

Hans Haacke in conversation with
Elisa R. Linn and Lennart Wolff

EL & LW You and KP Brehmer took part in the collective exhibition *Kunst im politischen Kampf. Aufforderung, Anspruch, Wirklichkeit* at the Kunstverein Hannover and, a year later, in the project *Art into Society—Society into Art: Seven German Artists* at the ICA in London. How did you get to know each other?

HH I was at the ICA exhibition in London, though not in Hannover. You could say KP and I were on the same page, and I really thought highly of him. We kept in touch, when I was teaching for a short period as a guest lecturer at the Hamburg University of Fine Arts in 1963 and again in 1994.

EL & LW The very title of the London show sounds like a call to action of some kind. Was there a general sense at the time that artists were turning away from social issues or an understanding that “high culture” shouldn’t concern itself with such matters?

HH I liked the title *Art into Society—Society into Art* very much. When I saw it again recently, it occurred to me that it hasn’t lost any of its currency and still applies today. In the 1960s in New York, but also in Europe, art wasn’t supposed to have any direct bearing on daily life and everyday issues—apart maybe from the mostly uncritical Pop Art. One was to stay away from societal concerns, let alone political issues. These were my years of apprenticeship... But KP Brehmer and others disagreed with that. I was also one of the dissidents. We met a few times and exhibited together in a few group shows.

EL & LW When the ICA show took place in 1974, the Vietnam War was drawing to a close. But in retrospect, these years are also associated with a withdrawal into the private sphere and the rise of neo-conservatism. How did you view these developments?

HH In the late '60s, the revolutionary movements in Paris, which had spread to various cities and universities in Germany, the US and other parts of the world, had a considerable influence on a younger generation of artists, including me. That continued well into the '70s. Then, at some point, everything flip-flopped, and many people didn’t want to have anything to do with it any more.

EL & LW Another connection between KP Brehmer’s work and yours is an interest in statistics and empirical social research. KP worked with existing studies about everything from the connotation of the word “police”, the emotional wellbeing of workers, to air pollution. You, on the other hand, create your own surveys, for example about the socioeconomic backgrounds and political attitudes of museumgoers. We find it interesting that surveys and data can cut both ways. They can be used as a tool for emancipation, on the one hand, or to further capitalist optimization and the spread of market mechanisms into every aspect of our lives, on the other. Both developments have accelerated rapidly in part thanks to the internet and Big Data.

HH These developments were less foreseeable at the time, and I wasn’t aware of this ambivalence. It goes without saying that statistics can be used in a variety of ways and for different purposes. For instance, respondents can be influenced by the choice of words in the questions.

EL & LW So what you saw in the surveys was chiefly their liberating participatory potential?

HH Yes. On the other hand, the current crisis is a good example of how statistics and empirical data can be used to manipulate or, how the Trump administration, for example, tries to completely ignore them. It has a huge impact on how people see the world. They might emerge from the current crisis as less neoliberal, by which I mean—speaking about the US—that ideas like a universal basic income and health insurance for all will gain support and the threat of a global climate change is taken seriously.



EL & LW A main approach for KP was his idea of “Sichtagitation” (i.e. a kind of subverted visual agitprop). He sought to sharpen the viewer’s eye by appropriating official images, symbols and diagrams from press, advertising, scientific and governmental sources, and subtly defamiliarizing and manipulating them. You, on the other hand, focus more on uncovering rather more opaque connections.

HH With regard to KP’s ideas of “Sichtagitation” and visualization of interests, it might be interesting to mention that, after it had been excluded from an exhibition at the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, my “Manet-PROJEKT’74” was, for the first time, exhibited in a public institution as part of a group show at the ICA in London, in which Brehmer also participated. When I was invited in 1974 to take part in the 150th anniversary exhibition at the museum in Cologne, I received an official flyer showing, on an easel, the oil painting *A Bunch of Asparagus* by Édouard Manet from its collection together with the banker Hermann Josef Abs, who was, at the time, chairman of both the Museum’s as well as the Deutsche Bank’s Board of Directors. I already knew a bit about his ties to the National Socialist Party and then proceeded with research into the provenance of the painting. I discovered that the still life of asparagus had been in Jewish collections for many years, among others it had been owned by Max Liebermann in Berlin.

