

INSIDE YOU CAN DO IT HANS HAACKE INTERVIEWED

by Óscar Faria

Hans Haacke | photo: Stefan Kömerl |
Conceptual Paradise, 2005



ÓSCAR FARIA Let's start with the beginning of your career as an artist. It was in Germany...

HANS HAACKE I grew up in Germany, I went to art school in Kassel, also in Germany. So, if you think that a career as an artist starts at an art school, I could say yes.

ÓF And how was the school's context during your graduation?

HH The school had some orientations along the lines of the Bauhaus. One of the teachers was a former Bauhaus student and the others looked to the Bauhaus for guidance. Another thing that was important for the students was the fact that Arnold Bode - the inventor, as I would call him, of the *Documenta* - was a professor of painting at the school. So we were close, as students, to the putting up of the exhibition. So when I was studying there in 1959, during *Documenta II*, all the students participated in the installation of the show; and we were guards and we did the guided tours even if we didn't know anything about anything... (laughs)

ÓF What was the relationship between that *Documenta* and the others that followed it, for example *Documenta V* of 1972?

HH I believe that it was the first time abstract expressionists' works were shown in Germany... On the one hand it was a historical show, with works that were done before and during the war outside Germany. But the big new thing was that also a contemporary section was introduced. And we learnt a lot from that. I learnt a lot about the art world... behind the scenes.

ÓF Was it important to experience the structures behind the work of art, to establish the difference between work and world of art?

HH Absolutely. Well... they are related but there are also differences... In a certain way art is a business like any other business.

ÓF When did you leave Germany?

HH I finished my studies in Kassel, and in 1960 I left and I was a year in Paris. Then I went to New York. Actually, first Philadelphia and then New York...

ÓF Why did you decide to go to the United States?

HH It started off with a grant... and I like New York and eventually I settled there.

ÓF Was it also for artistic reasons? Was the New York Art scene very different from the German art scene?

HH There were a number of reasons... Germany was very stuffy at the time... New York was a cosmopolitan city, I wanted to be in a big city and I liked New York when I was there... So in 1965 I settled there for good.

ÓF Most American artists say European context at that time was more receptive to their work than that of the United States. Curiously, at the same time, German artists went to New York. Concerning art reception, what were the differences between European and American contexts in the sixties?

HH Hum... I don't know how could I describe the difference...

ÓF Did you feel the differences?

HH Well... certainly there were differences... in Europe probably there was less sense - with any reason for that - of having established oneself for the first time in the international art scene. This was something that the Americans had done in the forties. Of course, they were very proud of it and that is a reason to be proud of. This first generation, the abstract expressionists, predominantly dominated the scene and the younger ones had to rebel against them. People like Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns constituted this new generation, and particularly Rauschenberg had an early entry in Europe. But once again, it was something the so-called minimal artist had to rebel against. Since they were, in comparison, a cerebral bunch of people. I think in the beginning they had great difficulty in being appreciated and the Europeans made a connection to their own history. I believe it's a bit chauvinistic to say that, but I say it anyhow, I have the feeling there was more acceptance of something that is based on ideas rather than on looks.

ÓF In Germany there were figures like Joseph Beuys, who influenced many artists. Do you feel that your work was influenced by the German Art tradition or by the art of that period?

HH No. Well, let's say now that all this appears in retrospective, as if Beuys was already a recognized artist in the sixties. He was not; that started in the seventies... The people I was a friend of were some artists known as group Zero... And there were connections, not close but at some level, with Fontana, in Italy,

with Yves Klein, in Paris, and a few other artists in Italy and also in Holland. This is a sort of my background, where I came from.

ÓF Your work has a strong political dimension. I was talking yesterday with Barry Le Va and he told me about *Documenta V*, in 1972, where there were some reactions against the Americans – groups like the Bader-Meinhof were operating at that time. Do you think your work differs from that kind of political approach that drives to action? What is the main difference between political work and political action?

