

Kritische Berichte, 1/82, Article

ART GOES PUBLIC: RECENT WORK BY Hans HAACKE & Marc BLANE

by David Craven

A major problem in contemporary Western culture is not merely to create new art. It is rather to create new art which is not immediately appropriated as a cultural alibi by the system which gives it media acclaim. The process of political domestication which now confronts all art is especially effective because the ideology of autonomy still dominates the artworld. Since the late 1940's, avant-garde modernity has been replaced by formalist modernism to such an extent that the "great refusal" (Marcuse) has become the best route to great remuneration. Corporate patrons, in particular, use formalist modernism as their official style of decor. With this situation confronting us, it is obviously implausible to believe that art is autonomous from society.

The recent exhibitions of works by Hans Haacke and Marc Blane are at odds with the social dependence of this supposedly independent art. Both artists contend that aesthetic freedom is now connected to art's capacity to pose alternative perspectives, not just provide new solutions for "purely" aesthetic problems. These alternative perspectives must result from a dynamic interchange with the public that goes beyond the reflex-like recognition of "quality" by viewers. (The issue is not, of course, to dismiss aesthetic quality, but to approach it in a more profound way). Today significant art must engage spectators so that they self-consciously participate in the construction of art's political meaning. Aesthetic vanguardism has become outmoded, because it too often reinforces the regressive idea that art is outside any system.

The new artworks and proposals for public art by Haacke and Blane are important, since they function in several ways as direct responses to the impasse confronting formalist modernism. Each artist ironically expresses oppositional concepts by means of established formal vocabularies traditionally used to suppress the very values his artworks convey. In a system with a seemingly unlimited capacity to co-opt art, Haacke and Blane have reversed this normal mode of appropriation. Haacke, for example, employs a sleek Madison Avenue promotional format (itself indebted to modernist design techniques) to present a Reagan stragem: "Try Charity". Carefully located in the context of his own opportunistic behavior, while being transmitted by a visual code designed to veil it with a professional gloss, Reagan's image is used to express a deeper truth than this surface-oriented ad would otherwise indicate. The viewer is faced not only with a disclosure of Reagan's untenable position, but also with the lack of neutrality of the visual language in which it appears. At issue is the basis for this characteristic way of formally communicating integrity in our society. At stake is a general awareness of the social illegitimacy of this purportedly collective experience.

This new piece by Haacke, (Ill. 1) entitled *The Safety Net* (1982), is further extended by being exhibited along with his earlier work, *Shapolsky et al Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (*The Guggenheim Piece*). Featuring photographs, charts, and maps, this work documents how private property in Manhattan is accumulated by a group of realtors posing as various organizations (some of them charitable institutions). Thus, this use of the *Shapolsky et al* serie places *The Safety Net* in a larger economic network that connects public plunder with private gain via such legal tactics as donations. This earlier work also provides an interesting formal contrast within Haacke's oeuvre, because the *Shapolsky et al* dematerializes the unique art object into general documents. As such, it negates the fetishism of artistic form endemic to formalism. In *The Safety Net*, however, Haacke uses the subtle formal appeal of advertising imagery, yet in order to call attention to what it is designed to make appealing perceptually.

It should be emphasized that Haacke's ability to create art that defies cooptation has been acknowledged by the artworld system. In 1971, the Guggenheim Museum Board of Trustees publicly censored his piece *Shapolsky et al*. Now of course, the Guggenheim Museum has become an important place for turning art into a legitimating agent for monopoly capitalism, with "Exxon Presents..." exhibitions being a recent tradition there. Fortunately, no such problem of censorship confronted Haacke's recent show (March 11 - April 23) as *A Bread and Roses*

Exhibition at the Gallery of District 1199, a cultural project of the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees. There is more than a little artistic, not to mention political, justice in the fact that an artwork censored by a corporate-controlled museum would enter the public sphere through a union-backed gallery. This is especially true here, since the Guggenheim's Board of Trustees had some members who were also on the Board of Directors for the Kennecott Copper Corporation when it helped sabotage the Allende government.

Marc Blane's new proposals are significant, because they involve revitalizing defunct art monuments in public spaces by means of images taken from the popular experience of city life. In several New York City parks, there are pedestals now devoid of the sculpture for which they were designed. The only things left of the sculptural complexes are the classical bases which both literally and metaphorically elevated the missing sculptures, giving them aesthetic sanctity. In other parks, as Daniel Buren has emphasized, pedestals continue to place high art at a remove from the ordinary world. In New York City, however, these pedestals have themselves become ironic monuments to the utter emptiness of the academically sculpted civic leaders originally adorning them. Graffiti on the pedestals further testifies to the loss of high art sanctification.



Structural Support –1982 – 19' x 16' x 16' – steel, bronze, granite

In several proposals on display at P.S.I., Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Blane offers some innovative ways of redefining public art, of reusing public space. His plan for Seward Park/ Fountain at the corner of Essex and Canal Streets is an example of how he wants to draw on the existing street language of visual forms, while stimulating new relationships to these forms. By

mounting an uprooted basketball goal and a steel I-beam on the empty pedestal, Blane would give a critical inflexion to two ubiquitous things in Manhattan. Steel is necessary, above all else, for the corporate skyscrapers. The basketball goal is a mode of social control, as well as a means of social climbing. Far from being merely a civic way of developing the play element among the disenfranchised, the basketball court is a consolation for those who can hardly be "kept off the streets" by a system which has no place for them otherwise. In a sense, the endless basketball game is a symbol for the inner-city youth who are denied any historical progression. For these people, there is only the eternal present of ups and downs, good shots and bad, directly leading to more of the same.

On the other hand, the aesthetic dimension does survive to a certain extent through the genuine artistry involved in playing these games. Besides being a way of "making it" or of just getting by, the basketball court is also an arena where an attenuated version of artistic self-realization is preserved. To put an uprooted, hence "useless", basketball goal on a fine arts pedestal in public space would unquestionably trigger many of these complex and certainly contradictory associations among the people who live in the inner city. Thoughts about the meaning of such an elevated basketball monument could easily lead to a consideration of the reasons for such a strangely familiar phenomenon. Many people would be surprised by the official elevation of something so central to the aesthetics of urban existence, yet so marginal in the fine arts. By momentarily bridging the gap between high and low culture, Blane would nevertheless be calling attention to the social distance which continues to separate these different spheres. Would these basketball monuments merely remind people of what they already know, only in an unorthodox way, or would these works lead to critical reflection about memories of urban life, about the ordinary role of art? Whatever the public discourse resulting from encounters with Blane's works, its initiation alone would be noteworthy.