

# THE UNFINISHABLE BUSINESS OF SOUTH AFRICA IN THE WORK OF HANS HAACKE .

by

Ntongela Masilela

More than any other artist of our time, Hans Haacke has wrought a visual equivalent of Walter Benjamin's observation that 'there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'

- Yve-Alain Bois, "The Antidote", October (1986).

Haacke ist sich bewusst, dass alle gesellschaftlichen Handlungen, einschliesslich der Kunst, explizit oder implizit politischer Natur sind.

- Edward F. Fry, "Hans Haacke", Documenta 8 (Katalog), 1987.

Haacke's work seems to me to emerge at this point, as a solution to certain crucial dilemmas of a left cultural politics based on this heightened awareness of the role of the institutions.

- Fredric Jameson, "Hans Haacke and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernism", **Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business** (ed.), Brian Wallis, 1987.

The most fascinating artists to this observer at last year's Documenta 8 (1987) exhibition in Kassel, West Germany were Mark Tansey, Hans Haacke and Fabrizio Plessi: an American, a German-American and an Italian. Their art work stood out in preeminence in an exhibition that included work from some of the outstanding artists of our time: Anselm Kiefer, the late Joseph Beuys, Richard Serra, Aldo Rossi, Arata Isozaki, and others. The last two-named, architects, make plain why it has been in the field of architecture that epoch-making battles, those that define processes of periodization, on the theories of postmodernism and postmodernity have been bitterly fought out. In another context, concerning the importance of the Venetian historian of architecture, Manfredo Tafuri, for Marxist international culture today, it will be necessary to try to explain why it has been in the domain of architecture that postmodernism has revealed its complex nature; in the sense of constituting itself as a dialectic of progression

and regression, as much as it is arguable that it was in literature that modernism displayed its most profound historicity.

In each of the works by these three painters there is a radical attempt to incorporate theoretical formulations (abstractions) into the figurative or into the installation or into sculptural: in Mark Tansey, one encounters the incorporation of theories of perception and modernity, especially of modernity in French painting from Cezanne onwards, into his figurative paintings; in Hans Haacke, the conceptual structure of historical and class relations is incorporated into his magnificent panels and brilliant installations; in Fabrizio Plessi, water as a physical force and as a metaphysical principle structures his installations or sculptural works. It should not be supposed that this process or principle of incorporation is confined only to these artists. On the contrary, in Anselm Kiefer for example, practically every one of his paintings is a commentary on, or an incorporation of, a particular moment of German history - for instance, the history of coloration in German painting from Ernst Ludwig Kirschner through Max Beckman to Kiefer himself, or for instance, the destiny of the mythological structure surrounding Wagner in German cultural history. But it only in these three painters that this process is taken to its most consequential extreme.

Hans Haacke, a major artist of international reputation, has remarkably and dramatically incorporated the historical experience of South Africa into installations by compelling commerce, art and representation to dialogue through figurative forms. In this, he has singularly defined a new historical space of cultural politics within the conditions of postmodernity (following Jameson, postmodernism understood as the cultural logic of late capitalism). Hans Haacke stands in complete contrast to Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), the great Portuguese modernist, arguably the greatest Portuguese poet since Camoes, who though having spent ten years in Durban (1896-1906), the decade of his formative experience, manages to leave South Africa out of his poetic oeuvre. Pessoa is to be contrasted with Camoes, who made South Africa part of the touchstone of his epic, the landscape of the Cape of Good Hope, which his contemporaries and compatriots Vasco da Gama and Barthelmeow Diaz made a point of rest on their great imperial voyages seeking a way to India. This being the centenary year of Pessoa's birth, which is being celebrated in many parts of the world, we South Africans have still to pose a critical question to our cultural and literary history, as to why our culture seems to have had no effect on his creative imagination, other than the fact of his bilingualism. [1](#) With Hans Haacke, his encounter with our historical experience has enriched his creative imagination and expanded his historical horizon.

