

# *If Yes, or If No: Polling The Prior And Present Hans Haacke*

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Embedded but embattled, the seasoned Hans Haacke is a cornerstone conundrum of the contemporary art world. Both inside and outside, censored but famous for it, he remains no less than a provocateur in residence. Despite my admiration for his work, I'll say this without reservation: the ever self-conscious art ghetto *needs* a hardened rabblouser. While bemoaning art's need to stay in the sheltered world of its own, he both has and hasn't escaped himself. Regardless of how strident their once marginalized arguments were, Haacke has garnered esteem, wealth, and the paradoxical privilege to keep poking. Where is art's freedom when it can be so wholly insularized, just as its used as a social gloss by large corporations to enroll the public trust? Depends on if we're talking free speech or the almighty dollar.

While best known for his sociological trepidation of art in a corporate context, he took some provocative paths before arriving there. His art has shifted along a continuum of small-scale and cerebral to more public, materialized, and vicious. So how did he get there? With his own words and works, I will constitute a chronology between his early 60's work until his big shift in 1970. From there, I will re-assess the objects of his art just as he worked on the objects of art could be in goals. The major shift in the prior and present Haacke parallels changes I saw between the two of his lectures held by CalArts. Before attending his more informal visit with Sam Durant on Feb. 9<sup>th</sup> of this year, I was unaware of Haacke's radicalism of range as he let on about his earlier days. Expecting a success-story run-through the following night at RedCat downtown, I was dejected to see Haacke subservient to an institutional prerogative when he was such a forerunner of institutional critique. With the most minimum of work in the LACMA show *Art of Two Germanys*, he nonetheless paid lip-service to the curator of the show, his co-panelist Stephanie Barron. I wondered how such a re-thinker of exhibiting could seem so placid in this stage of his career. Within I will argue Haacke's work was more all-encompassing up until 1967, when he became a part-time teacher at the Cooper Union, and even past his potentially career-crippling and now

most-famous piece, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*. But with the support of his full-time promotion in '71, and tenure in '75, Haacke was becoming more and more stabilized - the *go-to* political artist of his ilk. From '76 to '85, the punches came fast and hard: Chase, Jaguar, Mobil, Tiffany's. But the grimacing lineage is almost straight off an Upper West Sider's guilt list (they being the art-collector's scene). Haacke's renown grows faster than his enemy list. While never quiet about his own lifeline to the very kinds of institutions he harangued, something was awry to me. The transgressions seemed trite even as they were never wishy-washy. Much of Haacke's work he showed his first lecture seemed beautiful to me as an example of "what happens when art extends itself to an unfamiliar degree into real life" (Elsen and Merryman 571). But with the LACMA lecture, the 71-year-old, of tireless fury, open to so many techniques and sources of inspiration, seemed tired, closed-down, and most surprisingly, a careerist. So again I wondered, how did he get here?

With his first Readymade, Duchamp's original bluff was an absurdist act, but the decades following *The Fountain* were anything but. In the 60's, in art like so much else, polemics was everything. The absolute outpouring of 'nonart' that followed didn't blur lines between what was acceptable and not the way Marcel first did. Instead, it just showed almost anything was allowable. Anything at all. Being the trickster he was, Duchamp's were an aesthetics of ambivalence. Whether you'd fall for the gambit or not was important, but beyond lay nothing much else. This explains how he could speak not just of the 'irony of indifference,' but the the 'beauty of indifference,' and the 'liberty of indifference' (McEvelley 73). This is not to say he abstented from technique - afterall, *Bride Stripped Bare*'s construction meandered for years and years. Instead he was merely noting the Readymade was but studied play- intense in mode, but at heart a game, meaninglessly constructed. Like his obsession Chess, 'Art' needn't be unenjoyed but its myth taken down a notch. To put into place 'not-art' was to put into play the foundational arbitrary sign. Duchamp provoked with ugliness, the primacy of thought you were forced to relinquish, and always staying ahead of the game. "You see," he quipped, "I don't want to be pinned down to any position. My position is the lack of a position" (Schwarz 194). His use of chance indicated

an overall interest in contingency - which is to say, that something could go one way or another. The most ironic thing of all was that Duchamp was far from indifferently treated by the artworld. His chiding became good business, institutionalized, a solid investment in the newest of the new. Worst of all, his iconography of iconoclasm came to further the artist-icon mythology. As he tried to escape into anti-art antics, his authorial sublimation never did work as planned. And so the cachet he never wanted brought imitators upon imitators. Put into a museum-context enough times, audiences stopped being shocked by objects like the Readymades, only dejected. Understandably, the art crowds grew weary of being tested with such pop quizzes. Having their own perception questioned became the very code they had to abide by. In making things what they are, through how they saw, art was opened, but towards an iceberg of alienation. With a future wreck imminent, they gave in. Because they needed to be catered to, audiences effectively wrote a blank check- *Make me feel again!*

How could the once-new feel so old-hat, and how could it be brought anew? While Haacke was still in his German homeland, another young art student in the bunch, he worked with painting in Kassel. An early source of inspiration was Jackson Pollock, whose overloads of form constituted a significant sea change in the early part of the 50's, the decade Hans first engaged with art. In those endless layers of drips, with no sense of their hand leftover, the author was literally lost. The painting piece itself was the marker of event, an author in becoming, the author-as-painting. But without any direct representation, the works were their own kind of hermetic world, and to gaze upon them, to accept them in heart and mind, was to consecrate them, to desire to be back with Jackson in his studio of heroic undertakings. In 1952, critic Harold Rosenberg famously went so far as to say, "Call this painting 'abstract' or 'Expressionist' or 'Abstract-Expressionist,' what counts is its special motive for *extinguishing the object*" (26). The new Scene meant business, it meant openness, and it had found its all-encompassing visual metaphor: the inability to fixate. With no visible foreground or background, Pollock's mushy mesh became, like the symbol of the blur, a definition of non-definition. Now what people realized about this, despite any aesthetic admiration, was pretty startling. If clear depictions were dead in these

