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Where Worlds Collide: Art, Corporate, and Politics

In “This Exhibition Was Brought to You by Guns and Big Oil,” Gavin Grindon, an art curator and professor of art history and curation at the University of Essex, insinuates that the purpose of art is to be a method of communication for the public to share their ideas free of censorship, and it is the responsibility of museums to preserve it. He argues that many museum donors value art museums because they can utilize their status as cultural institutions to gain influence in our society; as the corporations weave themselves into the art world, they gain the power to curate art in their favor. According to Grindon, “ethics of funding cannot be isolated from ethics of curation.” He claims that the values of a museum are reflective of the values of its donors, and argues that, as institutions meant to preserve human culture, they should not be partnered with those harming or opposing the common man.

Grindon’s argument is embodied in several works by artist Hans Haacke: *MOMA-Poll* (1970), *Metromobiliton* (1985), and *Taking Stock (unfinished)* (1985). In particular, Haacke’s works spotlight the societal impacts of art museums accepting sponsorships from corporations and politicians, illustrating Grindon’s criticisms of corporate influence in the art world.



Fig. 1. Haacke, Hans. *MOMA-Poll*. 1970. *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/arts/design/hans-haacke-review-new-museum.html>

In *MOMA-Poll*, (see Fig. 1), Haacke invites viewers to provide their opinion regarding the endorsement from the New York Museum of Modern Art trustee and Governor Nelson Rockefeller on President Nixon's Vietnam policy to challenge the belief that art institutions can be separate from politics. His proposal to the Museum of Modern Art was a piece that would shine a light on political sponsorship in the art world, but he did not reveal his piece to the museum until the show (Griffin). In the early 1970s, many Americans held skepticism regarding the Vietnamization policy due to growing anti-interventionist sentiments and the belief that the policy would only prolong U.S. involvement in the war. Governor Rockefeller, however, was in support of this policy because he held loyalty to the Republican party (Sobel). In this interactive piece, Haacke gives power to the public by emphasizing their voices and allowing them a setting to express their political opinions. Ballots of various colors and sizes represent the diverse perspectives the public holds, and the use of symmetry in identical boxes for each side of the

argument creates a sense of equality between each response. Furthermore, the transparency of the boxes can be interpreted as a call for transparency in cultural institutions regarding the values they stand for and the people they receive support from. The shocked reaction from the Museum of Modern Art towards this piece underlined the taboo aspect of criticizing museums and their trustees and highlighted the influence that trustees have over the types of art pieces displayed in museums. The poll received an overwhelming response of “yes,” as Haacke expected, and it acted as a display of public disapproval towards Governor Rockefeller. By injuring Rockefeller’s reputation amongst the general public, the substance of this piece was a stark contradiction to the desired outcome of being a museum trustee: Public relations growth. Additionally, the piece revealed the hypocrisy of art institutions for claiming to stand for the public yet giving power to those who oppose the public’s views.



Fig. 2. Haacke, Hans. *MetroMobilton*. 1985. *Artnet News*, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/hans-haacke-all-connected-new-museum-1695825>

While *MOMA-Poll* challenged museum trustees by uplifting public voice and opinion, Haacke utilizes an informative approach to criticize museum sponsors and call attention to their actions in *MetroMobilton* (see Fig. 2). In *MetroMobilton* Haacke implies the oil company

Mobil sponsored the Met's Nigerian Exhibition to cover up their ties to Apartheid by presenting evidence of their actions through art. In this piece, Haacke mimics the style of the Metropolitan Museum's customary exhibition announcements. He emphasizes the two bright blue banners which quote Mobil's corporate policies regarding their involvement in sending oil to the Apartheid government of South Africa. The brown banner is an announcement of a Nigerian artifact exhibition at the Met which was sponsored by Mobil. The juxtaposition between the blue and brown banners highlights the hypocrisy of Mobil in their performative support of one African country while their actions were harming many other Africans. The plaque above the banners 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" and was taken from the Met's promotional pamphlet for the artifact exhibition. This further indicates that Mobil utilized the Met's exhibition as a method of cleansing its image in the public eye. However, behind the three banners is a photograph of South African prisoners marching which depicts the suffering caused by apartheid that was being covered up by corporations for the sake of economic gain. Beneath the photograph is an alterlike platform which is symbolic of the deaths caused by the violence of Apartheid.