The conceptual structure of historical and class relations evident in Haacke's art work aims at imparting of, and effecting a change in, consciousness of the

observer as the subject of history. In emphasizing the importance of consciousness Haacke continues a particular tradition of German Marxism which attributes the disastrous years of 1933-45 to the absence of a proper and correct articulation of consciousness, class or oppositional. This German intellectual tradition is eminently represented by Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. This should not be understood to mean that Haacke belongs by any stretch of the imagination to the Frankfurt School, but rather, that his art work continues a deep-rooted German cultural tradition. His recent fundamental essay, "Museums, Managers of Consciousness", which in many ways gives explanation of the historical project of his art work, is inexplicable without the precedence of Adorno and Horkheimer's book of 1947, **The Dialectic of Enlightenment**, a text which sought to cartograph the tragic adventure of consciousness in the contemporary art world. [2](#) That Adorno and Horkheimer condemned the new art forms celebrated by Benjamin, is another story within the dialectic of Marxism within German culture, or that Habermas today has distanced himself from his predecessor's critique of the bourgeois Enlightenment project of establishing of rationality, is equally also another story. [3](#) What is crucial for our purposes here, is that the translucent optimism of Hans Haacke is in contradistinction to the classical pessimism of Adorno and Horkheimer. In other words, the real controlling background of Haacke's imagination and perspective is the twelve tragic years of German history in our century.

That most of Haacke's art work is in the form of panels and installations is again to be understood in the background of what happened to German art in Germany during the Nazi occupation and colonization of the German imagination. Figurative art, especially in the form of hyper-realism, was carried to the level of obscenity in degradation of humanity, in praise of inhumanity, anti-Semitism and racism. In reaction to this great tragedy, the art work of Haacke could be characterised as anti-figurative and anti-realistic realism (i.e., conceptual art). In this sense, it finds a point of identification with the work of Joseph Beuys. Whereas the work of Haacke is projected on a historical plane, the work of Beuys, as this year's great and controversial Retrospective here in West Berlin's Walter Gropius Hall showed (the first since the passing away of the artist in 1986), is projected towards mythology and shamanism. But the articulation of their work against Nazi art is absolutely clear. They both found inspiration in the work of Marcel Duchamp. Existing simultaneously within the same German cultural space, historically speaking, Haacke precedes Kiefer.

The installations, panels and other artistic forms employed by Hans Haacke require the amalgamation of imagination and intellect for their appreciation on the part of the public. Clearly then, he has situated himself against the cultural logic of postmodernism, so apparent in the photography of Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman, or the postmodernist art work of Julian

Schnabel, Andy Warhol and Clemente, in which originality is negated, repetition and pastiche are celebrated, imagination is dehistoricized and history itself is denied. Intellect and imagination are combined by Haacke to deconstruct the hegemony of postmodernist cultural logic. In this sense, Hans Haacke could be seen as continuing Brecht's historical project of unveiling the most pronounced contradictions of a particular historical moment, by locating his art in the situation of specificities .

By marrying imagination and intellect in the most pronounced way, Haacke has made his installations and panels into conceptual constructions. In short, his remarkable art work, into which its making he combines or synthesizes information, the imagination and the intellect, is a series of epistemological forms which produce (in the sense of Walter Benjamin) knowledges of history or, in other words, knowledge of the historicalness of the present moment. For instance, his Manet-PROJECT '74, which consists of ten panels, each of which giving information about the previous owners of Manet's 'Bunch of Asparagus', and a color reproduction of 'Bunch of Asparagus' in a frame, gives us knowledge about the underside of art history, which is rarely mentioned in texts on art history, rather than the aesthetic upperside of art history, which usually suffocate these art history texts. That the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum/Museum Ludwig in Cologne refused to exhibit this work, after having accepted it in draft form, clearly shows the nature of class interests museums in late capitalism defend. This refusal of 1974 is similar to the refusal of 1971, when the Guggenheim Museum in New York refused to exhibit Haacke's 'Shapolsky et. al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971'. These refusals are an acknowledgement of the interlocking relationship between corporate powers, which exploit Third World countries, and art institutions like Museums, which supposedly represent civilization. The art work of Haacke unveils the dialectic of civilization and barbarism which Walter Benjamin has said is so characteristic of culture. It is only within the last two years, after a blockade lasting about fifteen years, that Haacke has been 're-accepted' by the dominant and big art institutions. This was signalled by the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, which exhibited the art work of Hans Haacke created between 1969 and 1986, under the title 'Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business'. This exhibition was held between December 12, 1986-February 15, 1987.

