

# HANS HAACKE

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*Matching the abstinence of American museums, collectors are also refraining from association with works that question the wisdom and morality of current U.S. government actions in Iraq. The widely shared opinion of art critics is that such works do not qualify as art.* – Hans Haacke

How, it would seem logical to ask, should a critic proceed in the critical assessment of a small retrospective show of Hans Haacke's art when the artist has preempted one's 'opinion' on the matter? Either I must agree with Haacke's statement (which the artist issued in response to a questionnaire circulated by the editors of *October* concerning the art industry's response to the current war) and so discount at least one of the five pieces in this exhibition: *Mission Accomplished* (2005), a torn-in-half print of the stars portion of the Stars and Stripes, one half of which lies on the ground while its complement remains framed on the wall; or I must disagree, and so be seen to dissent from my fellow critics by accepting any and all forms of cultural production that are overtly critical of the Iraq War – which is to say, that are 'politically engaged' in general – as 'art'.

Now, dissent is not a problem, but in defence of my fellow (at least likeminded) critics, the question has never been one of accepting politically engaged art as such; it has been one of finding politically engaged art that is any good (and no, not all cultural production can claim the strategic or semi-autonomy – of economic sequestration, of critical distance, or purposeful purposelessness – that qualifies it as 'art'). And Haacke's art – for the past 50 years quite possibly the most consistently politically engaged on offer – happens to be some of the best. That's because such engagement does not issue from knee-jerk liberal rage, ill-informed idealism or fatuous sloganeering, but from research into systems made manifest both physically and ideologically.

Like Haacke's more well known *Condensation Cube* (1963–5), *Wide White Flow* (1967), a more than 1,200-square-foot sheet of floor-bound white silk set billowing by four electric fans, presents an object lesson in dynamics (thermo- for *Cube*; fluid for *Flow*). These are complex systems at work, systems which respond to every environmental variable, including the presence of any 'actors' within the space. The point here is that such terms as 'observers' or 'viewers' imply a passivity which is impossible to maintain. From here it is only a short step towards recognising Haacke's early *Photographic Notes, Documenta 2, 1959* (1959) – a series of black-and-white photographs revealing a European public coming to terms with the (visual) legacy of its own Modernism – as moments in the unfolding of a different but no less complex system; and so on to the artist's *Sol Goldman and Alex DiLorenzo Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971), which should speak for itself.

Of course there are moments when poetics trumps Haacke's systems thinking, as it does in *Mission Accomplished*. The work is at once subtle and poignant, but reads more like a statement of physical fact: such is the case with our now divided States of America. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*

*Trickle Up*, 1992, threadbare sofa, embroidered pillow, dimensions variable.  
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