

Re-making utopia in the museum: artists as curators

Miranda Stearn

Abstract

Artists have long exposed and explored the inner workings and perceived shortcomings of actual museums through the creation of their own museum utopias. These projects, appropriating and modifying the language of the museum to create museum-like spaces outside the museum, have the potential to question how museums are and posit new models for how they could be, particularly in the case of artists working in the tradition of institutional critique.

*This paper uses the example of Hans Haacke's *Mixed Messages*, 2001, to look at what happens when these utopian projects are invited back into the space of a 'real' museum as commissioned artist interventions, re-making the ideal museum within the institution.*

Keywords: Contemporary, Artist, Intervention, Institutional critique

Re-making utopia in the museum: artists as curators

As I see it, artists doing institutional critiques of museums tend to fall into two different camps. There are those who see the museum as an irredeemable reservoir of class ideology – the very notion of the museum is corrupt to them. Then there are those who are critical of the museum not because they want to blow it up but because they want to make it a more interesting and effective cultural institution (Dion cited in Corrin, Kwon and Bryson 1997: 16).¹

Artists have long exposed and explored the inner workings and perceived shortcomings of actual museums through the creation of their own museum utopias in contemporary art spaces or commercial galleries. These projects, appropriating and modifying the language of the museum to create museum-like spaces outside the museum have the potential to question how museums are and posit new models for how they could be, particularly in the case of artists working in the tradition of institutional critique.

This paper looks at what happens when these 'utopian' projects, creating museums less flawed than any that exist in the real world, are invited back into the space of a 'real' museum as commissioned artist interventions, re-making the ideal museum within the institution.

These questions will be explored through the prism of Hans Haacke's museum-related projects, from his controversial interventions of the early 1970s to his invitation to create *Mixed Messages* as part of *Give + Take*, the Victoria and Albert Museum's 2001 collaboration with the Serpentine Gallery. Haacke is by no means the only artist whose relationship with museums provides an opportunity to explore these themes, but for the sake of achieving a depth of analysis within a limited word count, this paper will focus on this one artist. As exhibitions such as *Museum as Muse* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999) and more recently *The Museum Show* (Arnolfini, Bristol, 2011-12) demonstrate, museums have provided such rich material for contemporary artists over recent decades that museum-inspired projects have become almost a genre of their own.

Context: Artists and institutions

Daniel Buren, Joseph Kosuth, Andrea Fraser, Mark Dion and Fred Wilson among others have all straddled the divide between interrogating the museum and manipulating its forms from the outside, and coming 'inside' to respond to museum invitations. Wilson, for example, provides a parallel if more recent case study, creating installations raising challenging questions in relation to contexts of display for some years before being invited into the museum. Projects such as *Rooms with a View: the Struggle between Culture, Content and Context of Art* (Longwood Arts Project, New York, 1987), *The Other Museum* (White Columns, New York, 1990), *Primitivism High and Low* (Metro Pictures, New York, 1991) and *Panta Rei: A Gallery of Ancient Classical Art* (1992), recreated the language and techniques of the museum, creating a series of 'pseudomuseums' (González 2008: 73, 82) to lay bare its workings and challenge its implied claims to neutrality or objective truth. With his much discussed *Mining the Museum* (Maryland Historical Society 1992), Wilson brought his practice into the museum, initiating the first in a line of projects in which museum collections themselves would become the raw materials through which he carried out his investigations at the invitation of curators.

Inviting practitioners of institutional critique such as Wilson and Haacke into the museum as curators is both logical and problematic. Logical because, through demonstrating a strong engagement with museum collections, these contemporary artists suggest the relevance of these collections in the here and now, helping work against the image of museums as 'family sepulchers of works of art' (Adorno 1955: 175). For the artists too, responding to museum invitations offers opportunities to push and extend lines of enquiry begun outside the museum through the unprecedented access and profile offered by taking on

the role of an official guest curator. Nevertheless, these projects are also problematic because the notion of invited critique can seem inherently contradictory, asking the artist who takes on the role of curator to come ‘inside’ the institution and thus jeopardise the external position which might previously have been seen as a prerequisite for the utopian imagination.

Looked at more positively, the increased frequency with which critique has been brought into the museum reflects the convergence of challenging artist practice with revisionist, self-reflective trends emerging within museums, and an awareness that by inviting artists to take on the role of curator, they can be enlisted as enablers, facilitators or partners in this process, taking museums one step nearer to utopia.

An unwelcome guest: Haacke’s early museum projects

Han Haacke’s turbulent and drawn-out transition from external critic to internal collaborator can serve as a reminder that relations between museums and the artists who practise critique have not always been so amicable. During the 1970s, two of Haacke’s projects proved so unwelcome to the museums designated to host them that they were directly censored, with both the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1971) and the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne (1974) banning his work.