The present writer first encountered the work of Hans Haacke in Documenta 8 (1987), when his 1987 mixed media project, "Kontinuitat", was on display in Kassel . This project consists of a reproduced photograph of a funeral procession carrying coffins of police victims inside a logo of Deutsche Bank, one of the biggest banks in the Federal Republic of Germany with extensive holdings in South Africa . The photograph inside this logo hangs below the logo of Mercedes

Benz, which also has extensive investments in our country. Both the Deutsche Bank and the Mercedes Benz concerns are financial supporters of the Documenta exhibitions. Again the interconnections between corporate power and art institutions is clear. Since 1978, that is since the Sowet Uprising of 1976, beginning with "A Breed Apart", an art work consisting of reproduced photographs of police repression in our country using Leyland jeeps and those advertising the Jaguar, also manufactured by British Leyland (today known as the Rover Group), South Africa has found extensive representation in the work of Hans Haacke. This one-person exhibition was held at the Museum of Modern Art at Oxford, not very far from a major British Leyland production center at Cowley. This work consisting of seven panels, gives representation to the interconnectedness of 'civilization' (Jaguar) and barbarism (police repression in South Africa). The concept of reproducibility, which Walter Benjamin eminently theorized as one of the fundamental constructs of modernity, is one of the fundamental constrictive principles informing the art work of Hans Haacke.

The salient circumstance surrounding the first public exhibition of Haacke's work is that it is always situation-specific: it is not by chance that the polyptych, "We believe in the power of creative imagination", assembled in 1980, was first exhibited at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent, Belgium, or that the three panels of 1983, "Voice Alcan", were first displayed at the Galerie France Morin in Montreal, Canada, or that "MetroMobiltan", constructed in 1985, was first unveiled to the public in New York City. This concentration on South Africa in the thematic structure of Haacke's conceptual poetics, would seem to indicate then that, for him, Apartheid South Africa from 1948 to the present, is merely the continuation (Kontinuitat) of Nazi ideology, which was defeated in Europe in 1945. Haacke's engagement with South Africa today, is in many ways a continuing engagement with a particular tragic moment of German history.

The situation-specific nature of Hans Haacke's art work would seem to find a point of convergence with Fredric Jameson's recent advocacy for a world culture which is based on the internationalism of national situations. This fundamental essay of 1987, "The state of the subject (III)", indicates the charting of a new intellectual direction, for his first volume, of his two-volume recent publication, **The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986**, is called **Situations of Theory**.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it should be recalled that Jean-Paul Sartre assembled his essays under the various volumes called Situations. In the context of postmodern conditions, to indicate the situationality of one's historical projects, whether artistic or theoretical, is to reveal the historicity of the present moment: to reveal that which is subject to change and transformation, to reveal the transitory nature of the present cultural dominant, and to reveal the subject of history, which can bring about the surpassing of present-day contradictions. Jameson's essay on Hans Haacke announces the convergence of their historical projects.