new works, then they could be made at any point in time, and in any place. This matter of being out-of-time was far from unnoticed, but trivial at the start. As the Scene's stylishnesses preceded itself, the makers and lovers of this work could do nothing but be 'ahead of their time;' and yet again this notion of the avant-garde presages a furthering chasm from the everyday. Ever the hungry, investigative-journalist, this was asinine to Haacke. It's no coincidence the founder of 'Happenings' in the 60's, Allan Kaprow once outright groaned that Pollack "destroyed painting" (Buskirk 131). Being that Happenings brought consumers and producers of creative culture into a more synthetic hunch, the misunderstanding was all the more understandable. Greenberg didn't mean the canvas itself, but how it was used. Nonetheless. The 60's did not fashion itself a time like others, and the promise of being there, then, in the moment, for the moment, was a promise the decade fought to keep. Like a prosecutor quenching to bedazzle the jury, Haacke kept at it. He wondered how work so misunderstood or ignored by the general public could also be said to have so much importance on and within that very common culture. Who was to say such a thing? So to Greenberg's doctrinaire credo, "all that matters is results," Haacke glibly retorted:

*"the formalist doctrine of Greenberg et al has brainwashed the art public of the US. For decades now it has managed to have us believe that art floats ten feet above the ground and has nothing to do with the historical situation out of which it grew" (Greenberg; Haacke).*

It's also no coincidence then that Hans went on to attack the perceived timelessness of painting. In 1982's Documenta 7, he seeks quite the opposite a goal- *timeliness*, by contrasting two styles in as many references to the-then 'Leader of the Free World' Ronald Reagan. On one side of a red carpet he places a large-scale photograph of the protest that had greeted the president's arrival in Bonn, German just a week before the opening. Across, sits a precious, dry, and stern painting of the man in gilded frame. Stanchions hold up a red velvet rope, protecting the immobile politician who had been trying to gain support to station missiles inside the country. Engagement means ever vigilance, and so Haacke delivered all he could given the sudden exigency of the anti-nuclear demonstration. In so doing, he also breathes and lives in ephemerality. Aesthetically, the photograph of the protest is not particularly noticeable for how it looks, but for how it acts. Given the demonstrations at that time were the largest in Germany since WWII, their im-

portance is not lost on me. What is, however, is context. The work does not so much stand alone as need the very political engagement Haacke surely had in heart when making the piece. Unfortunately, that doesn't exist in any standalone fashion. By belonging to that moment only, the work is more like a speech, than a written record - it makes its biggest impact in living in presence. It doesn't bode nearly as well out of context, when the fleeting moment flees. We are left not with a universalizing document like "Guernica," which while staying with its specific referent, could just as well be a metonym for suffering in that war or wars on whole. Instead, we are but with one large, starkly black and white image of a protest that existed in some place and time with a relevance we feel bad for not knowing, though we don't all the while. The protest photograph could not be a metonym for any other. Its specificity is part of a grander theme in Haacke's work which his friend, critic and curator Jack Burnham, called "real-time" art. What does succeed in the *Documenta 7* staging is the unveiling of the exhibition as event. In materializing a recent action through the 'lower,' day-to-day artform of photography, and pitting that against a stodgily heroicized canvas, it illustrates the fallibility of art escaping the object and the gallery-circuit too. Neither one of them, Haacke fights to say, keeps up with the times. The two things are not incompatible, only underutilized. As he put it some years before, "Information presented at the right time and in the right place can potentially be very powerful. It can affect the general social fabric" (Lippard xiii). Here arises a prime new conjecture arose instead of merely more bemoaning. It runs something like this: If art pieces are to be evaluated as effecting a broader world, as they should, then a less formal and sense driven route of beauty isn't out of the question. For artists like Hans, this meant not so much escape as a more informed capitulation. It wasn't so much that non-objects should provoke an escape from the art-world while within it, but that new topics should be included inside the art-world to engage its outside. Any attempts at anti-myth would never quite get off the ground. Beauty had to now be something different, more to do with engaging outside itself, and with its intended societal effect in mind. In seeking the potency of well-timed, well-meaning ideas, meshed with the righteousness of outreach, Haacke had met his ignition. In his work in the 60's, he would use as many materials, take as many paths,

and fit into as many categories as this fire's flames would flicker.

Let's re-begin at a turning-point. It's 1964. Pollock is a success. Though he'll die before his paintings sell for prices that paintings have never yet received, his success in the early moment is still practically unqualifiable. The hosting body of Art subsumes its alien disease once more. But wait! At the end of any formal Modernist lineage of styles, and in the inability of any dominant style to rise to the front, Warhol's *Brillo Box* brings the re-evaluation of the art-object to a phenomenological standstill. While a representation like many others, this one is assembly-line style. The silkscreened reproduction from this former commercial illustrator bears no visual difference from its original commercial precedent. Wanting to exit the box of stylistic precedent, the still-existent line between High Art and Low Art is temporarily broken, while not well reviewed. Appropriation is cleared and cheered as another trickster rises to the fore, a 'Pope of Pop' to Duchamp's Pope of Doubt. As much as 60's artists knew they needed to re-investigate the gallery-context to re-appropriate it, they still never saw it coming. Instead, Warhol presided over his own hype, building it up to a fever pitch, keeping his authorial integrity in tact - mechanical repro, assembly line, and all. Art was not the 'real world' and needed to be brought into it, so why not bring art into life this directly? At first rebuked like Pollock, they were later deemed unprecedented genius. But once it started selling for tens of thousands, the Brillo came to stand for itself, and not an 'Art for Life' within most's easy-range of obtaining. Unlike James Harvey's original commercial design which could be had for a song, the over-the-top cost of Warhol's take prodded the institutions of art still farther away from the people. The need in perceiving was as challenging as Duchamp's. That is to say, the challenge was to have to 'see past' the art to get at its nature-as-art. But here was something else. Here, more specifically it was to see Pop Culture's triviality as not unworthy of art, as a art for the age. But since if everything is art, then nothing is, the rationale seemed befuddling. Of course either way, people had to see it for themselves. The opening show featuring the box brought a line stretched across the block. In coming in groves, they were popularizing participants, metaphorically proving an art could be fulfilled by being filled up with the world at large. The Brillo vitally opened up possibilities for source-material while lighten-