Haacke was intended to play a lead role in an exhibition to be held at the Guggenheim. Museum Director Thomas M. Messer intervened, insisting that Haacke omit three of his proposed works, including two pieces dealing with New York real estate corruption and one visitors’ poll which included questions relating to visitors’ political opinions. Haacke offered to replace the names of the real estate owners with fictitious ones but refused to withdraw the works, prompting Messer to cancel the whole show.ⁱⁱ In 1974, Haacke was intended to exhibit as part of *PROJEKT ’74. Kunst bleibt Kunst* to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum. His proposed project *Manet-PROJEKT ’74*, charting the provenance of Manet’s *Bunch of Asparagus* (1880), was excluded from the exhibition because of the politically embarrassing biographical details it included linking the current chairman of the museum’s friends’ committee to Nazi economic policy. The piece was instead shown in the private gallery of dealer Paul Maenz, while fellow artist Daniel Buren (b. 1938) posted small copies of Haacke’s panels to his own works within the exhibition.

In the aftermath of these incidents, it is perhaps unsurprising that for the next two decades Haacke exhibited his projects directly concerned with museums and their processes, such as *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Board of Trustees* (1974), *Manet-PROJEKT ’74* (1974), *On Social Grease* (1975), and *MetroMobilitan* (1985), in private commercial galleries

or contemporary art settings.ⁱⁱⁱ What is perhaps more surprising is that he returned to work within the museum at all, and conversely, that curators and directors dared to invite him to do so.

Invited back in: Haacke's curatorial projects

Viewing Matters: Upstairs (1996), at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, saw Haacke taking on the role of curator in just these circumstances. The most controversial aspect of Haacke's intervention was the decision to relocate the collection storage racks from the museum basement in the main gallery space, complete with collection works hung 'according to how best to save space, irrespective of medium, period, monetary value and historic and aesthetic significance' (Haacke cited in Grasskamp, Nesbit and Bird 2004: 15), a gesture designed to disrupt and lay bare the formation of the hierarchies of display in the museum:

I wanted to demonstrate that every presentation of works from the collection is inevitably a highly selective choice, driven by an ideologically inflected agenda – as was mine. It is often assumed that what we get to see on the walls of museums is a disinterested display of the best works, and represents a reliable account of history. This, of course, is never the case. The canon is an agreement by people with cultural power at a certain time. It has no universal validity (ibid.: 15).

In Haacke's hands, exhibiting not simply works from the museum store but the conditions of storage became a challenging intervention highlighting the processes by which curators make clear to visitors what is important, and by extension the fact that curators wield this power in the first place. Interestingly, Haacke notes that 'some curators and directors in the Netherlands were outraged', adding by way of explanation, 'I believe they thought I didn't treat the works with proper respect' (ibid.: 15). The irony of this response, given that Haacke was treating works exactly as the curators treated them, simply in a public rather than private area, underlines the power of his gesture. This 'outrage' however was nowhere near the scale of the controversies surrounding Haacke's censored projects of the 1970s and the project went ahead in line with Haacke's original intentions (ibid.: 15).

In addition to displaying the conditions of storage by relocating the racks, Haacke selected groups of works from the collection on five different themes: Artists, Reception, Work/Power, Alone/Together/Against Each Other, and Seeing. The items selected included paintings, sculpture, photography and other types of objects, and within each theme works from very different eras were juxtaposed, for example, Frans Florin's *Death of Lucretia* (1555-65) was hung between two contemporary photographs: Inez van Lamsweerde's *Thank*

you Thighmaster: Pam (1993) and Craigie Horsfield's *E. Horsfield. Well Street, east London, October 1983, 1995* (1995).

Haacke's selection and arrangement, while exploring loose themes, confounded expectations of museum display by disregarding traditional organising devices such as national schools or chronology, and by bringing together acknowledged 'masterpieces' (such as Degas' *Little Dancer aged Fourteen*, 1880-81) with 'less important' stored works. Haacke also departed from museum convention by refraining from supplying any written explanations for his selections. Instead, he insisted that viewers look at the 'matters' on display and deduce their own meanings from the unexpected juxtapositions, explaining:

Had I done so [provided explanations], I would have undermined the technique of causing creative fiction that has been attributed to the Comte de Lautréamont: juxtaposing normally unrelated objects, such as an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table (ibid.: 16).

