

Art & Education

Menu

School Watch
August 2022

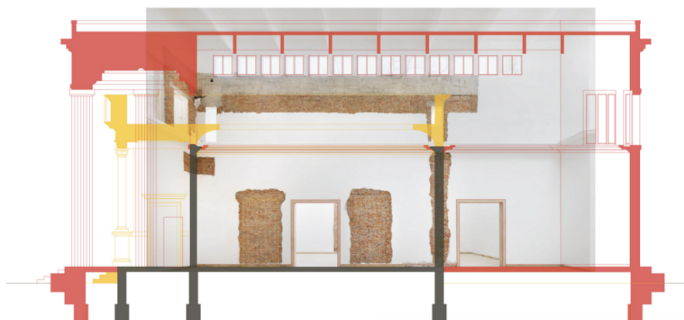
Field Notes: Maria
Eichhorn, "Relocating a
Structure," German
Pavilion, 59th Venice
Biennale • Jef Declercq



Maria Eichhorn, *Relocating a Structure*. German Pavilion 2022, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2022. Detail view: Foundations of the rear wall from 1909; join between sections of the building from 1909 and 1938; rear wall of the building from 1909, interior wall from 1938, demolished in 1964; wall lettering; doorway to the right side room from 1909, walled up in 1912; examination of plaster layers; doorway to the right side room from 1909, walled up in 1912, reopened in 1928, walled up in 1938. © Maria Eichhorn / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2022. German Pavilion, 59th Venice Biennale, April 23–November 27, 2022. Photo: Jens Ziehe.

For her contribution to this year's Venice Biennale, Maria Eichhorn has presented *Relocating a Structure*. German Pavilion 2022, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, a multifaceted project that is made accessible to the public in various ways. The most visible element of *Relocating a Structure* is Eichhorn's architectural intervention at the German Pavilion itself, a structure and site that, according to the artist, "demands site-specificity." [1] Originally built in 1909 as the Bavarian Pavilion, the building was monumentally redesigned by the Nazi Regime in 1938 to fit their cultural ideology. This extension of the pavilion's height and depth drastically changed the building's proportions and subsequently its psychological effect on its visitors, an estrangement that only intensified after World War II. By removing the homogenizing layers of plaster from the walls and excavating parts of the foundations, Eichhorn has exposed the joins between the original architecture and the Nazi-era modifications. Based on in-depth research into the history of the building and an analysis of its structure, the artist's anti-renovations have made the pavilion's contrived characteristics tangible. Though originating from forensic examination rather than personal expression, Eichhorn's meticulous incisions inject a palpable drama into the experience of the pavilion. The revealed structural traces make the architectural chronological record legible and affirm a direct material connection between the past and the present. Subtle white-on-white wall texts clarify the history behind the newly exposed transitions to attentive visitors.

The second component of *Relocating a Structure* is its comprehensive publication. [2] In more than 350 pages, the artist has collected images of the spatial interventions made in the pavilion, along with extensive documentation on the building's history and a personal reflection on the project. Furthermore, the publication includes essays on the political, social, and artistic context of the Venice Biennale by various contributors. [3] From within their respective fields of expertise, each of these writers takes a historical perspective to examine the contemporary challenges facing the institution. The book grants additional attention to Eichhorn's concept of relocating the German Pavilion, which served as the starting point for the project. The idea was to physically remove the entire pavilion and transport it to a temporary storage site for the duration of the Biennale, after which the building would be reinstalled in its original location in the Giardini. This gesture would have opened up a free, empty space and radically altered the visual and spatial dynamics of the Biennale. Although never realized in a material sense, the research into the possibilities of this action, including the technical specifications, are part of the publication.



As a final component, Eichhorn collaborated with the Istituto Veneziano per la Storia della Resistenza e della Società Contemporanea (Venetian Institute for the History of the Resistance and Contemporary Society) (Iveser) to organize guided tours of places of remembrance and anti-fascist resistance in Venice. These tours are held over the course of the Biennale, and their content appears in the *Relocating a Structure* publication. Each of these components will undoubtedly receive different degrees of attention from the public, with the anti-spectacle of the pavilion likely drawing the greatest interest. However, according to the artist and Yilmaz Dziewior, the curator of the German Pavilion, this difference in address and reception does not reflect each component's importance within the project. [4] Moreover, Eichhorn does not favor visuality over other modes of encounter. Far from it being the artist's responsibility to obligate the audience to engage with every aspect of the project, it is the combination of these various components that best translates the ideological structures and the political conditions examined in the work. Fragmenting *Relocating a Structure* across media does not lessen the value of the project when considered in its entirety, and by presenting both conceptual and physical elements, Eichhorn only broadens the project's accessibility. The artist thereby not only scrutinizes the structure of the German Pavilion but also the traditional modes of presentation omnipresent at the Venice Biennale.