Though the work of Hans Haacke is usually situation-specific, in the sense of unravelling the primary contradictions of particular political ensembles in the present context, it would be a serious misunderstanding of its conceptual depth and of its penetrative pitch in historical allusions, to limit its significance only to the present context. Haacke penetrates the present political context in order to go deeper into the cultural forms of historical lineages. A work like, "We Believe in the Power of the Imagination", a polyptych of eleven silkscreens panels and a flag, is an extraordinary tracing of lineages, specific to Ghent (Belgium), where the work was first displayed in 1980, yet relevant to world culture. David Craven, in a seminal essay, "Hans Haacke and the Aesthetics of Imagination", which appeared in the Canadian art magazine *Parachute*, a year following the exhibition of this work, brilliantly shows its direct visual analogies with the Ghent Altarpiece (1432) by Hubert and Jan van Eyck. To historically understand and aesthetically appreciate "We Believe in the Power of the Imagination", it is necessary to juxtapose two statements. Haacke writes of the political logic informing the construction of the polyptych: "Fabrique Nationale Herstal S.A. (FN) is one of the major manufactures of small arms and ammunition in the world. The company, with headquarters in Herstal, near Liege, Belgium, admits to supplying arms and ammunition to about eighty countries . . . During the civil war in Biafra, FN supplied both sides with weapons . . . In 1977, a large number of Belgium 'hunting rifles' were delivered to South Africa. The international press has since frequently reported that South African blacks were wounded or killed by shotgun blasts". [5](#) David Craven makes the following instructive analysis: "Precisely because the format of the Ghent Altarpiece is religiously based, as well as aesthetically sanctimonious, Haacke has used a similar format to accentuate the auratic character of his own work . . . In light of the humanistic tradition within which the Ghent Altarpiece is generally seen - particularly its connection to Burckhardt's notion of 'discovering' the material world - Haacke's anti-altar art becomes a shocking inversion upon closer scrutiny . . . As Haacke's work demonstrates, Fabrique Nationale equates its leadership in the manufacture of weapons with the onetime leadership of Flanders in creating art. Once the center of art, Belgium is now the center of arms". [6](#) In other words, Hans Haacke has a profound sense of the possible political uses of art history.

Though the question or issue of South Africa has become increasingly important in the work of Hans Haacke in the last ten years, say from "A Breed Apart" (1978) to "The Saatchi Collection (Simulations)" and "Hippokratie" (1987), the importance of this brilliant work lies far beyond the resolution of this momentary and severe historical crisis, in that it is probably the only serious art work which is in constant dialogue with the most advanced cultural theories of historical materialism, the theories of Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson and Manfredo Tafuri. Haacke's work is the most vital

reconstruction of our contemporary cultural memory: "His work makes one aware, for example, of the links between the politics of repression practiced in remote countries of the Third World and certain individuals or corporations who figure as philanthropists and cultural patrons in various capitals of the First World . . ." [7](#) It proposes new ways of realizing originality in our present postmodern conditions. [8](#)

The first truly historical and historic exhibition of Hans Haacke's great vision will be in a liberated and New South Africa.

[1](#) Goerge Monteiro, "Poe/Pessoa", *Comparative Literature* , vol.40 no.2, Spring 1988, pp.134-149; Peter Rickard, "The four voices of Fernando Pessoa", *Times Literary Supplement* , December 9-15 1988, pp.1359-1360. Octavio Paz has articulated some brilliant insights concerning Pessoa in relation to modernism: see, **Children of the Mire** ,

[2](#) Hans Haacke, "Museums, Managers of Consciousness", **Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business** , (ed.), Brian Wallis, MIT, Cambridge, 1986, pp.60-72.

[3](#) Jurgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-reading the Dialectic of Enlightenment, *New German Critique* , no. 26, Spring-Summer 1982, pp.13-30.

[4](#) Fredric Jameson, "The state of the subject (III)", *Critical Quarterly* , vol. 29 no. 4, Winter 1987, pp.16-25. In an Introduction to his recent collection of essays, Jameson writes: "What one writes, in doing such histories, is, in other words, the history of the situations of the texts, and not some 'history' of the texts themselves, which, whatever they are considered to be - expressions, symptoms, symbolic acts, social and political events, subversive interventions, speech acts - are all profoundly discontinuous with each other", **The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, vol. 1 Situations of Theory** , University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p.xxvi.

[5](#) Hans Haacke, a Text accompanying the reproduction of "We Believe in the Power of the Imagination", **Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business** , op. cit., p.202.

[6](#) David Craven, "Hans Haacke and the Aesthetics of Legitimation", *Parachute* , 23, Summer 1981, p.6.

[7](#) Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason", *Art in America* , February 1988, p.98.

[8](#) Fredric Jameson, "Hans Haacke and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernism",  
**Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business** , op. cit., pp.38-50.