Instead of being presented with an officially endorsed canon, ready-packaged for passive consumption, Haacke challenged his viewers to navigate his selection for themselves and draw their own conclusions, and in so doing hoped to make them more aware that no museum display represents a pre-endowed objective truth and all might be considered as arbitrary and contingent upon personal or institutional decisions as his own, and might require just as much active critical scrutiny – that, in the word of his title, *Viewing Matters*.^{iv}

In 2001 *Mixed Messages*, Haacke's contribution to *Give + Take* (a partnership initiative between the Victoria and Albert Museum and The Serpentine Gallery) brought his practice to London. Haacke's installation juxtaposed items from the museum's collections, relocating them into the 'white cube' context of the Serpentine and defying conventions of display by dispensing with traditional categories, labelling and even symmetry and alignment in the hang. Each grouping of objects within a room seemed linked by an underlying theme, but this was implicit rather than explicit and the onus was put upon the visitor to draw out these connections and their implied meanings. In the north gallery, for example, a Buddhist statue, a medieval crucifix, a seventeenth-century Torah mantle and two Muslim prayer rugs (all usually under the auspices of different curatorial departments within the V&A) were exhibited on the four walls of the room with a cast of Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* in the centre. The west gallery incorporated a large painting of the 1851 Great Exhibition juxtaposed with aquatints of street life in Victorian Calcutta, nineteenth-century South Indian paintings of westerners on tiger hunts, a Notting Hill carnival headdress from 2000, an album of 'South African Racial Types', and a nineteenth century doll with interchangeable head and limbs

which could thus be assembled as a black boy or white girl, along with various other images and objects evocative of racial attitudes and colonialism.

Speaking of the major preoccupations shaping his engagement with the V&A, Haacke emphasises the significance of drawing out this imperial context:

The western world and its institutions, as we know, has a problematic history relative to the rest of the world. Colonialist if not outright racist attitudes toward non-Western people appear in the V&A's collections of paintings, prints and watercolours, in caricatures, ethnographic charts, in dolls, games and toys of all sorts, some even produced for the Western market by non-Western makers. [...] But then there is also the positive image of the black Magus in a Swabian Adoration of the Magi of around 1500, and early-eighteenth-century tender white (!) marble head of a black boy from the Netherlands [...] The obnoxious examples in the V&A's collection offer an important historical perspective. They function as pieces of evidence. Aside from many other things, the V&A is a museum of the British Empire. (Haacke cited in Kaplan 2002: 85).

As Haacke makes clear, the imperial legacy is only one aspect of the V&A, but, he considers it important that this underlying facet of the museum's identity become an active part of how visitors understand and respond to the museum, alongside aesthetic enjoyment of the objects presented, commenting:

What museums should perhaps do is make visitors aware that this is not the only way of seeing things. That the museum – the installation, the arrangement, the collection – has a history, and that it also has an ideological baggage (Haacke cited in Glover 2001: 11).

Haacke's *Mixed Messages* can be seen as a strategy for achieving this aim, and critical response suggests he was largely successful, with one critic describing the project as 'the unearthing and reshuffling of historical and artistic objects from a specific museum collection in order to bring out sublimated attitudes towards race, class and political power' (Heartney 2001: 51-53).

The reception of *Mixed Messages* as an essentially post-colonial intervention comes through clearly in the press response, with the installation variously described as 'a mad conversation piece, in which stories about empire, colonialism, race, sex, religion, class and cultural division collide with the things which represent them,' (Searle 2001: 12-13) and

a fierce conceptual assault on the origins of the V&A, on the cultural climate at the time of its founding, and, by extension, on Britain today. Haacke achieves all this with creative juxtapositions that leave you, the spectator, to make the connections [...] Haacke's display is given over entirely to the taking of clever pokes at the sins of the British: at our racism, colonialism, sexism, capitalism (Januszczak 2001: 4-5).

Nevertheless, most commentators shared the view that the post-colonial critique, while present, was considerably less biting than might have been anticipated given Haacke's previous projects, and that the laying-bare of imperial resonances went hand in hand with an enthusiastic, appreciative response to the visual riches of the V&A's collection which the visitor could not fail to pick up on and participate in – presumably a relief to the V&A Trustees who, apparently, had awaited the exhibition and press response with some anxiety.^v Indeed several commentators used the image of Haacke, the fierce critic, having unexpectedly succumbed to the almost seductive charms of the collection, with Richard Dorment describing the outcome as 'more of a pussycat's purr than a tiger's growl' which 'all but omits the customary outrage and moral superiority',^{vi} and John McEwen describing how Haacke

flaunts his subversive credentials by selecting a few objects showing the empire in a disagreeable light and the V&A as a bastion of imperial values, but on the whole he succumbs to the museum's charms; as will the audience for his instructive, amusing and – in the form of a fourteenth-century Italian crucifix – moving selection (McEwen 2001: 11).