ing up High Culture, breaking down its last defenses. Even while some felt as they were being cheated (*yes, but is it art?*), they also felt bemused. They couldn't help themselves. The further and further dislodging of art's definition was a bright spot for anyone willing to tackle redefinitions for themselves. I suspect these moves were keenly noticed by the young Haacke, having moved to New York in 1965. The new professor at Cooper Union maintained, "I believe any system that demands continued isolation for its survival is really charting its own death" (Haacke 69). In that way, "Haacke is like Warhol in not painting over the everyday world," because otherwise, the sphere of art is just exalted once more (Horowitz and Huhn 37). While they differed in much else, they'd unite by instilling this conducive pluralism. That the mere choice of material could provoke such critical re-evaluation is pretty remarkable. Why make anything new when you could just re-think something old? Better yet, why not rethink a process?

While much of the erasing of Modernism meant the stretch towards open-ends, Art Historian Corine Robins more specifically frames the timeframe I'm most interested in exploring here. She helpfully deems the period in American Art from 1968-1981 "The Pluralist Era," (Robins). This time frame was premised on the **Demise of Formalism**, and it wanted the death of tradition proper, not the now dormant replaced by more strangeholds. Controversial to some, bewildering to most, some chastized it as Dadaist, even Anti-Art. The art critic for *The Nation* Arthur Danto argues that ever since we have been living in "bad aesthetic times," but finds at least a little reprieve in explaining its on purpose; afterall, "good aesthetics is sometimes regarded as politically oppressive" (298). The Pluralist Era begins in the year of a seminal text by John Chandler and Lucy Lippard first encapsulated the changes conceptual art was bringing, terming it and their

essay, 'The Dematerialization of Art.' They saw an arising divide clearly split in two, either "art as idea" or "art as action" (Lippard 43). The breach came so fast and hard the critics were besides themselves in their struggle to catch up. Just to illustrate the preponderance of terms bandied about in this period, Haacke's 60's work was in one place or time grouped as:

|              |               |                   |                   |                   |
|--------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Air Art      | Anti-Form Art | Earth Art         | Elemental Art     | Environment Art   |
| Idea Art     | Kinetic Art   | Kinetic Sculpture | Land Art          | Non-Aesthetic Art |
| Open Systems | Postformalism | Process Art       | Real-Time Art     | Reductive Art     |
| Serial Art   | Sky Art       | Systems Art       | Systems Esthetics | Technological Art |

# *and lastly,* 'Un-Objects'

For Han's works to exist simultaneously in so many ways in this period is to show both the amazing synergy of the projects and how overlooked they've become. From 1970 onwards, he was but one thing and one thing only, and though he maintained the position steadfastly, he could also be reduced to its convention as a brand-name. That is to say, from 1970 on, Hans was but a **Political Artist**. Haacke has always been political, but he rode the coat-tail of his bigger, more famed pieces in the next three decades up to the present. Earlier on, though, his broad hope in contingency and his heterogeneity in range shows an inventive artist taking nothing for granted. Here was someone not doing what he's doing just because its what he's always done. To clear his name of the forever damaged **Political Artist** is to reconsider, repackage, and repoliticize this pre-1970 era.

**1957-61** Moving from a smaller-scale to a bigger one, Haacke began with more quotidian materials, even impermanent ones. It would be some time before moving onto to appropriated materials. In the summer of 1959, he photographed the art-scene surrounding Documenta 2 working as a 23-yr old student-guard there. Immediately he was taken with the way the fair

prioritized art above the masses. This was his first act of sociology on the political economy of art- not as a maker, but paltry part of the background. Pollock was on display that year, in only the second of this fair which was to become the most important of Contemporary Art after WW2. Viewing the divide between the partakers and the holiest of art-objects they stood clear of proved telling. Here was museum culture at its most common lowest denominator: swelling to the fore, like some kind of haute World's Fair. A boosterism was at work, but a protectionism too.

Hans became inspired by the use of some of the simplest, oldest elements around because they seemed more publicly accessible. Everyone had some a priori of Earth, Air, Wind, or Fire. These were classical substances, primal, all, even holy, but in an ancient way and across the board. They also seemed not so much innocent but immune to the corruptions of technology and the man-made. Norbert Kricke's architectonic proposal for water in 1957's "Water Forest" was an early apex, as were Yves Klein's fabled experiments. In particular, the latter brought a natural world back into a protective bubble, the very one that so puzzled the impressionable Documenta guard. With both his physically torch-blown "Fire Paintings," hued red through burning, and his 'Cosmogonies' paintings, hued blue by rain, Klein let myths roam wild for his aesthetic storytelling. These paintings were constituted as events, but with a splash of chance and interactivity. Coming off Pollock, Klein set something into process without fully controlling it. However non-figurative the Abstract Expressionist brushmark, it still came from those brushstrokes at all times. First used in 1957, the fire marked differently than Pollock ever could, debunking a preeminently authorial position as they consumed part of the piece. They not only put into position a natural system on top of an artificial one, they enchanted with an element of temporality that questioned the very core of object-hood. Adapting an even more intuitive process into place, Yves' work was a starting place for even more breaks with tradition. Closure of the author-star could be an opening for viewer intrigue, destruction could be a part of creation. Art became a theatre. The way Klein made work was to preface the way Minimalists would later open up to their onlookers. For critic Michael Fried, since "theater is now the negation of art," at least the advantage tilts towards a observatory co-experience, for "the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situ-

