



Fig. 1. Hans Haacke, Der Bevölkerung, 2008
c-print on Alu-Dibond

91 3/8 x 70 in. (232.1 x 177.8 cm)

HANS HAACKE: CONNECTING THE DOTS. . .

In 2007, two museums in Germany hosted Hans Haacke retrospectives simultaneously, the Akademie der Kunst, Berlin and the Deichtorhallen, Hamburg. The decision to distribute works across two institutions was the artist's own, his intention being to reflect upon German history and the role of cultural institutions in contested narratives of nationhood and citizenship. The date coincided with the completion of a permanent public installation, 'Momento for Rosa Luxemburg', located in the plaza that bears her name. In 2003, a twelve-person jury reviewed proposals from a range of national and international artists for a monument to honour the writer, finally settling on Haacke's subtle homage. He selected sixty quotations which were laser-cut in brass and sunk into elongated concrete slabs which were then distributed apparently randomly across Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, upsetting the original geometric layout of paving stones. Deliberately anti-monumental in appearance, the texts invoke both historical memory and attest to contemporary political conflicts, and the work exhibits Haacke's ongoing critical interrogation of location and context: of how meanings can be contested and re-signified. Berlin is also the site of Haacke's controversial permanent installation (in its passage through the various political institutions), *Der Bevölkerung*, positioned in the interior courtyard of the Reichstag building.

At the time, I was approached by the arts documentary film-maker Michael Blackwood, to participate in recording the artist walking through and reflecting upon the works in both venues. Over three days we conversed in situ, first in Berlin, then Hamburg, a journey through four decades of artistic practice from the early ecologically-derived objects, through the social networks of urban exploitation to the role of art, artists, museums and markets in the exchange of economic and cultural capital. Certain expressions recurred throughout our conversations; 'networks of information', 'what is going on in the world', 'conjoining memory and site-specificity', 'ambiguity and the play of meaning', 'everything is connected with everything else' (this a quote from Lenin's essay, 'What is to be done'). Haacke's creative journey, from examining natural/biological to social/political/artworld systems, was mapped across Berlin and Hamburg in works that only realised their full

significance in the context of their institutional sites and through the material conditions of the exhibiting space (light, temperature, etc), and interactions with the viewing public. These conditions, or 'real-time systems' are the unifying element underlying Haacke's practice, an output that, because of the research-intensive nature of individual works, numbers a little over 150 pieces in total. 'The social and political character of the exhibition locale plays a role, as do the architectural peculiarities of the space. *In fact, the symbolic qualities of the context are often my most essential materials*'(my emphasis).¹

The expression 'real-time' was derived initially from the industrial/military complex's use of computers to provide an immediate response to any threatened attack and then expanded to describe any computerised system that operates a one-to-one, real-time response between machine and user. As such, and as applied by Jack Burnham to Haacke, this differentiated his work from the 'mythical' timeframe of traditional aesthetics.²

Despite its longevity (now entering a sixth decade), his oeuvre resists the familiar art-historical periodisations of early, middle or late, formal canonical attributions, or stylistic evolution or material consistency. With Haacke, 'needs must...', that is, the subject under investigation is the determining factor on his formal, technical and conceptual approach. Context and framing are fundamental determinants which account for what Jacques Rancière terms, a 'politics of the aesthetic': 'Art is not, in the first instance, political because of the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world. Neither is it political because of the manner in which it might choose to represent society's structures, or social groups, their conflicts or identities. It is political because of the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space.'³ Although Rancière references Haacke in a number of his texts, it is, in fact, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu that the artist most aligns with. In their published extended conversation, Bourdieu suggests that artists, particularly Haacke, have the unique ability to make visible what is hidden. 'The artist is the one who is capable of making a sensation ...that is, touching the sensibility, moving people – analyses which would leave the reader or spectator indifferent if expressed in the cold rigor of concept and demonstration.'⁴

