

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

A LEGEND OF INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE, AN ADVOCATE OF DEMOCRACY, AND AN ARTIST'S ARTIST: THE SCHIRN PRESENTS THE GROUNDBREAKING WORK OF THE COMPELLING CONTEMPORARY ARTIST HANS HAACKE

HANS HAACKE RETROSPECTIVE

NOVEMBER 8, 2024 – FEBRUARY 9, 2025

The German-American artist Hans Haacke (b. 1936) counts as one of the most influential figures in contemporary art. From November 8, 2024, to February 9, 2025, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is dedicating a comprehensive retrospective to the artist's oeuvre from 1959 to the present. Haacke has shaped the development of political art like no other artist of his generation. His direct and theoretically concise works are simultaneously poetic, metaphorical, ecological, and in many respects extremely contemporary. On several occasions, his controversial artistic contributions to current debates were censored from exhibitions. Artistically, he has pursued a variety of strategies, becoming involved early on in the fields of ecology and natural sciences, drawing on approaches from the ZERO group, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, public art, and poster art, among others. As a central pioneer of Institutional Critique within Conceptual Art, his works examined orders or systems and presented them comparatively. The artist himself describes the world as a supersystem with countless subsystems, each of which is more or less influenced by the others. Systemic thinking, institutional critique, and democracy are the major themes running throughout Haacke's oeuvre. The Schirn is showing iconic early works from the 1960s, his influential real-time systems, pieces that invite public participation, as well as expansive (historical) political installations. With around seventy paintings, photographs, objects, installations, actions, posters, and a film, the exhibition illustrates how Haacke became one of the world's most important and influential political artists for subsequent generations.

For this comprehensive retrospective, the Schirn was able to bring together in Frankfurt major works by the artist from international public and private collections, including: Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; FRAC Bourgogne Dijon Collection; Generali Foundation Collection at the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg; Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart, Berlin; LACMA, Los Angeles; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; MACBA, Barcelona; the Lila and Gilbert Silverman Collection, Detroit; TATE London, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

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Sebastian Baden, director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, notes: "Hans Haacke is a legend of political Conceptual Art. With this retrospective, we're presenting an artist whose work has had a major influence on contemporary art. As an artist's artist, he is a role model for many current positions. His major themes of ecology, Institutional Critique, and democracy are also the central themes of the present. Haacke's critical practice needs to be made accessible and communicated to a broad international audience. The artist is always concerned with involving viewers, inviting them to engage in critical debate, and sensitizing them to the diversity and freedom of opinion. The democratic potential of his oppositional work is especially relevant now, at a time when democracies around the world are at risk."

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Ingrid Pfeiffer, curator of the exhibition, further remarks: "Looking at Hans Haacke's early work in particular offers insights into an oeuvre which may seem heterogeneous at first glance. He uses systemic questions to combine different materials and techniques such as photography, objects, actions, or installations. Structural parallels run like a golden thread through his oeuvre. During various periods, he has interlinked physical, biological, and social systems to reveal structures and cycles. Haacke's work is always rigorously political, but also poetic and humorous. This directness has led him to be disinvited from exhibitions several times. He consistently stood up for his convictions, which include the defense of democratic principles in particular."

OVERVIEW OF WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

In her publicly accessible rotunda, the Schirn presents Hans Haacke's iconic **Gift Horse** (2014), which the artist developed for Trafalgar Square in London as part of the Fourth Plinth, one of the world's most prestigious commissions for public art. As a kind of "counter-monument" to the imperial representation of power by the statues in this square, Haacke's 4.5-meter-tall bronze sculpture shows a horse skeleton based on a study from George Stubbs's book *The Anatomy of the Horse*. The ticker of the Frankfurt Stock Exchange is transmitted live via an electronic display on a loop at the front of the skeleton's thigh bone. Haacke's **Gift Horse** can be read as a commentary on a society that has for centuries been defined by class antagonisms and subjected to the dictates of the markets.