HH I'm not a politician, nor a political activist of the kind they were. I'm an artist. (laughs)

ÓF Are there any similarities between the criticisms an artist can make and those made by a group as Bader-Meinhof, for instance?

HH I wouldn't know how... No, No. The fact that they had political goals and I engage in political subject matters in my work, that doesn't bring us together.

ÓF Another group of the sixties, *L'Internationale Situationniste*, was very critical of the state of art back then. They called it the spectacularization of art. I think your work points against that kind of spectacularization, but it's still art. As an artist with a critical perspective about art, but still practicing inside the art field, how do you feel about the Situationists' criticism?

HH I will have to take a step back. I've written about this occasionally. I believe in the art world and in what artists do, in what people who are interested in art care about and so on. The press is part of a larger picture of things that form a period's consciousness. They contribute to how the society thinks of itself, what goals it has, what traditions it charges or the ones it abandons. And in a minor way what artists do to participate in this formation of the social understanding and consensus. At the same time they also move it forward or, for that matter, they can also hold it back. I don't believe that artists *per se* are the *avant-garde* of the society. And from this somewhat removed point of view, it does matter what happens in the art world, what artists do, what people talk about in the art world, what they see and how that affects their view of the world. In that sense, it is political.

ÓF But do you believe that an artist can work critically inside the art world or, to put it differently, from its interior?

HH Yes, you can do it. Inside you can do it. Outside it is not an either or. Today we know more about the world of the media and the arts are part of the media. We know that there are no boundaries or walls between them and what happens here is that someone communicates somewhere else and that affects the entire planet. To assume that only what happens outside, in the street or in the barricades, is really capable to infiltrate the thinking of a society, that's naïf.

ÓF I remember that one of your works at that time – “*Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real*



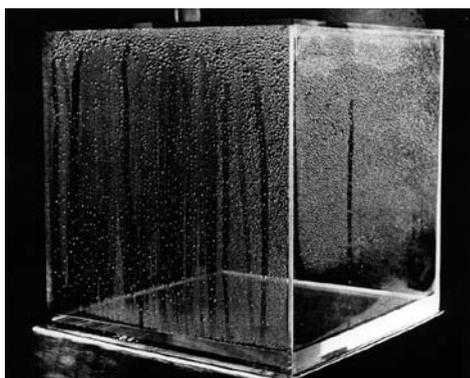
State Holdings[...]" [1971] – was censored, causing the curator Edward Fry to be fired. I saw the same work, two years ago, at *Documenta* in Kassel, in the middle of such a spectacle. The work was very important in 1971, but censored, and now it is absorbed by the art world. The question is that now it hasn't the same impact. What do you think and feel about it?

HH Of course it can't have the same impact. But nothing in the world has the same effect in the world today that it had twenty or thirty years ago; there is no such thing.

ÓF What conclusions can you take from this process?

HH I don't think that's shackling new. It's natural. Nothing, absolutely nothing is understood, is perceived or is reacted to in the manner in which we did at the time when it was first presented to the world. If you read newspapers today from twenty or thirty years ago you shake your head and think: why did they get excited about? But it was very upsetting at the time, and the same is going to be true for what we are arguing over today.

ÓF Let's talk about your "*Condensation Cube*", of 1965. In this work we could say that there is a kind of separation between your own use of the cube and the work of the

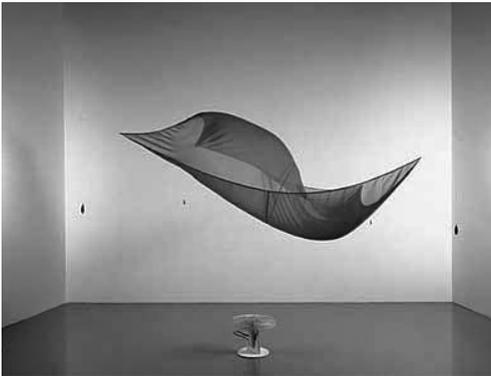


minimalists, for instance. Was it a way of going against the minimalists' formalism?