ation - one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder” (153). Coming from a Greenberg disciple, the point is surprisingly positive. If painting has become exhausted for Pollock to do what he did, it stands to gain again from a theatricality, a position in space. Instead of being one thing at one time, perceived in complete singularity instantaneously, minimal art unfolds. It takes time. This makes it harder to appropriate institutionally. Plays were performed in amphitheaters as well as cushier theaters that were indoors. While the theater could be brought into the gallery, performed there, it didn’t exactly work the other way around. With the starkest of unembellished material, Vassilakis Takis suspends a nail in mid-air by levitational pull from a magnet in 1959. Kinetic sculpture has erupted, proving the involvement of invisible natural systems like magnetic fields can be just as involving as the more primal and visible natural elements. Two years past Taki’s first ‘télémagnétiques,’ Haacke enters the fray. He knows what he has to do to engage the intra-artistic with the ‘extra-artistic.’ He begins working in three-dimensions.

**1961-1967** Haacke’s first interactive kinetic sculptures were made in ‘61. Made of reflective foil wrapped around board, the reflective surfaces of *A7-61*, *D6-61*, and *A8-61* engage their witness in a flittery flood of perception. The ‘sculptures’ are not representative, and in both name and virtue they speak to Op-Art and science, even science fiction. From ‘63 on, Haacke had begun producing art referencing his reading of Ludwig von Bertalanff, a biologist and prominent thinker of general systems theory. Jack Burnham gets in on the act. As someone who wanted to connect conceptual art with technology even in its earliest incarnations, he shares a fascination with systems and their incarnations. By looking at developing technologies, he intriguingly connected art and computers by calling software information, and hardware the object. Since software was programmatic, running off set instructions, artist ideas could be set to run similarly. But since they’d be off the machine, computation could work expressively, aesthetically, just as it did systematically. As early as ‘59, Haacke had met and expressed admiration for Otto Piene, a German artist and founding member of ‘Group Zero’ with Heinz Mack, and later with Gunther Uecker. In their own words, the group’s work was, my own emphasis added, “aimed not only at movement and light, but also at warmth, sound, optical illusion, magnetism, *condensation* and

expansion of materials, water, the movement of sand and foam, fire, wind, smoke and many other natural and technical appearances” (*Art of the 20th Century* 501). This clearly captivated Hans whose “Condensation Cube” was a small-scale replica of an atmospheric environment, trapped within the confines of a small box made of Plexi. Water visibly condensed and evaporated in flow of the conditions that surrounded it. The art-object was alive and in flux, and the audience had an ever so perceptible role in what the water would do on the inside of the cube. First planned in 1963, and displayed in 1965, this was an exploration of thermodynamics as much as the borders of the gallery. This early on, it worked more successfully in the first vein than the latter, but it was a promising start. Companion pieces ran legion, and while variably formally beautiful, they always were so metaphorically. In ‘66’s ‘Ice Stick,’ a copper tube was covered in ice from a refrigeration unit below it. Looking like a candle in the tundra, it was affected by the room temperature of the gallery, which changed the ocular nature of the piece. In this case, its snowiness would modulate in heat of the moment. The Cult of Personality that uplifts Art into the sky is brought back down to earth, and the gallery not into a mythologized space out of time but a laboratory in the present state. Besides “Condensation Cube,” 1965 was also the first year of exhibit for “Blue Sail” - a kind of ‘air art’ or sculpture, where a fan blows up at a fluttering piece of blue chiffon fabric straddled to two opposing walls. The air makes the invisible visible. It’s also startling as an object because were the air blower to be turned off, nothing of the event or process would remain. The display *is only* what it is when its in motion, not in standstill, as if one could *only watch and forever stay in the watching* of Pollack attacking his canvas in and through his brushstrokes, Klein in and through his flamethrower.

**MARCH 1968: THE AIR ART SHOW** “Blue Sail” gets a companion piece with ‘68’s “Narrow White Flow.” Another ‘kinetic sculpture’ made using only a fan, fabric, and air, this time the white fabric is strewn closer to the floor where the gallery guest can stand nearer and above it. Engaging the use of elements that were normally latent, the visitor is put askew, facing the dilemma: am I looking at a finished ‘product’ or am I inside a process? If they recognize themselves rightfully as in the latter, they become a participatory partaker rather than unattached

consumer of the former. The observing viewer cannot stay outside the work when it is an interactive system. Here is revealed a political comparison of fantastic proportions: The processual as the provisional! Elements this small, instable, and ephemeral, would nonetheless come to take the form of a larger metaphor for adaptability. Though within a small space, these miniscule projects were demonstrative of a further complexity, at times even a numbing one. They lacked in specificity and ulterior politicism what they made up for in accessible reconsiderations of art and its audiences. Since everything in the environment effects the changing object, change is always possible, even inevitable. In the flux is also a strength, the openness to believe in one thing affecting another. "Narrow White Flow" was part of a 1968 show called "Air Art," curated by Willoughby Sharp, the co-editor of a short-lived but powerful journal *Avalanche*. Sharp had also curated an early major show in new media the year before featuring Otto Piene from Group Zero - "Light / Motion / Space," at the Walker Art Center. The main concept of "Air Art" was focusing on a "turning to the elements," the classical substances of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water predated by Klein and Group Zero (Selz). The broader 'Earth Art' term took historical hold, but the now hardly remembered term 'Air Art' was also in the early mix. Peter Selz wrote the introduction to the catalog, before becoming the Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture at MOMA. In it, he importantly noted, "One day soon it may become a social necessity to exchange our traditionally sacred object art for a more conceptual, less spatial art-as-environment" (ibid.). The cover of the catalog is an image of Haacke's October 29, 1967 "Sky Line" event, where around 200 helium balloons were all strung together, floated and paraded together through Central Park. Like other Land and Conceptual Art, the only remains of the event are after the fact photographs. The critique is implicit - work this flexible makes institutionalization difficult. Even Warhol was in on the trick. The year before Central Park's white ballon bonanza, he had followed on Haacke by using a fan in a gallery in 66's "Silver Clouds," this time for blowing around silver helium-filled mylar pillows. The unlikely connection goes even further. Haacke had used a fan and a balloon in his 1964 "Sphere in Oblique Air Jet." Andy's version was more aestheticized, playful, pop, and de-scientized, while Hans worked more within the pretense of analytic exactitude. As the

man himself put it, *"From the beginning the concept of change has been the ideological basis of my work"* (Siegel 18). By dabbling in natural processes at all, these experiments with systems on whole promoted a slyly political agenda: change is the only continuity.