The exhibition tour begins with important physical, biological, and ecological works from the 1960s onward. Haacke's early projects were influenced by his friendship with Otto Piene and his contact with the Düsseldorf-based ZERO group. During this period, he participated in numerous pioneering exhibitions on Kinetic Art, Op Art, Conceptual Art, and Land Art. Although Haacke's work had overlaps with many innovative movements of the 1960s, he did not feel that he really belonged to any of them. He wasn't interested in specific materials or styles, but in the fundamental connections between physical, biological, and social systems. The earliest works shown at the Schirn include the painting **Ce n'est pas la voie lactée (This Is Not the Milky Way)** (1960) and Haacke's reliefs with mirror foil created starting in 1961. The latter already testified to an interest in interactions with the viewer, which would become increasingly important. Haacke's first photographic work, **Photographic Notes, documenta 2** (1959), also depicts visitor behavior in exhibition spaces. Other pieces, some of which are participatory in nature, demonstrate physical processes, such as **Column with Two Immiscible Liquids** (1965) or **Large Water Level** (1964–65). Also on display is a series in which Haacke explored the various physical states of water. One of the artist's signature works is the **Large Condensation Cube** (1963–67), a cube of acrylic glass enclosing a small amount of water. Haacke also called these cubes "weather boxes" and later made analogies between meteorological and political climates. This linking of different systems is characteristic of Haacke's method. The transition from object (or sculpture) to process is also evident in his artistic practice. Further "experimental setups" in the museum interior demonstrate the water cycle (**Circulation**, 1969) by means of evaporation, condensation, crystallization, liquefaction, other air movements (**Blue Sail**, 1964–65), or growth processes (**Grass Grows**, 1969). From 1967 on, Haacke also worked outdoors, for example with **Sky Line** (1967), and controlled processes related to water vapor or melting snow, which he then documented photographically.

He consistently returned to systemic and ecological questions. His photograph **Monument to Beach Pollution** (1970) counts as one of the very first ecological works of art. With **Krefeld Sewage Triptych** (1972) and **Rhine Water Purification Plant** (1972), Haacke offered direct and indicting commentary on the pollution of the river Rhine. His "real-time systems" are also a distinguishing feature of his oeuvre. The action **Chickens Hatching** (1969) saw chicks hatching in

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real time in the exhibition space, demonstrating birth and growth processes in a minimalist box structure. **Ant Co-op** (1969) documents the regularity of the tunnels dug by ants as a biological and social system. The documentary artist portrait **Hans Haacke: Self-Portrait of a German Artist in New York** (1969) offers insights into his artistic methods and also shows many early processual works in action.

One of the exhibition's areas of focus is the sociological and political approach that eventually became known as his signature work. From 1969 onward, Haacke started analyzing and visualizing social systems in order to spark sociopolitical debates in the art context. This form of Conceptual Art is fundamentally about raising awareness for the social, economic, and institutional conditions under which art is produced, exhibited, sold, and received. In 1971, **Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971** triggered a cultural-political scandal and artistic protests against censorship. Using photographs, tabular information, and plans of 142 properties on the Lower East Side and in the Harlem district of Manhattan, Haacke exposed the dubious concentration of real estate and related practices of the Shapolsky group. This work led the director of the Guggenheim Museum, Thomas Messer, to cancel Haacke's solo exhibition shortly before it was scheduled to open. **Manet-PROJEKT '74** (1974), which Haacke submitted for the anniversary exhibition of the Wallraf Richartz Museum in Cologne, also prompted another act of institutional censorship. He proposed exhibiting Édouard Manet's **Bunch of Asparagus** (1880) from the museum's collection alongside the results of his own research into the work's provenance. The information panels contain detailed personal, biographical, professional, and financial information on the previous owners, as well as information about their involvement in National Socialism. The Schirn is also showing two further pieces that critically examine the entanglements between art patronage and economic activity: **Der Pralinenmeister (The Chocolate Master)** (1981), about the connections between cultural and tax-related decisions made by the influential Cologne collector and manufacturer Peter Ludwig, and **Buhrlesque** (1985) on the Swiss art collector, patron, and arms manufacturer Dr. Dietrich Bührle.

The exhibition also presents participatory works, such as the installation **MoMA Poll** (1970) in which Haacke asked visitors to The Museum of Modern Art in New York questions about their political convictions. A new visitor survey will also be conducted during the exhibition at the Schirn. In **Photoelectric Viewer-Controlled Coordinate System** (1968), the visitors' movements through the room trigger infrared projectors and photoelectric sensors that variously activate twenty-eight light bulbs.