HH It did not come out of the tradition or the thinking of minimalism. For me it didn't matter if it was a cube. The shape did not matter. I needed a container for water to evaporate and condense. So the most practical thing seemed to be to build a box out of ready-made materials with walls we could look through – this was plexiglas; maybe one could say, in spite of it, a cube is not just a neutral shape. But I was looking for a shape that did not draw attention to itself.

ÓF That work is often mentioned in important conceptual art catalogs. Do you think that it fits in that field of proto-conceptual art?

HH Yes... I think the reason it is understood in that context comes from the fact that what matters there is not the shape of the object. It was not primarily the looks of the condensation – although I personally like the looks of it a lot – that was important. The process of condensation was something that was directed by the environment, by air currents, by lights and temperature conditions in the place where it was displayed. There were immaterial forces, so to speak, that had an effect on the processes triggered by and then we could see some random traces of those processes.



Hans Haacke | *Blue Sail* | 1964/1965 | Property of the artist, as a permanent loan to the Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen | Photo: Wolfgang Neeb, (c) VBK, Wien, 2004

ÓF Like the human presence in a space?

HH Yes.

ÓF So it is a matter of phenomenology, I think. Is it a word that we can associate with your earlier works?

HH That's a philosophical term that is well to say that fits on art. But what I also found interesting was that this process I described took place even if no one was looking at it; there was always something going on. What was going on was what I care about and I wanted to present, it was not whether one would find symbolism or project things on it...

ÓF I should quote Benjamin Buchloh when he says that your early work "*moves away from a specular object relationship altogether and it establishes a biological--physical system as a link between viewer, sculptural object and architectural container*". Is it a correct definition of your early work?

HH I wouldn't object to it.

ÓF I think in your earlier works the sociological concerns are not present yet. When did you feel the need to approach those themes?

HH Well, I have to take a step back again. When I was working with the condensation type of works, with air currents, also with plants and animals, I found out that people who spoke about theory and wrote about systems theory were describing phenomena similar to those I was interested in. They were using a language that was useful for me to describe what I was doing. There were concepts that I found useful to apply to a conceptual understanding of what I was doing. And if one approaches these things from a so-called systems point of view then, of course, very soon one will realize that these are not only physical or biological systems, but that also the social sphere is an interactive organism where there are forces at work and where, in one way or the other, everything is connected to everything else. This is one avenue through which this can be approached. The other one is that towards the end of the sixties, and like many other people, I also was politicized through the events in various countries of the world. There was, aside from the war in Vietnam, something like a cultural revolution taking place, and that affected me. So, it was not really such a big step, as it may appear to outsiders, to include into the primarily physical and biological also the social and the sociological things.

ÓF Was it an attempt to relate art to the world?

HH Well, yes. On the one hand, it was a natural step but at the same time I also felt that it would be... as if I were a coward if I had not included the social at a time when the social was weighting very heavily.

ÓF You also participated in artists' movements that existed in New York...

HH Yes, *The Art Workers Coalition*. I was quite active there.

ÓF What kind of activities have you done and how did you react against the war?

HH Well, *The Art Workers Coalition* started off as what was called an artists' rights organization, but it coincided with the political events outside of the art world, in particular in the United States, with the Vietnam War. We were challenging the institutions, the museums in this particular case, and at some point also the people who were running these institutions that were part of the establishment, the political and financial establishment of the country.

ÓF And what was the importance of a figure like Seth Siegelaub in that context? Seth Siegelaub after a while went out of the art world and tried to do other things. Did he have an important role at that time? Was he influential to artists and the way art was moving back then?

HH Seth Siegelaub probably was among the very few, who very early on, whose friends were conceptual artists and organized out of the established venues exhibitions

of conceptual art, with some three or four artists that he was affiliated with. And apparently he was savvy enough to also make this known and the art world was talking about it; and that launched, to some degree, what we learned to call conceptual art. The other part, that probably was significant, is the artists' rights angle that I mentioned. He developed a contract together with a lawyer in New York that reserves certain rights to the artist when the artist sells a work. I use that contract still today.