Haacke's works of the 1960s shared with other artists of the time an interest in process, in changes of state and material structure and the conditions of spectatorship. Documented in Lucy Lippard's influential publication *Six Years: the De-materialisation of the Art Object from 1966-1972*(1973) are explorations into the boundaries of form, content, environment and viewer by such artists as Robert Morris - 'What is revealed is that art itself is an activity of change, of disorientation and shift, of violent discontinuity and mutability...'⁵ theorists of language, Ferdinand de Saussure and C.S.Pierce, and the psychology of perception - Anton Ehrenzweig: 'Indeterminacy

has an important social aspect; it requires the co-operation of others',⁶ which produced various attempts to codify these developments in something like a general theory of art. An early supporter of Haacke, Jack Burnham, drew upon the structural anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss and the semiotics of C.S.Pierce for his book, *The Structure of Art*,⁷ and directed Haacke to the writings of the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, an early exponent of general systems theory. Bertalanffy argued that the organism was an 'open system', emphasising relationality and an interdisciplinary approach in analysing complex systems against the linear, causal paradigm of classical science. Responding to his reading of General Systems Theory, Haacke explained his shift from focusing upon systems of change independent of the viewer (Condensation Cube, Chickens Hatching...) to social systems: '...systems analysts seem to be convinced that on a conceptual level, physical and biological phenomena have their equivalents in the social and behavioural sphere...'⁸



Fig. 2. Hans Haacke, *Cleaning Women* from *Photographic Notes, Documenta 2*, 1959, 26 black and white photographs

Each: 6 5/8 x 9 7/8 in. (16.8 x 25.1 cm). Frame: 8 7/8 x 12 1/8 in. (22.5 x 30.8 cm)



Fig. 3. Hans Haacke, *Nun* from *Photographic Notes, Documenta 2*, 1959, 26 black and white photographs

Each: 6 5/8 x 9 7/8 in. (16.8 x 25.1 cm). Frame: 8 7/8 x 12 1/8 in. (22.5 x 30.8 cm)



A series of B/W photographs, clearly non-professional, of people at a large multi-galleried exhibition of international art, the clothes and general disposition of those depicted suggesting an earlier time, maybe the mid-1950s? In many the art seems incidental to the scene, a backdrop to single, couple or group encounters; in one, a nun stands with her back to a sculpture and a painting, holding an open book which is probably the exhibition catalogue but given her religious dress, pensive expression and distant gaze could equally likely be a text of the scriptures. Another image is of a mother and child sitting on a bench, a small animal toy is the object of their attention as she pushes it towards the infant, not the large abstract painting (Pollock?) which fills most of the background. Now a baseball-capped youth stands legs astride with his back to a geometric abstraction, intently immersed in a Marvel comic. One photograph is unpopulated other than by a large (bronze) figure, (Henry Moore?) casually discarded on the floor surrounded by builders' materials – a pile of broken bricks, an old bucket, ladders, and scaffolding planks. Light streams across the image but only illuminates the floor and wall. Continuing what appears to be an intentional refusal of institutional high culture, two male figures gaze upon a (Surrealist?) painting stacked against others on the floor of what could be a gallery awaiting hanging or a storeroom, one wears a workman's apron, the other a suit. Now a back view of two female cleaners, carrying brooms, heading determinedly past more stacked canvases in a large room/gallery. Back to the art and two 'German fraternity students in full regalia' studiously ignore a large Kandinsky on the rear wall, an image that, in the words of Walter Grasskamp 'pointedly juxtaposed two vastly different German traditions.'

Researching the first six Documenta exhibitions (1955-1977), the writer Walter Grasskamp discovered in the archives a stack of B/W photographs, including those described above, and traced their author to Haacke, a series which he made as an art student working at Documenta 2 in 1959. Grasskamp recognised the quality and

Fig. 4 and 7. Hans Haacke, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, 1971

two maps (photo-enlargements) black & white photographs; 142 typewritten sheets; 6 charts; one explanatory panel
maps: 24 x 20" (61 x 50.8 cm); photographs: 10 x 8" (25.4 x 20.3 cm); typed sheets: 10 x 8" (25.4 x 20.3 cm); charts: 24 x 20" (61 x 50.8); panel: 24 x 20" (61 x 50.8 cm)