In numerous pieces, Haacke advocated for democratic processes, the activation of public opinion, and a pluralist anti-fascist approach. Some of his projects deal with media representation: **News** (1969) transplants the ticker of a news agency into the exhibition space; in the Schirn, reports from selected Frankfurt media such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and *Hessenschau.de* are transmitted. **Photo Opportunity (After the Storm / Walker Evans)** (1992) offers a comparative perspective on photo reportage. The Schirn is also showing Haacke's power-critical work for documenta 7. The installation **Oil Painting: Homage to Marcel Broodthaers** (1982) consists of a portrait of then US President Ronald Reagan made by Haacke himself, which is shown opposite a large-format photograph of a major demonstration by opponents of his policies and the deployment of nuclear weapons. Haacke's long-standing engagement with the politics of history and post-Nazism also feature in the exhibition. In 1993, he represented the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, for which he was awarded the Golden Lion together with Nam June Paik. His sensational contribution **GERMANIA** presented a debris field of marble floor slabs inside the room, which had been remodeled in 1939 under the National

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Socialists. Haacke developed the large-scale work **DER BEVÖLKERUNG (TO THE POPULATION)** (2000) as a permanent installation for one of the two inner courtyards of the German Reichstag building in Berlin. The decision to award the commission to Haacke became the subject of intensive public debates in the Bundestag. The illuminated letters installed on the floor refer to the inscription “DEM DEUTSCHEN VOLKE” (To The German People) on the gable of the Reichstag building. Each member of the Bundestag was invited to contribute 50 kilograms of soil from their constituency; the seeds embedded in the soil grew into a variety of living vegetation, which now frames the letters today. Haacke’s poster project **We (All) Are the People**, which was created for documenta 14 (2017) in Kassel and Athens and has since been shown many times, can be read as a reaction to the rise of anti-migrant sentiment in recent decades. The text-based poster work repeats the eponymous slogan in the twelve different languages of the major migrant groups in each country.

Hans Haacke (b. 1936 in Cologne) has permanently lived and worked in New York since 1965. After studying at the Staatliche Werkakademie (State Art Academy) in Kassel (1956–60) and spending time abroad in Paris, Philadelphia, and New York, he taught in New York City for thirty-five years as a professor at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. In the course of his extensive teaching activities, he was also a visiting professor at the Hochschule für bildende Künste (State University of Fine Arts) in Hamburg and the Gesamthochschule (Comprehensive University) in Essen, lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, as well as an honorary doctor of fine arts at Oberlin College, Ohio, Bauhaus University Weimar, San Francisco Art Institute, and the Maryland Institute College of Art. Haacke has received numerous awards, including the Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement of the College Art Association of America, the Deutscher Kritikerpreis for 1990, the Golden Lion for the German Pavilion at the 1993 Venice Biennale together with Nam June Paik, the Kurt Eisner Foundation’s Art Award, the Helmut Kraft Foundation’s Prize for Fine Arts, the Distinguished Teaching of Art Award of the College Art Association, the Peter Weiss Prize of the City of Bochum, the Roland Prize for Art in Public Space, the Roswitha Haftmann Foundation’s Art Prize, and the Kaiserring of the City of Goslar.

An exhibition by the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt in cooperation with Belvedere, Vienna.

VENUE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt am Main
DURATION November 8, 2024 – February 9, 2025 **INFORMATION** schirn.de **EMAIL** welcome@schirn.de **TELEPHONE** +49.69.29 98 82-0 **ADMISSION** €12, reduced €10, free admission for children under 8 years **TICKETS** In the online shop at schirn.de/shop and at the Schirn box office **OPENING HOURS** Tues. and Fri. to Sun. 10 a.m. – 7 p.m.; Wed. and Thurs. 10 a.m. – 10 p.m. **BOOKING INDIVIDUAL TOURS** Individual tours or group bookings can be made at fuehrungen@schirn.de **CURATOR** Dr. Ingrid Pfeiffer, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt **CURATORIAL ASSISTANT** Cornelia Eisendle **FUNDED BY** Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Cultural Foundation). Funded by the Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien (Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media). **ADDITIONAL SUPPORT** fiber to the people GmbH

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