ÓF What do you think about the fact that in our days and in the context of this exhibition [*Circa 68*], a newly born institution doesn't present certain conceptual artists like On Kawara, Douglas Huebler, Art and Language or Joseph Kosuth... and at the same time chooses one of your works that is a, should I say, pre-sociological one?

HH I don't know yet which artists are represented in this show. So I can't really assess what is here and what is missing and what could have perhaps been the reasons...

ÓF But aren't you interested in the context that will surround your work?

HH I understood that this was an exhibition about 1968, an historical exhibition. I must admit that I didn't think about who is in or who is not in the exhibition.

ÓF Do you consider these artists (Douglas Huebler, Kawara, Art and Language, Kosuth, Victor Burgin and others) representative and worthy enough to be in a museum that is precisely focused on that moment of art?

HH Probably some of them should be here, yes.

ÓF May that kind of absence reflect an ideological choice?

HH Probably... I'm not sure whether this plays a role ... but I occasionally get the sense that there was an effort made to select works that are not the trademark works and also – and this probably addresses your question – select names that are not necessarily the ones that everybody is talking about. What I've seen so far... I find interesting because there are a great number of works that I've never seen nearly in reproduction or in real life. That gives me the sense that Vicente [Todolí] was not looking for the usual.

ÓF Yes, that is true.

HH ...and that I find very nice! I really enjoy that and even though being it an historical show gives a freshness that most historical exhibitions don't have.

ÓF But isn't freshness a quality that market wants?

HH I don't know whether the market plays a role here... but there's another phenomenon perhaps taking place, and it is not directly related to this exhibition, although it fits in the pattern that I believe is occurring. We are going through a period, it seems, in which things, particularly from the sixties, are being honoured, revisited and rethought. But an attempt is also made to get to the roots of it and not just look at the surface of it. Like in a big exhibition [*Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1999*] in New York, at the Queens Museum of art – which is not a visually attractive show and where you

have to make an effort to go through – but where I got a sense of the ferment that existed in the sixties which I have not sensed in many other exhibitions that were more visually attractive and so forth.

ÓF I was asking it because now we are talking about the change of paradigm in the sixties and I think that this changing – and the rehabilitation of that period – is related to the market. That freshness could be also something else...

HH These things may be connected subterraneously but I don't think there's a direct link. Another thing that certainly fits these phenomena is that there are more and more young art historians who are writing doctoral theses about the sixties and they had become real experts. So apparently there is a need to dig below the surface of what we had accepted as given. And then, after thirty years, if works or artists' names, brand names, so to speak, have in fact survived, sooner or later the market catches up.

ÓF We should now talk about the *Shapolsky's* piece. I believe it's very important. What were your intentions with that work?

HH As you know it was started in 1970, and exhibited in 71. In this period things were going very well in New York. The Guggenheim Museum, as you know, is up in the fifth avenue, in a very chic part of the town; the art world, as I knew it, and the people I was friends with, we lived downtown and there were certain lines in the city that you should not cross, because it is another world. So going up town, you were crossing a sort of a border. It was also a period when the gap between rich and poor was established, and the political weakness was felt very acutely. If one is up town in the Fifth Avenue and sees the way people live there, and how are their houses, the chauffeurs, and the doormen and so forth... Then, if one comes back home, in downtown – it has considerably changed since that time, of course –, it was very run down, it was poor; the so-called quality of life, which everyone had to put up with, was rather miserable. There was a tremendous gap. I wanted to indirectly present some of the backgrounds to why things are the way they are. In New York this has a lot to do with real estate. Who owns what? How much? That represents power, and still today, the real estate industry has a tremendous effect on who is going to be mayor in New York. I also wanted to import into this very refined world uptown



Hans Haacke | MOMA Poll | 1970

JOHN WEBER GALLERY VISITORS' PROFILE 2 by Hans Haacke
 A work in progress during his exhibition at the J. Weber Galler, 420 W. Broadway, NYC, April 28 – May 17, 1972.