Installation view: 38th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, June 1978

insight inherent in these images and how they exposed 'discrepancies between the paintings and the visiting public, between art and its system, between the autonomy of art and the social field'.⁹ I experienced a similar moment in the exhibition at the Hamburg Deichtorhallen, Hamburg where 26 images from the series were displayed and I could not help but observe the prescience of this body of work in the context of his subsequent development. Working 'behind the scenes' at a major international exhibition afforded the young artist the opportunity to witness the auratic process of bestowing aesthetic value through the preparation and presentation of works of art. Haacke returned to Kassel in 1972, but this time as a contributing artist to Documenta 5, with one of the first of his real-time systems works, *Visitors Profile*. (The first, *News*, 1969-70, was included in Jack Burnham's curatorial exemplification of system's theory, *Software, Information Technology: It's New Meaning for Art*, at New York's Jewish Museum, 1970. Five teletype machines spilled out reams of tickertape bearing information obtained from external wire services, bringing miscellaneous data from the external world into the consecrated spaces of the museum. This work was also repeated in Hamburg).



Fig. 4-5. Hans Haacke, *MOMA-POLL*, 1970

2 transparent ballot boxes with automatic counters,
color-coded ballots
2 transparent boxes
each: 40 x 20 x 10 in.
(101.6 x 50.8 x 25.4 cm)
paper ballot: 3 x 2 1/2 in.
(7.6 x 6.4 cm)

Systems

Visitors Profile, as the title suggests, employed a 'vox-pop' sociology of the museum-going public, gathering information from questionnaires completed by visitors on themselves and topics of general interest. A more politically contentious Poll appeared in the Museum of Modern Art's *Information* exhibition (1970). *MOMA Poll* invited visitors to respond to the question, 'Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?' (Two months prior to the opening of the exhibition, Nixon had ordered the bombing and invasion of Cambodia). Given the close association of the Rockefeller family with the museum as patrons and trustees, this work made explicit the connection between economic and cultural capital whilst also undermining claims for the art institution as a politically neutral and protected space (at the end of the 12-week exhibition, the results showed that 68.7% had voted YES, and 31.3% NO).¹⁰ Not only did Haacke's *Polls* re-stage the viewer/artwork relation as a performative event, they also negated any notions of universal spectatorship: we consume culture not as tabula rasa, but as complex and conflicted subjects of gender, race and class.

If revealing the contradictions and joining the dots is fundamental to critical arts practice, then Haacke's planned solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, made abundantly evident the ramifications of such a position. *Hans Haacke: Systems* was cancelled by the Director, Thomas Messer, just a few weeks before its opening date, April 1971. Messer's decision was primarily based upon the multi-panel, densely referenced text and image work *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real-Estate Holdings, a Real Time Social System, as of May 1971*. Combining black and white photographs of 142 buildings and vacant lots in Harlem and Lower Manhattan with typed informational texts, diagrams and charts, *Shapolsky et al...* plotted real-estate transactions across the city's slum neighbourhoods. Unlike other examples of aestheticized social documentary images of poverty from the late-19th century (Lewis Hines, etc), the effect of the accumulated evidence was politics rather than pity, a visual and textual account of the material realities of slum housing and landlord exploitation located within the hallowed spaces of a high cultural institution. However, although the confrontation was not to be, *Shapolsky et al...* had and continues to have an afterlife in the resulting critical and public response to the cancellation at the time and the direction of Haacke's practice towards what has since become the genre of 'institutional critique'. The artist's extensively researched documents of real estate speculation across deprived boroughs of the city were judged incompatible with the cultural objectives of the museum, an institution heavily dependent upon the patronage of individuals (including those owning land and property) for its financial viability. Thus, the hidden boundaries of aesthetic acceptability, boundaries which had been fragmented by the Duchampian *Readymade* and normalised in the art-historical narrative of avant-garde outrage, coalesced around the production of meaning and the power of cultural gatekeepers. The definition of context expanded to include institutional histories, symbolic

values, social stratification (viewer privileges), and the recognition that meaning-production is itself an open-ended system.¹¹



Fig. 7.

