



Hans Haacke, *El vapor de la lana*, 1995 ©  
Hans Haacke, VEGAP 2006

## Hans Haacke

**(Cologne, 1936) articulates his work about the social criticism and the critique of the conditions governing the artistic production. Jesús Carrillo, professor of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, has interviewed him. The capacity of art possesses to articulate new audiences, or the future of the spectacularization of the museums, have been some of the questions dealt with in this interview.**

**Jesús Carrillo: Art practices in the 20th century, especially after Second World War, cannot be conceived outside the institution. It is still possible in 2005 to overcome the contradictions working within it?**

**Hans Haacke:** I believe, throughout history, and not only in the so-called Western world, the production of artifacts and what we call “art” today has occurred in more or less close connection with the “institutions” of their time. Many of the objects were, in fact, commissioned by the institutions or enjoyed at least their tacit support. During periods when societies are not monolithic, differing positions or outright challenges to the norms of the day take many forms. Among these manifestations are “deviant” art works.

This pattern persisted in the 20th century and continues up to this day. There have been and still exist today various forms of institutional dissuasion and censorship, exercised by governmental agencies, by art exhibiting institutions, granting agencies, and also art schools and art history departments. I also consider the art press as well as commercial art galleries and their customers as being part of the institutions of the art world that are not entirely innocent of such practices. But during non-dictatorial periods, there are quite a number of individuals and institutions who are relatively open to or even encourage deviations from the consensus, and they do this in spite of their personally sometimes conflicting positions and the “contradictions” of the institutions they direct or are affiliated with. After all, it is not surprising that art institutions are not immune to the conflicts of the larger social arena of which they are a part. Each institution, with its specific constellation of people and the social forces that affect it at a given moment, needs to be examined on its own as to whether one can work with it or not. One institution and its particular contradictions is not like every other.

My work has been censored both in Europe and in the United States. And I know of institutional self-censorship, the privately admitted version and the self-censorship that is internalized to a degree that it is practically unconscious. But I have also

experienced generous, principled and courageous support without which my work would not have survived for so many years and would probably be unknown today. The answer to your question then is a qualified “yes”.

**JC: The neo-liberal takeover of public space, the fear of terrorism and the crisis of the ideal of egalitarian citizenship and “communality” as revealed in the recent turmoil in France make it difficult to think of a stable notion of the public. Can the artist operate without such a reference? Does art have any competence in the articulation of new publics, of new commons ?**

**HH:** Control over the public space, the streets and the places where people gather - or shop – has existed throughout history. It is not a new phenomenon. New is the privatization of traditionally public spaces and the degree to which the fear of a terrorist attack and riots has increased the surveillance and control of both the public and the private spaces. Still, to speak about Paris, what is happening there today is mild compared to the siege the city was under at the peak of the Algerian War and the threat of a coup by right-wing officers.

*Égalité* and *fraternité* or communality (to make it gender-neutral). are principles to uphold. Neither in France, where they were first formulated during the Revolution and adorn every state building, nor in many other countries which subscribe to these basic precepts are they adhered to as a matter of course in the framing and execution of public policy, not to speak of private day-to-day life exchanges. The film *La haine* [Hatred] from the mid-1990s gave a premonition of the consequences of their flagrant disregard. Enactment of genuine equality and the adoption of truly communal attitudes would require changes that, in effect, would almost border on a revolution. Advantages enjoyed and taken for granted by many generations of certain segments of the population would have to be curtailed and a massive redistribution of social resources would have to be started.

I believe an unacknowledged rejection of equality, as guaranteed in the German constitution, was the subtext to the vehement opposition by many members of the German Parliament to my installation *Der Bevölkerung* [To the Population] in the Berlin Reichstag building. I had conceived this work with the hope that it might contribute to the shaping of a more democratic social consensus. Although art works, no matter of which persuasion, play only a minor role in affecting the *Zeitgeist*, it is not a negligible one. They have considerable symbolic capital. Not to use that capital would mean to leave the “marketplace” of ideas, without contest, to forces we oppose.

**JC:** Following the general logic of today's capitalism “expand or die”, contemporary museums and art centers are becoming increasingly extrovert in order to survive in the highly competitive market of leisure, “culture” and tourism. Should art institutions retrieve anything from that arena? Are there alternative spaces of social interaction for art beyond that?

**HH:** Even though I am sickened by how cultural institutions have become part of the entertainment industry, I am not ready to write them off. I remember that in the sixties and seventies there were complaints that museums were too elitist, that their entrance fees were too high, that they were not accessible to “normal” folks. I have been a tourist in many art venues. Among my fellow tourists there were always some whose behaviour made me believe they were genuinely interested in what they were looking at, that it meant something to them. I believe several of the Documenta commissioners understood that Documenta is an ideological “battle ground”, and it is fair to say that the event has had an important impact on “ordinary” Germans and visitors from abroad. “Arts & Leisure”, as *The New York Times* calls its Sunday culture pages, is more than *muzak*. In spite of all our gripes, they remain a forum we should not vacate.

**[www.macba.es](http://www.macba.es)**

If you wish to reproduce a part o the complete interview, please contact us at [publicac@macba.es](mailto:publicac@macba.es)