Please answer by punching out bridge between edge and hole next to the answer of your choice.

as artist	Do you have a professional interest in art?	What do you think is the approximate proportion of Nixon sympathizers among art museum trustees?	100 % 75 % 50 % 25 % 0 % don't know
as art/history student	Where do you live?	What do you think is the approximate proportion of Nixon sympathizers among visitors to contemporary art exhibitions?	100 % 75 % 50 % 25 % 0 % don't know
other professional interest	Manhattan	What was your personal income in 1972 (before taxes)?	none \$1-1999 \$2000-4999 \$5000-9999 \$10000-14999 \$15000-19999 \$20000-24999 \$25000-29999 over \$30000
no professional interest	Brooklyn	Do you think, as a matter of principle, that all group shows should include women artists?	favor tolerate reject don't know
	Queens	Sex?	male female
	Bronx		
	Richmond		
	adjoining counties		
	elsewhere North/Middle Atlantic States		
	South Atlantic States		
	Central and Mountain States		
	Pacific States		
	abroad		

a sense of what it is like in the other part of the town; I wanted to create this friction. Apparently the museum understood what kind of friction this would cause and stopped it.

ÓF How do you feel about using of the word “inappropriate” to qualify your work? The Americans seem very puritan in their use of such expressions. How do you feel about their, should I say, “excuse”?

HH When Thomas Messer, the director at the time, called it inappropriate he was talking about a conception of the museum as an institution, of art as an institution and what is proper – and inappropriate is an etymologically related word. And that was not part of that world that he understood, of the world where he'd grown up in, and was gentle to be accepted in a museum that he directs. Since then things have changed tremendously. Has nothing to do with me, personally, but nowadays you can see almost everything in museums...

ÓF Do you think that is important?

HH I don't quite know yet whether that's better or worse... (laughs)

ÓF We should talk about another important work you've done: the “Visitors Profile” [1971]. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

HH On the one hand, in the end of the sixties, I began to be interested – also as a part of my political activism with *The Art Workers Coalition* – on who was actually running the museums, on who were the trustees, on where was the money coming from. But then it is also interesting to know who is the public. What social stratum do they represent? What brought them to the exhibition? And I've discovered, a little later, a French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, that also did research on the public of art – and that's probably why we was interested in what I was doing. I wanted to do “research” – in quotation marks because clearly it is not strictly scientific the methodology that I pursued – but I wanted to introduce that notion into the institution of the art museum, and particularly confront the public of that institution with a situation of self-reflection, making them think about who they are, what they have in common and how these persons, that can see themselves represented or reflected in a mirror, differ from the rest of the society.

ÓF What conclusions have you reached?

HH The conclusion at the time was for them, and I was a part of this and I cannot

exclude myself... but the most part of the people that go to museums come from a certain income bracket, there's a sizeable group formed by students and struggling artists that have a very low income but the rest comes from a middle class or from a higher income bracket. The educational level is usually quite elevated. On the whole they are more liberal-minded than the average person and there are many other aspects... Concerning subjects as the Vietnam War and racial integration, for example, they were clearly more liberal than the rest of the society.



ÓF What do you think about the conclusions? Would the results be different today?

HH Probably it has changed somewhat. We know the museums public has grown tremendously. There are many more museums and many more people go to the museums. Probably it has levelled a little bit.

ÓF Another important work is from 1969... I think the title is "*Nachrichten*" ["News"]... That kind of work interests me because I'm from the media and I think there is some kind of aspiration, something that Noam Chomsky also does, to make things more transparent to people. Perhaps that was the reason why you put that machine in that exhibition...