Jack Burnham abandoned Systems Theory in the early 1970s, seeing in it a failed attempt to impose a rationalist grid upon the complexity and disappointments of the human condition. In his failure to account for the avant-garde 'myth' of progress through technological revolution he misrecognised art's political turn in the 1970s which was, in fact, grounded in the convergence of specific struggles over questions of representation, accountability and equality. Although some critics (notably, Benjamin Buchloh) have linked Haacke's systems aesthetic to the natural/biological works, arguing that politics only enters his practice with the focus upon social systems, it is precisely his situating the natural within the social that frames a continuity of creative exploration that, in its structures of research and modes of exemplification, embeds politics within practice. The already mentioned Reichstag installation demonstrates what Rancière refers to as 'arts specificity' in 'bringing about a reframing of material and symbolic space'.¹² *Der Bevölkerung* (To the Population) was Haacke's successful proposal for a work to be installed in the new German Parliament when it moved from Bonn to Berlin in 1999. Soil was to be gathered in 50-kilogram sacks by members of parliament from the 669 regions of the Federal Republic and deposited in a large wooden-sided trough situated in the Northern courtyard of the Reichstag, distributed around large white neon lettering spelling out the title of the work. The typeface reproduces the 1916 design for the West Gate of the Reichstag which announces 'Dem Deutschen Volke' (To the German People). After a heated parliamentary debate, approval for the installation to proceed was narrowly agreed, (260 to 258 votes) and the first soil deposit was made in September 2000. Looked down upon by the visiting public and updated daily on a webcam, the vegetation (seedlings, vines and weeds) gradually overgrows the lettering only for departing members of parliament and their replacements to first remove, then restore their respective plots.

Haacke described the process of selecting and depositing the soil as 'a symbolic action of anti-separatism...affirm(ing) communality and equality', which contradicted the nationalistic expression ('Dem Deutschen Volke') which adorns the West Gate.¹³

Der Bevölkerung thus connects the early biological systems works, which function independently of the observer, with the later critical examinations of political, social, and institutional systems, interrogating language (the implicit racism of *das Volke*), immigration and citizenship (who is included or excluded in the process of nation-building), and the possibility of a bio-politics of power and the state. All are located at the heart of the legislature and the judiciary. In relation to current concerns over environmentalism and climate change, nationalistic populisms, and the mass movement of migrants and asylum seekers as borders and territories are reconfigured, Haacke's critical questioning of the place of the aesthetic in constructions of identity and the constitution of the public sphere is both urgent and necessary.

¹ Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange*, Polity Press, 1995, p. 91.

² See Jack Burnham 'Steps in the Formulation of Real-Time Political Art' in *Hans Haacke: Framing and Being Framed, 7 Works 1970-75*, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Press, 1975.

³ Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran, Cambridge: Polity Press 2009, p. 23.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke *Free Exchange*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995. pp. 23, 28.

⁵ Notes on Sculpture: Part IV', in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, Cambridge MA, 1995, p. 69.

⁶ *The Hidden Order of Art*, London 1967, p. 95.

⁷ Jack Burnham *The Structure of Art*, Braziller, NY, 1971.

⁸ Hans Haacke 'Provisional Remarks' in *Working Conditions: The Writings of Hans Haacke*, ed. Alexander Alberro, MIT Press, 2016, pp. 48-61.

⁹ Walter Grasskamp *Hans Haacke: Photographic Notes Documenta 2, 1959*, Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen Publication Series, vol. 5, 2012.

¹⁰ See Hans Haacke *Framing and Being Framed: 7 Works 1970-75*, Halifax, New York, 1975.

¹¹ This and other related 'systems' works are explored in Rachel Turner (ed), *Hans Haacke, October Files 18*, MIT Press, 2015.

¹² Jacques Rancière 'Aesthetics as Politics' in his *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, p. 24.

¹³ For a full description of the project, see Hans Haacke for real: *Works 1959-2006*, exhibition catalogue of the two exhibitions in Berlin and Hamburg, ed. Matthias Flugge and Robert Fleck, Richter Verlag Dusseldorf, 2006, pp. 216-224.

All figures: © Hans Haacke / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Figure 1. Photo: Stefan Müller