**APRIL 1968** After MLK's assassination on the 4th of the month, Haacke faces a massive dilemma. He can't bear to analyze the mutability of natural systems when its the social system thats so out of sync. Even before the general onslaught of the year to come- the youth riots in May, RFK's assassination in June, the Chicago Democratic Convention in August, a major shift in politicized thinking has ocured. Hans writes Burnham in April:

*"Nothing, but really absolutely nothing is changed by whatever type of painting or sculpture or happening you produce on the level where it counts, the political level...Art is utterly unsuited as a political tool. No cop will be kept from shooting a black by all the light-environments in the world...I am also asking myself, why the hell am I working in this field at all...I still have no answer, but I am no longer comfortable"* (Haacke 130).

**NOVEMBER 1968** Haacke never quite leaves earth-bound art for politics, but he does show a more prominent interest in the environment, keeping with his kind of air art. His funny ecological gag "Live Airborne Systems" takes place on the 30th of November. He tosses bread onto the beach and into the ocean of Coney Island so as to photograph seagull movements. Far from in your face, the procedural breakdown is still unobtrusive and pointedly short-lived. If a urinal could become art by bringing a crowd to a tossed-out found-object, bread too could become art by bringing a crowd to a tossed-out found-object. Haacke's first engagement with a social system happens too in this year when he works with architect Ricardo Scofidio on a proposal for a public park in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. While never-enacted, the park stands in for his desired engagement of the time: bridging and blending new sorts of art with and for new experts.

**1969: THE ART POVERA SHOW** In the tail end of the decade, Italian curator Germano Celant created the term *Art Povera*, meaning 'Poor Art,' to describe the way artists were trying to avoid mechanized Pop Art, seen as anti-naturalistic and anti-humanistic. Though the term's understanding and use was largely reserved to its country of origin, the tag didn't just apply to Italian artists. So while Celant's groundstaking 1969 book *Art Povera* included Torin's renown Michelangelo

Pistoletto, it also included Americans Carl Andre, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson with our protagonist, the German-American Hans Haacke. Pistoletto was one of the earlier wellsprings for the notion. In 1964, his piece "The Wall" was nothing more than a sheet of plexiglass against the gallery wall. While almost the slimmest of investment and possibility one could put into an art-object or experience, it's still conceptually meaty. It's a trick. DuChamp meets the minimal. One sees through the glass directly to the wall and has to somehow then aestheticize the wall. The glass delimits a field of definition of art to its very borders. As Pistoletto explained, "A "thing" is not art. The idea expressed by the "thing" itself may be. Aesthetics and reality can be the same, but with each in its own independent life" (Pistoletto 52). Bordering on that very same line is "Works of art and artistic ideas are identical," the purpose statement of Willoughby Sharp's Kineticism Press (Le Feuvre 8). Sol Lewitt rounds out the bunch arguing, "Conceptual art is good only when the idea is good" (83). Though this may have been an attempt to de-mythologize the maker from further art-land consumption and malaise, it arrives wrapped in a bundle of egotism. If the idea and the completion are counterparts, removing the authorial signature doesn't mean the resulting piece isn't asking you to call it brilliant. It just means its doing that same thing in a trickier way. By calling speech inferior to thought, and reproduction inferior to presence, Conceptual Art was the definition of logocentric. Instead of accepting a corruption to reality that language enacts, it seeks to direct the viewer's participation towards a perceived "pipeline to the psyche," that doesn't really exist (Ong 166). Asking this requires two initiations: one into the traditional, and the other into the transgressive. The second is not complete without the first, and learning curve can be steep for casual passers-by. Lastly, both quotes ignore the fact that beautiful form can commence without any other idea or intention than itself. And beauty certainly doesn't have to exist in such a painstakingly contrived way. Even of his work "Drawing Series 1968 (Fours)," which clearly featured drawings, Sol LeWitt bewilderingly said, "It is an idea not an object" (Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art 823). This blurs the line between research on the beforehand and its productive synthesis afterwards - a 'back end' masquerading as a 'front end.'

Like much about Conceptualism Haacke eventually came to question, Pistoletto's point with "The Wall" was strong, his aestheticization weaker, and his ties to the 'real world' weakest of all. The piece was just as out-of-time as any Pollock, bred in the artworld to effect change within it. It also was still living for itself as much as any other reason, just in a shorter breadth and more particular to a specific place. While his own "Condensation Cube" used plexi to hold in a world, he did so to contain an event, a perception, and a process which could have just as well been for scientific purposes. "Wall" only affected the borders of the gallery. It was as if the finished piece was as much research into permeable possibilities as any proper finality. The plexi could never make the same point twice. For Pistoletto and those like him, the daring simplicity, and the fact that it had never been done before, was enough, a transgressive victory in its own right. Not all the work in the '69 *Art Povera* show and catalog was this coolly cerebral or interiorized to the gallery wall. Haacke, for one, argues in the catalog:

*"A "sculpture" that physically reacts to its environment is no longer to be regarded as an object. The range of outside factors affecting it, as well as its own radius of action, reach beyond the space it materially occupies. It thus merges with the environment in a relationship that is better understood as a "system" of interdependent processes . . . A system is not imagined, it is real" (Celant 179)*

While the selections in the show may have been placed into a group, they remained perpetually abstract in both production and affiliation. The complete subtitle of the show is worth mentioning: 'EARTHWORKS - IMPOSSIBLE ART - ACTUAL ART - CONCEPTUAL ART.' What proves meritorious in trying to group such ongoing experiments is exactly what makes that task so hard to do: their radical fleetingness. Of the four listed, Land Art seemed the most anti-market. Towards its beginnings, critic Jean Lipman even ventured Land Art was "virtually impossible to collect, display, critically evaluate or even accept as art within any previously established framework" (76). But even as unmarketable as it seemed, its place outside the gallery mostly came back into it. However performative, ephemeral, or uncategorizable it was, the material form of notes, schematics, and documentation was displayed and often sold at auction.