HH To some degree perhaps there is a vague connection with the reason that got me to do the *Shapolsky's* piece. Traditionally and, to some degree, still today, the museum, the institution, the art world is separated from the rest of the world. The museum is where you go on Sundays. In fact there's quite a number of people, including artists, who take it as a refuge from the nasty world outside and I want to bring the nasty world inside, point out that. In fact, there is no separation; you cannot leave the world by going to a gallery or to a museum; it is still the same world, the same news that you get outside in the newspapers and this continues to affect you, no matter if you're in or outside the gallery. The continuity of existence is... established.

ÓF We should talk about the work you have in this exhibition ["*Narrow white flow*", 1967-68]. What is it about and what is its context of presentation?

HH This is a work that grows out from the things I did with fabrics and air, motions,



and so forth. And, as I told you before, the shape doesn't matter but only the process. And that isn't something stable, but that it is evolving, that it is continuing, that it is dynamic... that also informs all the things that I did with air motions - and I did quite a number of them. This piece here doesn't have a shape. It has many shapes. And it is the piece of fabric on the ground that reacts, as everything in the world reacts to something

else. And this is, if we look at it abstractly, a perfect example of a system, as an interaction of elements.

ÓF You have other works based on the same system...

HH Just speaking about this on abstract terms is very dry and boring... I probably would have never done anything of this type; I would have only thought about it in conceptual terms. I also love the looks of it and what I achieved... and it has to be calibrated very carefully, the right fabric has to be chosen, the fan has to be directed. It's also a visual thing. The shadows and the highlights have to be adjusted and directed very carefully... it's for the eye... (laughs)

ÓF It's also very beautiful, very simple... Now I must use a long quote from Hal Foster's *"The Return Of The Real"*: "*Social mapping is more explicit in much institutional critique, especially in the work of Hans Haacke, from the polls and profiles of gallery and museumgoers and the exposés of real-estate moguls in New York (1969-73), through the pedigrees of masterpiece collectors (1974-75) to the investigations of arrangements among museums, corporations, and governments. However, while this work questions social authority incisively, it does not reflect on sociological authority.*" [Foster, Hal, *The Return of The Real*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1996, p. 185]. May you comment this statement about your work?

HH I think this is one of many examples of someone who is expecting that in a work, or in an approach to a work, everything can be done simultaneously. I don't believe

that this is possible. You can't criticize sociology while you're doing a social work... For example, Pierre Bourdieu has been accused recently by a number of sociologists of having stopped to make sociology to become a political activist. And indeed one cannot quite combine both. If one gets engaged, I believe it's very difficult, at the same time, with the same force and with the same acumen, to reflect and to criticize oneself. I believe it is humanly impossible.

OF In more recent works, you reflect about Germany's past, but in a very different way from [Anselm] Kiefer and others. I saw one of your works in Venice, in the German Pavilion, and in Munster I saw also a very strong piece about the past and the history of Nazism. Why did you feel the need to do artworks such as these? Do memories need to be exposed in the present?

HH I think that primarily it has to do with me and then with the people who see it. I belong to the generation of Germans who escaped the war; in a certain way we escaped the Nazi period; we were just too young. But we were close enough to feel the "heat" of it and to me, and to lots of people of my generation, it is a thing that is very difficult to forget. On the other hand it's perfectly understandable that younger people say: "that's not my generation, it doesn't concern me, forget it." But it still is something that my generation has to deal with. We have the luxury of being somewhat exempted. So it is not personal guilt that drives us, but it is more by implication. This is something that somehow we all have in the back of our minds. But when it comes to the public, of course there is also a need, not only in my generation but also in younger generations, to get a sense of what this country has done, what it is capable of doing and what it takes to learn from history and maybe also what other countries can learn from that history.

This is a previously unpublished conversation that took place just before the opening of the exhibition *Circa 68* (June-August 1999), in the Serralves Museum, Porto. The transcripts were taken directly from the original tapes.

Dinis Santos *tape transcription*
Miguel Leal *edition*
Angelina Barbosa *revision*