p. 138.

Hans Haacke, *Der Bevölkerung*, (2000), Image © Richard Buettner.

Exterior, Reichstag, Berlin. Image permission: Francis Heery

also considered questions of German national identity by channelling unsettling references to design history, but it is in Haacke's biting criticisms of the actions of multinational corporations such as Mobil (now ExxonMobil), Philips, Daimler-Benz (now Daimler), and Philip Morris, that he has most consistently wielded the forms of graphic design as material. In these works, the visual language of corporate identity and advertising provide him with a potent range of contextual assets to repurpose. *Creating Consent* (1981), for example, employs the Mobil logo, colour scheme and company typeface to humorously reimagine an oil drum as gigantic 'branded' television antenna, as a comment on the oil company's sponsorship and influence over the US state-founded Public Broadcasting Service. In *A Breed Apart* (1978), a reconfigured series of advertisements for British Leyland becomes a frame through which the company's involvement with the South African Apartheid regime is highlighted.

Unlikely as it might seem at first, there is a curiously looping thread linking *Der Bevölkerung* to many of these works. *Behrens Schrift* – the artwork's featured type design reference – is named after its designer, Peter Behrens, who is often credited as the creator of the first corporate identity system.[6] The design work that Behrens produced for the German electrical firm AEG (Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft) - encompassing a cohesive system of architecture and electrical products accompanied by a standardised graphic design system - laid groundwork for this sub-field of design practice that would develop expansively during the post-WWII period. Behrens's work, arising from the 'art into industry' pedagogy of German modernism, pioneered the concept that a company should have a standardised and distinctively recognisable visual appearance including company logo, typeface and a consistent graphic style. The replicable nature of any given corporate identity scheme – the fact that its visual language is designed so that it can be intentionally reproduced by any designer following a set of instructions (known today as 'brand guidelines') – is regarded as essential to its success. This is what produces its easily identifiable 'brand-image', and for Haacke, it is this reproducibility that is precisely what makes the graphic outputs of corporations such ideal material to work with. Corporations invariably present themselves as possessing self-evident and natural identities, yet Haacke is well aware that these identities are *constructs*, and the manufactured language through which they communicate is easily impersonated.

At the centre of any corporate identity scheme is the logo, which Haacke deploys as a central feature within many of his works. For the celebrated American corporate identity designer Paul Rand, a logo 'is an instrument of pride and should be shown at its best,'[7] and one senses that Haacke takes a slightly mischievous pleasure in faithfully reproducing these symbols in order to then systematically undermine them. Haacke is also evidently in full agreement with Rand

6. Richard Hollis, *Swiss Graphic Design: The Origins and Growth of an International Style 1920–1965*. London: Laurence King, 2006, p. 41.

7. Paul Rand, 'Logos, Flags, and Escutcheons' 1991, in Michael Bierut (et al., eds.), *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design,* New York: Allworth Press, 1994, p. 88.

8. Ibid., p. 89.

9. As with *Der Bevölkerung*, this is a highly complex work, the full significance of which lies outside the scope of this essay. For an in-depth analysis, see Bois, op. cit.

10. Hans Haake, 'Caught between Revolver and Chequebook: A Paper for "Art and the Economy" Colloquium 1993' in Walter Grasskamp (et al.), *Hans Haacke,* London and New York: Phaidon, 2004, p. 126.

when he states further that a logo 'derives its meaning from the thing that it symbolises, not the other way around.'[8] The use of logo as material for his artworks not only identifies individual corporations as the subject (or targets) of these artworks, but also provides the leverage for his attacks, whereby he draws on the complex external realities that come pre-packaged within the form of the logo itself, in order to turn it on itself. A particularly striking example of this tactic can be found in *Les must de Rembrandt* (1986) which targets the Rembrandt Group business conglomerate – and its associated companies Cartier (jewellery) and Total (petroleum) – inside a carefully constructed installation highlighting the group's connections with the exploitation of black workers in apartheid South Africa.[9] The viewer enters the installation through a doorway as if entering a Cartier shop and is confronted by an overtly decadent display of these three associated logos, with a large image of a worker's strike placed in the centre. Any associations of luxury that would have typically been suggested by the Cartier logo are immediately punctured by its placement above this central image, and also by its proximity to the incongruous brutal sans-serif form of the Total logo beneath. Information etched in gold below (along with an external caption) contextualises the display, drawing disturbing connections between the juxtaposed visual elements. The installation reinforces Haacke's view that '...the context in which [cultural productions such as designed artefacts] appear has a signifying power of its own. As the context changes, so does the way audiences respond.'[10] The authority that these logos hold outside the gallery – as symbols of prestige, wealth and power – is unmasked as a front for mass oppression, and the meaning of their identity is thus transformed through the exhibit. Works like these arguably anticipated the development of 'culture jamming', in which the visual language of corporate graphic design is subverted to create messages that target multinationals. One of the most famous examples is the Nike 'advertisement' that displays an image of a child labourer beside a Swoosh and the slogan 'Just Do it'. But whereas many such images tend towards generalised critique, Haacke's work has consistently emphasised the particulars of places, historical events, corporations, and individuals, while each work also responds to the singular circumstances presented by the artwork's proposed exhibition location. This attention to detail, to the specifics of context, is what provides the works with much of their potency and Haacke's arguments have the added benefit of being voiced *within* the established art system, in essence, from a position of power in the first instance. Their status as artworks in prestigious galleries is what allows them to pursue a different tactical approach than that of protest and often leads to attempts at censorship[11], thus furthering their potential to stir controversy, or create a 'fallout', which Haacke considers a part of the artwork itself.[12]

Haacke has stated that '...in order to reach a public, one has to insert one's ideas into the public discourse [...by entering] the institutions where this discourse takes place...'[13] The presentation of his works in a gallery is central to this aim, and in public works like *Der Bevölkerung* or the more recent *Gift Horse* (2015) – which also draws on the socio-cultural associations of letterforms, in this case stock-market ticker tape displays – this aim is achieved quite literally of course. However, another way to interpret this point might also be that his use of graphic design elements as art material also further cements the artwork's connections to public discourse, by way of speaking in the 'forms and language that are accessible to [the] public.'[14] Within the context of gallery display in particular, Haacke's graphic design elements function much like inverted ready-mades: rather than reimagining commonplace objects as art within gallery, he uses these objects of design to direct attention *away* from the gallery, transforming the public's understanding of complex realities of the world outside it.

11. For example, Mobil attempted to sue both Tate Gallery and the Van Abbemuseum for publishing a catalogue of works by Haacke that featured the use of their logo, but were ultimately unsuccessful in preventing the publication. See Grasskamp, op. cit., p. 133.

12. Bois, op. cit., p. 66.

13. Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange*. Cambridge: Polity, 1995, p. 65.

14. Ibid., p. 107.