Both imprudent yet quickly quenched, this 'poor art' of the everyday was a courageous but contradictory cipher. For one, its desire to be straightforward and daily seems denigrated by its

reception - chic shows and the retrospectives that follow. While anyone could use the materials amidst the plural *Art Povera* show works, only those deemed suitable to the art world fell in its sophisticated trappings. In Celant's introduction, he wrote "Animals, vegetables and minerals take part in the world of art" because the "artist-chemist . . . has chosen to live within direct experience, no longer the representative" (*Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* 662). But even if that were entirely so, the gallery context was the hat for the magic rabbit. Is it any wonder Haacke's fellow German and sometime fellow group-shower Joseph Beuys used dead rabbits as showpieces, and rabbit's feet as a talisman? The interest in ecology was a romantic investment, a belief in purer, simpler times. It asked us to believe in the benevolence of natural processes uncorrupted like the social processes of the art-world. I take to the point without fully agreeing with it. The desire remains for art to work like an alchemy Duchamp's trick could never achieve: to be absolutely transcendent of the art-world, not transposed on top and back into it.

**FEB. 1969: "EARTH ART" SHOW** Willoughby Sharp returned for another vital curation featuring Haacke with "Earth Art" at the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art at Cornell University. One artist Haacke shared the stage with in the show was Gordon Matta-Clark, best known for robbing buildings of certain sections. Here was someone fixated on the artwork as an *Object To Be Destroyed*, as a relevant book title calls it (Lee). Deconstructing buildings was about reprocessing vision, what formerly could not have been seen. When he cut through a part of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago to be torn down for later renovation, it was also about reprocessing the art circuit. As the works were temporary, one had to literally assess the museum at that point in time. Decay was turned around on its side, shifted into a strangely beautiful sculpture. Even as it worked backwards, adding nothing new, these acts provoked something into place by virtue of what they took away. They made light of a system of being in the world, how one thing could blockade another while neither ever left the other's grasp. A wall breaks an outside, but the wall is always engaged with it too. Haacke's piece in "Earth Art" was simply a mound of dirt with grass-seeds called "Grass Grows." While he shared a symbolic question of the inside and outside, he still worked small and ever so symbolically. His soon to blossom

investigation was not as literal, nor deconstructive. But his early 'sculptures' which preceded Matta-Clark's did share an early embrace of temporality, a being of-the-moment. Both aroused an interior physical space's dormant life into a newly situational one. While Hans may have wanted to conceptually break through the museum, going forward into its ulteriority, Gordon's blending of foreground/background stopped at the material level of dead buildings. How was the alive and well museum or gallery, an image in the mind of a place to find knowledge, discovery, or confirmation? What else could you find there, and how was the institute becoming like a brand? For Haacke, it wasn't just about the museum as a literal space or how that space effected how it was physically situated, but how the museum was a symbolic space, and how its more immaterial reputation was societally situated.

**MARCH-APRIL 1969** In this month, a landmark exhibition was organized by renown Swiss curator Harold Szeemann. It was entitled "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information." This show was composed of 'open scores' / work-by-instructions, while cross-pollinating Art Povera with Earth Art. It was also "one of the first European shows of contemporary art to be sponsored by a multinational company, in this case Philip Morris Europe" (Bird et al. 52). Asked to be a part of the display, the notion of the avant-garde being corporately sponsored was a scary notion for Haacke. Tellingly, he nonetheless accepted the invitation. Szeemann puts him in Documenta 5 three years later. The 23-year guard at Documenta 2 had gone from background to foreground. His heroes Group Zero were in Documenta 3, and now here he was in Documenta 5. He was officially in the Scene, and any critique of Philip Morris wouldn't show up again until his 1990 "Helmsboro Country," a parodic punch at Jesse Helms and his political sway over Tobacco Country.

**SEPTEMBER 1969: "CHICKENS HATCHING"** Like a mixture between his precedents of seagulls and grass, Haacke created an incubator system that allowed people to watch a live hatching of chickens direct in the gallery. This predated Eduardo Kac and 'bio-art,' and shows a machinic take on nature, an eco-intervention melded with a cybergetic influence. It's another non-'stable' object with an ever-changing temporality at the fore. By not working within a zoo or laboratory,

and putting them in the gallery context, Haacke questions his own authority. Is his authorship role to create, or to expose in new ways? This reconsideration puts the viewer into a questioning mode of their own. As they try to unravel the creator's mindset they may turn into a kind of co-researcher, seeking to unravel the same codes. Then again, the ephemerality can be take or leave it. In works like this, no single representation can be the event in its entirety - no single take. As such, the viewer can just as well leave it all at the door, not knowing where their permanence comes in. While it'd be more exciting then coming back to Cornell's gallery to watch Grass grow, this is a funny way to be down-to-earth. The title of the show, "New Alchemy: Elements, Systems, and Forces," also sounds mystical and ethereal, rather than practical and of the supposedly plaintive world before art's codification. Haacke also exhibited in Joseph Kosuth's "Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects" show, the original wholly conceptual art exhibit. Even if wasn't Art that was being mystified, these 'groundbreaking' shows just further codified their original radicalism, owning their critique by opening up to it.