Fig. 3. Haacke, Hans. *Taking Stock (unfinished)*. 1985. Paula Cooper Gallery,

<https://www.paulacoopergallery.com/exhibitions/hans-haacke5#tab:slideshow:tab-1:slideshow:slide:6:slide-1:2>

MetroMobiliton and *MOMA-Poll* blatantly criticized and challenged museum funders, in contrast to his approach *Taking Stock (unfinished)* (see Fig. 3), where Haacke invokes the image of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to criticize the role of advertising agency Saatchi in the art world. At first glance, our eyes are drawn towards Thatcher, stoic face tilted upward with an air of superiority and royally seated on a chair depicting Queen Victoria. Her posture and chair radiate pretentiousness and authority, reflective of her personality as The Iron Lady. Emphasis is also placed on Thatcher's blue dress, bright in the atmosphere of neutral colors, symbolizing her unique position as the first female British prime minister and a fresh new era for Great Britain. Behind her on the bookshelf are two cracked ceramic plates, depicting Charles and Maurice Saatchi. Saatchi and Saatchi was the largest advertising agency in the world and it spearheaded Thatcher's election campaigns. These campaigns helped them further establish

themselves in the political landscape and also integrated them with the conservative party. Furthermore, on the spines of the books are the agency's accounts, consisting of corporations, institutions, and museums. These names, including the Tate Museum, the Whitechapel Art Gallery, and Christie's Auction House, are meant to highlight the shady dealings made between them and Charles Saatchi as he used them to intertwine himself with both the art and corporate worlds, granting him economic power (Morosan). Additionally, the Tate Gallery's Victorian sculpture of Pandora sits beside Thatcher, alluding to the interconnection between the Tate Museum, Saatchi, and Thatcher, or rather, cultural institutions, corporations, and politicians. The title of this piece says "unfinished," implying the neverending cycle of exploitation, control, and corruption that occurs as these three worlds collide. Charles Saatchi resigned from the Patrons of New Art at the Tate after *Taking Stock (unfinished)* was displayed at the Tate Museum. Maurice Saatchi went on to become co-chairman of the Conservative party (The Independent).

This sample of Haacke's work visually exemplifies the power given to corporations and politicians in the art world. As a pioneer of the Institutional Critique movement, he redirects the conversations surrounding art and exposes the business of the art world that exists behind the curtains. The work of Haacke amplifies the voices of the public and informs them of the shadowy actions of the politicians and corporations who have invaded their art spaces, and challenges the ethics of art curation for corporate or political incentives. Each of the three paintings examined in this discussion demonstrates Grindon's argument that the ethics of curation cannot be isolated from the ethics of funding in art museums, and that art is intended to be a form of communication for the public. Through Haacke, we can resonate with the true essence of art, gain insight into the clash between the art, corporate, and political landscapes, and reclaim our power in the art world.

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Note on the use of generative AI:

I used ChatGPT in the process of writing this paper. While I did not borrow directly from the results, I used the following prompts to expand my awareness of changes in the American public's overall stand on President Nixon's Vietnamization policy at the time, as well as the stands of most American politicians, in the context of the artwork *MOMA-Poll* by Hans Haacke.

The results helped me make develop my understanding of the purpose behind the work, the reasoning for Governor Rockefeller's stand, and the the poll's results:

- Were the American people mostly supportive or unsupportive of President Nixon's Vietnamization policy?

- Were the American politicians mostly supportive or unsupportive of President Nixon's Vietnamization policy?