EL & LW Benjamin Buchloh, who wrote a lot about your work, was rather critical of approaches based on system aesthetics. Actually, he only ascribed a political dimension to your work when you shifted focus from physical and biological to social systems. This interpretation is to a certain extent based on drawing a distinction between nature and culture and, consequently, between your early and later works. What is your point of view when it comes to this reading?

HH In the second half of the '60s, it occurred to me that, besides my exploration of purely physical phenomena such as the flow of water, evaporation and the like, biological systems, flora and fauna, should also figure in my work. When the “revolution” erupted towards the end of the '60s, I realized that what I had been doing wasn’t enough. I felt that my work should include social systems as well. My friendship with Jack Burnham played a role: he’s the one who introduced me to systems theory, especially Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s *General System Theory*, which was published in 1968. That’s when I realized everything—the physical, biological and social—is interconnected. They don’t exist separate from each other. And that, of course, includes the pollution of our environment.

EL & LW And yet there are still attempts to dissociate these spheres from one another, to keep matters of ecology and sustainability separate from a critical assessment of our economic system and issues of wealth distribution, for example.

HH I think many people have come to realize by now that the way society is organized has a direct impact on the environment and the future of the planet, and that something has to change fundamentally. —It’s all connected!—Artists who eschew social issues are effectively promoting art as something otherworldly, surrounded by a halo, divorced from real life. Not by coincidence does that type of art still receive a lot of financial support. But I think it’s a generally accepted fact now, especially by the younger generation, that political, social, economic and environmental issues need to be seen as affecting each other. Here in the US, we see how Donald Trump is trying to weaken the government agencies responsible for environmental matters and to make it impossible for them to do their job. His rallying cry is “Make America Great Again”—We’ll see what comes out of that.

EL & LW In 1972, the publication of *The Limits to Growth*, the Club of Rome study on the limits to a growth model involving the ever-increasing consumption of finite resources, caused quite a stir. In Jack Burnham’s book *Systems Esthetics*, which came out four years prior, he had already stressed that one of the crucial questions of the time was of an organizational nature: How do we create stable, enduring—or as we might put it today, sustainable—relationships between organic and non-organic systems?



HH This calls to mind my work in Krefeld, which I'm still quite proud of in retrospect. It should be pointed out how courageous it was for Paul Wember, the director of the municipal art museums in Krefeld, to show it in 1972. At his Museum Haus Lange, in addition to presenting an active filtration system that purified heavily polluted water from the Rhine, the work made the process and waste residues visible to the museum visitors. Maybe most importantly, it also named the worst polluters and revealed the financial ties between the City of Krefeld and corporations of the area, among them Farbenfabriken Bayer AG, an outpost of a major German chemical company.

EL & LW How was the project received by the public and the press? Was the public already aware of this issue?

HH The project was well received by the press, at least as I saw it. Germany was receptive at the time to debates about sociopolitical and environmental issues. Documenta 5 was held in the summer of the same year. I remember seeing some works there addressing similar concerns. I also got the chance in Kassel to conduct a poll of the Documenta visitors with very specific questions.

EL & LW With regard to your surveys, which you've been doing for many years now, what can you say about museum publics?

HH People who go to art exhibitions at museums and other major cultural events are often highly educated and members of an influential level of society. My surveys suggest that a relatively large number of them are liberal or even left-leaning people who could have an impact on the social consensus.

EL & LW And what do you think about the often stated problem that in the art world you ultimately only address and reach people you mostly agree with anyway?

HH No, I don't see it that way. I think we should consider instead whether the art public may have some social leverage, when you set it in motion. For example, it is noteworthy that the Whitney Museum in New York last year cut ties with Warren Kanders, its Vice Chairman, after wide protests inside the museum against his business of producing tear gas. Recently, the killing of George Floyd by a racist police officer in Minneapolis also mobilized the art world. Things are moving.

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