

Tectonic Autopsy

**MARIA EICHHORN
"RELOCATING A STRUCTURE"
GERMAN PAVILION,
59TH VENICE BIENNALE
23 APR – 27 NOV 2022**

It would be easy to dismiss Maria Eichhorn's (*1962) project "Relocating a Structure" for doing "everything right": for balancing an extremely precise and minimal architectural intervention into the actual structure of the German Pavilion with extensive historical research that leaves almost no questions open; for thinking through and presenting every detail up to a discarded alternative approach; for including the wider context and history of Venice, the city's Nazi occupation and the Biennale itself; in short, for always wanting (or having) to be the model student when it comes to dealing with a difficult past as it is so clearly embedded in the monumental (a.k.a. fascist) architecture of the German Pavilion – and thus, having national stereotypes entering again through the back door.

Indeed, it would be easy. But such critique – as tempting as it may feel at first sight – would completely miss the point. For this premature folding-back of the project into the realm of national representation would not only be a bit of lazy thinking, but furthermore, would completely misinterpret Eichhorn's carefully considered approach. Because it would succumb to slurring over the rather differentiated and detailed findings of Eichhorn's research, as well as to ignoring the well-balanced multi-part conceptual design of her project at large. It would then itself be prone to fall into the trap that Eichhorn successfully works to avoid at almost all costs – that is, to give into a clean and somewhat totalising symbolic reading and a grand gesture

that does away with the nitty-gritty and often muddled specifics of history.

Eichhorn chose an inherently four-fold approach: In the pavilion itself, to start with the most obvious part, she opened up crucial passages within the structure by removing the plaster surface as well as parts of the flooring. As such, she makes visible various alterations to the building that was initially erected in 1909 as the "Bavarian Pavilion" – mainly (but not only) the drastic expansion of the structure under the direction of architect Ernst Haiger in 1938, that gave the building its monumental and overpowering structure in line with national socialism's architectural ideals. Through these cuts in the plaster surface, you can now see exactly where an exterior wall became an interior one, where doors or windows have been closed, where a sloppily added concrete ceiling from 1938 meets the brick walls of 1909, and so on. Instead of treating the building as a seemingly unified and totalised structure, Eichhorn quite literally "digs" into the details of its multi-step formation. What is then revealed are the joints and zones of alteration that inscribe

and contextualise the building's architecture (and history) within a wider historical framework. She is thus not taking the domineering Nazi architecture for granted and seemingly eternal – which is precisely what the Nazis wanted. Instead of playing up (or fighting against) the unease it emits, Eichhorn somewhat coolly and very accurately makes the structure visible for what it is: not even a unified building, but a hastily executed architectural extension.

This is taken forward in the second part of the project: the catalogue. Here, Eichhorn presents not only the findings of her meticulous research – countless documents, historical photographs, detailed calculations, letters, plans and drawings including everything from property files to Arnold Bode's unrealised post-war plans to redesign the pavilion – published here, too, is a short interview with Hans Haacke, whose famous 1993 project "GERMANIA", for which he broke open the pavilion's floor, is a (more violent and gestural) blueprint of sorts for Eichhorn's (rather restrained and research-heavy) intervention. Several essays then extend this research in concentric circles to the



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wider area of the Giardini and its privatisation as a once-public park, as well as to the often-problematic role of the Biennale itself in the economic and social development of Venice over the last decades.

Eichhorn – and that's the third part – additionally presents in the publication her initial and ultimately unrealised idea to literally relocate the whole building, therefore removing it from the site of the Biennale. As radical and compelling a gesture this would have been, its presentation as a dismissed alternative once again makes clear that Eichhorn very actively decided against the grand approach, that would have meant getting rid of the problem of (German) history within a single stroke. Instead, she adds yet another component – the fourth – a series of guided tours to memorial sites for the victims of "the

National Socialist Occupation of Venice" during the years 1943 to 1945, consequently decentering the gestural impulse of art even further, not only by providing context in research, but by parallelising and supplementing the project as a whole with the proper hands-on political work of remembrance on the ground (and thus outside the literal grounds of art, the Giardini). Ultimately, what makes this project so compelling is not only the diligent research, but the perfectly balanced and thought-through inner workings of its larger design – the way the various parts complement and at times contrast each other.

If one is tempted to bring up a comparison, "Relocating a Structure" with its multi-faceted and layered approach, feels in many ways like the total opposite of Anne Imhof's Golden Lion-winning

performance *Faust* from 2017. Imhof, who had German Shepherds parading in front of the pavilion, referred heavily not only to the Nazi past of the building, but seemed to hint at Haacke, too – only that she was doubling up the floor with a layer of glass, not opening it up. In large brushstrokes and with a heavy lean on the gestural side, she was literally playing up "German-ness" until it became a grotesque neo-goth farce. Set against Imhof's approach, Eichhorn's project undeniably has the tendency to fall on the side of an "inner-German" discussion; but it also becomes clear, that "Relocating a Structure" unfolds on a wholly other and interestingly somewhat new level of dealing with the German Pavilion's past – that is history proper, not myth.

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