**NOVEMBER 1969** Haacke used his third solo show at New York's Howard Wise Gallery to wise effect. His fourth solo show ever, it was a key turning stone. Incorporating sociological research as a real-time productive system, "Gallery-Goers' Birthplace and Residence Profile" was savvy and new while lo-fi all the while. In using the gallery to talk about the gallery, it didn't yet so much berate it but prod it. Howard Wise Gallery was known for its experiential, technologically advanced, multi-media presentations. So Haacke wanted to use the gallery site itself to constitute a site-specific work. For this profile, viewers put where they were from on a large NY map on the gallery-wall. Instead of using the physical elements of a gallery's interior to re-engage and re-activate it, here the artwork was only completed with literal physicalization - the consumer as producer. The results showed how "closely confined" the art-world was because the viewer's literal origins weren't so far-off from the space's 50 West 57th Street address. The poll takes on significance because it is like a sociological take on the earlier condensation cube- a holder of events constantly in motion.

**BROKEN PIECES** Questioning the object was a start, but it didn't go large enough. How

stretchy is an 'exhibit' and how resilient once you break it? The idea of doubting the cruciality of the exhibition site doesn't seem new today when it's just as good or bad as any other, but early skepticism was more pressing at the time. As Art was becoming more Place and Media-Agnostic, one goal was to bring art back into a 'micro-scale.' Otherwise the contemporary viewer would just be disparaged by their engagement with the ever-sacred art-object. Given the necessity of perspectives to take on its charge, bridging the Inside of the White Cube to the Outside took on, of course, a plurality of meanings, which I cannot go into here in adequate depth. But what the artists need for sure was this sacrament of the secular had to end. This was taken to its logical extremes which are indeed worth repeating, though Haacke wasn't directly involved. The "Art by Telephone" show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago held huge implications past its origins in the winter of '69. Unlike a normal show-setup, instructions on how to display the art could only be given over the phone. Thus the curator Jan van der Marck and his crew became not just co-producers in their installation, but the true initiators. The 'author' was literally not there, while their intermediary achieved a closer connection to the final presence. This resonated with the general open aura, one where the manufacturer was de-mystified. Another example of work-by-instruction resonates from two shows organized by Lucy Lippard. These were entitled either "557,087" or "955,000," depending on the population of the cities Seattle and Vancouver they were displayed in. At the end of '69, and beginning of '70, art was breaking the premise that any premise was unquestionable. So now that the gallery object and gallery context had been suspected, the operation of show promotion and reproduction was put to the test as well. In lieu of a traditional catalog Lippard sent out over a hundred 10cm x 15cm index cards. These bites and pieces came in a plain brown envelope, many designed by the artist themselves. The distance between the artist and audience is reduced by removing the standard intermediary designer who normally would have arranged together a book. In using materials any run-of-the-mill organization could garner, a 'Poor Art' was made indeed. Going the furthest of the bunch was the artist Robert Barry. On three separate occasions, he put on shows by closing them. Though he was given the space inside a place, he put out signs in front of the showcase's location, saying, "The

gallery will be closed” (O’Doherty 332). This was a postmodern move without any of the visual signifiers which would come to cliché it (the *blur*, the *kitsch*, the *hyper*, the *uber*). Its also the clearest example I can find of the absolute dematerialization of art: a visage made mirage. While there was somehow no Art and no Author, there was still very much an Art and an Author. Its there, alright- at least in the language and the recollection of the tale. This is almost as far as one could go without completely reducing the work to mental concepts that don’t require the corruption of saying. Historians and linguists have long desired for this impossibility in their acknowledgement of material language as corrosive, and subsequently privileging of thinking and speech over writing. While the piece could be called the ultimate in participatory art for it requires their complete imagination, it could also be called the least open of all, a hoax and symbolic closing as much as any cleansing. If you feel the need to call Barry’s closed gallery a debacle, it was the debacle these “anti-Form”-ists had always wanted.

**1970: OFF TO THE BALLOT BOX** By late 1970, young curator Kynaston McShine was calling “‘conceptual art,’ ‘art povera,’ ‘earthworks,’ ‘systems,’ ‘process art,’ etc.,” “the strongest international art movement or ‘style’ of the moment.” She said this in promotion of her INFORMATION show, held from 2 July – 20 September 1970. In it, Haacke asked the audience to take part in a poll, putting their votes in a transparent ballot box. The answers provided were either Yes or No and the question was: “Would the fact that Govern Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?” Rockefeller was running for re-election that year, and the family’s money was historically tied up in the museum. The event-container has come full-circle to an immersion with people, not just science. The transition is complete. You can see how the earlier viewer’s polls were rough drafts for the timeliness of this one. Hans also made use of a Telex newsfeed machine for INFORMATION. “News” appropriated media in a dynamic fashion, as rolls upon rolls of news fell onto the floor, as the Telex emitted them. Piled in heaps, one saw the news of the day, materialized in density and decay. Since Hans never quite became that journalist he wanted to be, he brought a little slice of the newsroom inside the four white walls, chiding their mysterious otherness all the while. The core

concept of INFORMATION was to deal neutrally with exchange, but it took a turn to the sour as it went on. With an overall anti-Vietnam war sentiment, it understandably caused a big-stir.

Another poll was conceived by Hans at Jack Burnham's show "SOFTWARE - Information technology: its new meaning for art." Also in 1970, and in New York, it combined Haacke, Kosuth, LeWitt, and scientists from MIT into one puzzling bunching. Burnham defined as show as one with "art that is transactional in that they deal with underlying structures of communication and energy exchange" (Gere 131). Considered an official start of conceptual art as exhibitable, it featured CalArts' own John Baldessari who interred ashes of his paintings in the wall of the museum. If the death of the object could be so accepted, it was no longer a death, merely a new beginning. This time around Haacke's "Visitor's Poll," had a computational element, not merely an analog one. In keeping with the project themes of data flow, info-processing, movement, and interconnections, the poll system showed on-the-fly results of a visitor's profile at the gallery. The poll gave information which painted its own portrait, an elephant in the room: that the viewers were largely high-end, high-classed, and highly-educated.