Haacke himself attributes this apparent 'mellowing' to a shift in focus away from looking only at 'particular conditions in this institution and at this particular moment,' (Haacke cited in Kaplan 2002: 90) instead taking the opportunity of working with the V&A to enact a broader meditation on 'the institutions of art history and museums as such, and of the ideological implications of "museuming," of how artifacts are presented, and how that affects our understanding of society, then and now' (ibid.: 90).^{vii}

Artist-as-curator projects, as a sub-category of artist interventions, can participate in transforming the museum from authoritative purveyor of grand narratives, undermining the false objectivity of impersonal museum interpretation by turning to the opposite extreme of privileging a unique personal response, while also providing a succinct and compelling way of expressing the subjectivity of historical interpretation without resorting to extensive, sometimes abstruse text, or a laborious summary of all possible explanations. In this context, Hans Haacke's juxtapositions within *Mixed Messages* prompt chains of thought about the V&A, its objects and the impact of context on meaning that would take many lines of text to express, and even then not fully.

Critique versus collaboration

This modified role for the artist however, working within rather than outside the museum or gallery, presents challenges in the context of the practice of institutional critique, as several

commentators have been quick to note. Hal Foster comments on instances in which such invited interventions ‘often seem a museum event in which the institution imports critique, whether as a show of tolerance or for the purpose of inoculation (against a critique undertaken by the institution, within the institution)’ (Foster 1996: 191). Similarly, Miwon Kwon comments that, through the sometimes repetitive formula of commissioned critique, artists ‘can easily become extensions of the museum’s own self-promotional apparatus’ (Kwon 1997: 102), while Isabelle Graw describes a process of commodification whereby ‘[s]ubversion in the service of one’s own convictions finds easy transition into subversion for hire; “criticism turns into spectacle”’ (Graw 1990: 137).

This delegation of critique to artists external to the institution can be seen as an avoidance of curatorial responsibility. Sue Latimer, writing on artist interventions in *Museums Journal* in 2001, asked, ‘Why don’t museum curators do it themselves rather than turn to contemporary artists?’ (Latimer 2001: 29). Among possible answers, she suggests the notion that it might be easier for a curator to convince colleagues to allow an artist to take a new approach than to take that new approach internally, thus ‘transferring the risk element’ – to this one might add that the risk element is not only transferred but contained, isolated to a one-off project rather than threatening to become part of ongoing practice.

There are alternative, more hopeful readings. Commentators such as Frazer Ward and Jennifer Gonzalez challenge the notion that invited institutional critique always ends up serving the institution under scrutiny by emphasising the role of the artist in creating a more questioning visiting public who will continue enacting the project of critique rather than passively accepting museum narratives (Ward 1995: 84). This analysis, however, still takes as a starting point the assumption that artists commissioned by the museum to carry out interventions must somehow create the space for genuine critique in spite of their hosts / commissioners, rather than with their co-operation.

Hans Haacke is among the artists challenging this implication that when an artist and museum attempt to collaborate, one side must necessarily out-manoeuvre the other:

There are curators and administrators today who participated in the cultural revolution of the 60s and read the same books as we did [...] to the more adventurous among them it is not as problematic as it once was to extend an invitation to me. In turn, I do not consider myself automatically as being co-opted when that happens. (Haacke cited in Bickers 2001: 3)

Finally, Isabelle Graw offers a slightly different take on the notion of the artist as ‘institutional ventriloquist’, suggesting that curators turn to artists to deliver critical

interventions not because they are unwilling or unable to take responsibility for doing so themselves, but because as ‘insiders’ they lack the position of authority to do so, creating ‘an absurd situation in which the commissioning institution (the museum or gallery) turns to an artist as a person who has the legitimacy to point out the contradictions and irregularities of which they themselves disapprove’ (Graw 1990: 137).

And the collection?

Amongst the complex theorizing and occasional hand-wringing that accompanies questions surrounding the integrity or otherwise of artists invited to intervene in collections as guest curators, it might be easy to overlook the question of the visitor’s experience of the collection works contained in these selections. Clearly, Haacke’s projects call for a more active, critical mode of viewing as there is no straightforward message to be passively consumed – as the exhibition title suggests, the messages are indeed undeniably mixed. This active mode of viewing, originating in the unusual juxtapositions and lack of written interpretation, impacts upon viewers’ experience of the selected objects but also potentially stays with them in their future museum interactions, all of which can be taken as very positive. However, as artists such as Haacke gain increasing prominence, is it really the collection objects that the viewers come to experience, or is it the named artist-curator, who eclipses the museum objects which become merely raw materials, not works of art, relegated to mere components in a larger vision, in which it is within the syntax rather than the individual words that the meaning, and therefore the interest, is to be found?