Augusto Murer, *Monument to the Partisan Woman*, 1969. Base by Carlo Scarpa. "Places of Resistance," *Relocating a Structure*. German Pavilion 2022, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, German Pavilion, 59th Venice Biennale, April 23–November 27, 2022. Photo: Jens Ziehe.

Eichhorn's engagement with the pavilion's architecture and history comes as no surprise. [5] The symbolically charged building, which retains its fascist aesthetics to this day, has been the point of departure for many German artists' contributions to the Venice Biennale, including Joseph Beuys in 1976, Lothar Baumgarten in 1984, Hans Haacke in 1993, and Isa Genzken in 2007, to name only a few. Taking this exhibition history into account, *Relocating a Structure* can easily, but rather shortsightedly, be criticized as derivative. Eichhorn, however, is well aware of the artistic precedents, a fact that is illustrated by an interview with Hans Haacke included in the publication as well as by the complete overview of previous contributions dating back to 1909 published on the pavilion's website. What sets *Relocating a Structure* apart is Eichhorn's characteristic investigative



disposition and her ability to explore the relationship between the symbolic and the real. In line with Hans Haacke's conviction, Eichhorn suggests that the pavilion be treated and preserved as a monument, an official legal status it acquired in 1998. [6] Importantly, *Relocating a Structure* does not present the building as an isolated historical artifact but rather as a contemporary document in all its complexity. By forensically examining both the pavilion's structure and its context, and communicating this information to the audience through various channels, Eichhorn does not merely explore the past but rather engages with the present. In exposing the German Pavilion as a vulnerable construction as well as by presenting the proposal for structure relocation, Eichhorn employs both conceptual and material strategies to challenge the notion of national representation, the privatization of public space for the sake of art, and the hierarchical and often colonial conditions that are the Biennale's modus operandi. Furthermore, the essays offer a sharp analysis of the current condition of the Biennale and bring forth opportunities to rethink the institutional structure and its social implications. Marco Baravalle's text "The Biennale as a Commons?," for example, calls for a process of commoning to be set in motion and provides clear propositions on how the Biennale could positively impact its surroundings. [7] The guided tours offer a broader understanding of the consequences of German and Italian fascism and connect visitors to the Giardini, a private symbolic space for art, with the political reality of the city of Venice. Eichhorn's approach goes beyond a reactionary mindset that fetishizes the material and thereby connects art practice and direct action—albeit limited and exemplary—geared toward the uncovering of social and political constructions with a



uncovering of social and political constructions with a possible transformative effect. [8]

Even though the history of the German Pavilion is no longer a mystery, the examination of its architectural and ideological structure remains topical. Employing the relocation of structures as an artistic strategy allows for the displacement and redirection needed to challenge the status quo. What Eichhorn presents with *Relocating a Structure*, when considered in its entirety, is a possible model for how to engage with traumatic legacies and their monuments. The artist does not necessarily take a specific political position but rather has transformed the structure into a state of mind, one that is characterized by critical investigation and accessibility. Even though the collective memory of the art world can be rather short, and the pavilion will be restored to its previous condition by the time of the next Biennale, the documentation provided in the publication extends the lifespan of the project. Maria Eichhorn has thus set a standard for forthcoming investigations into the German Pavilion and has laid all its cards openly on the table, allowing for the deck to be reshuffled.

Jef Declercq is an independent curator and art historian based in Brussels. He holds a master of arts in art history from Ghent University (2019), after which he completed the postgraduate curatorial studies program at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (KASK) in 2020. In 2022, he took part in the Young Curators Programme in the Belgian Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale. Declercq has initiated multiple exhibition projects, both in traditional exhibition spaces and in unconventional environments. He is co-curator of “Publiek Park,” a nomadic exhibition project in public parks and gardens.