**AND ON AND ON: INSIDE AND OUTSIDE** By 1971, Haacke had shifted from inorganic systems to biological systems to human social systems. His renown only blossomed after his first major censoring. Because his most famous piece, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real-Estate Holdings...* exposed too much about a New York slumlord, the show featuring it got cancelled. It was to have taken place at the Guggenheim, but the museum's Thomas Messer called it off, arguing it had ruined "the intrinsic nature of the work as an end in itself" (Haacke 138). He also deems the whole debacle a "muckracking venture" (Elsen And Merryman 562). It was made as a 'dirty laundry' campaign, not an aesthetic object fit for a museum. The staging took a clinical approach, as if a city-engineer had put the whole thing together inside the city-clerk's office where all the data came from. Nonetheless, it elevated in the ranks of reputation and was put on elsewhere later. All in all, it worked unintentionally as a kind of 'bad-but-good' PR. It was from that very point, the restaging of *Shapolsky* years later, that the convoluted loop of inside/outside defeats itself. As a 'real-time' system, the anti-aesthetics were to make the work like journalism. Instead they were

aestheticized and institutionalized just as could have been expected. Graphically speaking, I'm not a fan. The sketches and photos of the builds are seeped in the dryness of a bureaucrat. It's innocuous. The wish to offend is there, but it's not flagrantly visualized. Neither is 1975's "On Social Grease" of much beauty, it being six plaques with incriminating quotes about Corporations and Culture set in the default typeface of officiality, Helvetica. Its rather dreary. Haacke makes his points much less minimally now, the systems are as visible as they can be. But do they resonate? I prefer 1972's "Rhine Water Purification Plant," where Haacke found a problem and represented it through a beautiful solution. Highly polluted water from the German city of Rhine was filtered in a gallery, pumped to a small pond full of goldfish, and then pumped through the wall outside the gallery onto a garden. The piece implicates officials but indirectly, not through direct naming, or using their word against them.. While really sticking it to the city of Rhine it does so beautifully as well as practically. No matter how marginalized the work was compared to his most famous 80's period, this was no small feat.

Through the 1980's, and by its latter half especially, critique in art is a kind of cottage industry. Baudrillard excuses himself, ducking out from being in every artist-statement and *October* essay. Haacke makes light of the whole puzzle with 88's *Bauchichard's Ecstasy*, trickily working back to Duchamp. The piece is good for a quick laugh, but named something else it would seem only about the urinal Readymade. Here again, a timely piece at the time feels dated out of context. Neither its aesthetic completion in and of itself or its title alone make sense compiled unless we read them with a pretty lengthy historical context. Where did the skepticism of the Art Context go? Those who would accept the piece and laud it had to be in on the joke. I never expected to feel like one of those annoyed Documenta 2 visiting guests with a Haacke no less! If you're not ingratiated into the scene before, *Ecstasy* sure isn't going to bowl you over.

As time went on, Haacke reappropriates too heavily, and too directly. He becomes but a 'culture jammer,' the living incarnate of *Adbusters* magazine before it ever existed. Always relying on his research. Mainting a resolutely concept-driven approach, he repositions his findings as much as make anything new out of them. Take his "Sanitation," from 2000's Whitney Biennial.

Open-lid garbage containers stand in front of other people's quotes, inscribed in crass white on black. Amongst others, the words implicated were Giuliani's. All were set in a 'Fraktur' typeface - solemn, Gothic, and most of all Nazi-like. Essentially pulling a journalistic mistake, he puts the quotes out of context. Here was Rudy's explanation of why he censored 99's 'Sensation' show, but Rudy was nowhere to be found. The point was laughable. Giuliani wasn't a Nazi. And you didn't need to spend all the time and pretense to make a piece that was merely going to say that. While *Shapolsky* shocked through surprise, its tireless research, *Sanitation* was shock contrived from our own expectation for it. Nothing more, nothing less. This wasn't free discourse. We knew the mayor copped to political censorship, but he wasn't there to argue his point, so how fair is that? The work should have spoken for itself but it didn't, it couldn't. Even Joseph Beuys, who said "Everyone is an artist," also said an artist should finish off with "a precisely worked-out form" (1035) "Sanitation" was not the same as being an ephemeral event like balloons in Central Park. It said nothing about censorship, art, or form I couldn't get from elsewhere.

**I HATE TO SAY IT, BUT...** Haacke lost polemical edge because the art world relies on him to repeal their own guilty conscience. Today he's not so much a source of censorship, but "has become a heroic, eccentric outsider of the aesthetic mainstream" (Bucloh 237). I've always suspected Capitalism reappropriates its critiques, but I was less sure of it in the Art world until Haacke's depoliticization at the hands of LACMA. If the 'radical critique' becomes a novelty, the very censoring of the art becomes its unveiling. This works better when that very blockade does not only pretend to be a moat but actually acts like one. Otherwise, it's a kind of charade.

**CREMATION PIECE, PART 2** A quick story in parting, one more optimistic. Of the 'political artists' working today, many acknowledge Haacke's indomitable influence. And of those, Thomas Hirschhorn is a prime student, calling himself a worker-artist-soldier. He appropriates while reavowing. He's crass but for a reason. It doesn't feel forced. Instead of feeding bread to birds, his grungy politicized uses trash to far better use than "Sanitation." In an early staging within the everyday, he left out work near trash cans and photographed the results as they were tagged and thrown away. The result is still put in an art context as the destruction is documented,

but the raw self-knowing critique is uplifting. It's rare an artist can have this much self-humor in the 'political art'-world. The politicism starts beyond the gallery before it ever gets there. It's a social system, a sociology, a kinetic sculpture, an institutional jab. All Haacke's interests are there. Between the prior and present Haacke, this is a reincarnated 1969 version working broadly, exceptionally, with all he can, the best he knows how.

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