Ultimately, artists’ museum utopias tend to be more about, as Haacke puts it, ‘museums as such’ rather than the particular objects within them, and it is this that ensures that they will always remain problematic as solutions in real museums which still understand their core business as enabling encounters between people and objects, rather than institutions.

With artist intervention projects establishing themselves within the programming of so many museums, thinking critically about how they operate and what their impact might be upon artists, audiences, institutions and their collections feels all the more important. This paper has used Haacke’s transition from critic to collaborator to explore the potential, but also the challenges, of this practice. The popularity of recent projects such as *Banksy versus Bristol Museum* (2009) and Grayson Perry’s *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* at the British Museum (2011) demonstrates the power of artists’ curatorial projects to capture the public imagination and get people into the museum. The question of whether what they

encounter when they get there is any nearer a museum 'utopia' than a display curated 'inhouse' by museum staff plays into much wider debates about what museums are, could or should be.

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Miranda Stearn

miranda.stearn@courtauld.ac.uk

@mirandastearn

ⁱ Mark Dion, interviewed by Miwon Kwon (Corrin, Kwon and Bryson, 1997: 16).

ⁱⁱ Walter Grasskamp describes the implications for all concerned as follows: 'This blatant censorship and the violation of both the freedom of art and the right to express political opinions were so flagrant that protest was unanimous across all artistic camps, with numerous internationally known artists joining a boycott of the museum. No cultural, educational and political institution in a democratic country has ever been so rightly pilloried as the Guggenheim and its Director after the cancellation of the show. It is difficult to exaggerate the financial and personal damage incurred as a result of this censorship, in the lives of both curator and artist. Fry worked as a co-curator on documenta 6 and documenta 8 in 1977 and 1987, but was never again employed by a US museum, and Haacke's work was not bought or shown in US museums for twelve years.' (Grasskamp, Nesbit and Bird, 2004: 47)

ⁱⁱⁱ First installation venues for these projects were: *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Board of Trustees* - 'Live!', Stefanotty Gallery, New York, 1974; *Manet-PROJEKT '74* - Galerie Paul Maenz, Cologne, 1974; *On Social Grease* – John Weber Gallery, New York, 1975; *Oelgemaelde, Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers* – documenta 7, Kassel, 1982; and *MetroMobilitan* - John Weber Gallery, New York, 1985.

^{iv} Here institutional critique finds productive synergy with constructivist learning theory, which, through the work of George Hein, has proved influential in a museum sector where educationalists (as well as on occasion curators and exhibition designers) think in terms of meaning making as the process which goes on when people learn in the context of the museum. Hein summarises constructivist learning theory as follows: 'What is meant by constructivism? The term refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge for themselves – each learner individually (and socially) constructs meaning – as he or she learns. Constructing meaning is learning: there is no other kind. The dramatic consequences of this are twofold: 1) we have to focus on the learner in thinking about learning (not on the subject/lesson to be taught); 2) there is no knowledge independent of the meaning

attributed to experience (constructed) by the learner, or community of learners' (Hein cited in Durbin 1991: 30).

^v 'I (as one not in the inner councils of the museum) formed the impression that there was considerable apprehension on high (at Trustee level) about what Hans Haacke would do to us; its was thought that the V&A was about to score an "own goal", yet again.' Anthony Burton reflecting on *Give & Take*, in response to questions posed by Gavin Colthart, who was writing a dissertation on Haacke. Burton goes on to describe how the V&A press officer had been instructed to prepare a defence against possible disaster, but in the end no 'defence-spinning' was necessary. Unpublished email dated 09/01/2002, V&A file RF 2000/220, pt 3.

^{vi} Richard Dormant, 'Museums of moving images', *The Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday 31 January 2001, p.27.

^{vii} Hans Haacke, quoted in Kaplan, 2002: 90. Haacke reflects further on this theme in another interview, this time with Patricia Bickers: 'Some people, who have looked at earlier works of mine, are wondering whether I have mellowed. Maybe so. But perhaps they have a somewhat one-dimensional view of me. In the show at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and also in this work here at the Serpentine, I am not primarily interested in looking at today's power structures in and behind the institutions (not that this is no longer of interest to me). Instead I am focusing on the artifacts in the collection, their presentation, the institution of the museum and the institution of art history. The production of meaning intrigues me as much as looking at who funds the institution and what they get in return. To a degree, of course, they are linked.' Hans Haacke, interviewed by Patricia Bickers (Bickers, 2001: 3).