

Ecology and Economics in the Art of Hans Haacke

In what ways do ecology and economics inter-relate in Hans Haacke's work from the 1960s onwards?

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Both stemming from the same root 'oikos' meaning 'household', Raymond Williams argues that 'economy' and 'ecology' are closely intertwined.¹ With the 'nomos' ending – Greek for 'law' - 'economics' becomes the 'study of the household' whereas the 'logos' ending in 'ecology' translates to what Matilsky explains as 'the maintenance of the household'.² On closer inspection economy and ecology relate at a far deeper level. The growing economy and population is sustained by both ideal social conditions (including peace, social stability, education, employment and technological progress) as well as physical (such as food, raw materials, fossil and nuclear fuels and the ability of the earth to absorb waste and recycle basic chemical substances).³ The problem is that since the dawn of the industrial revolution, we are growing at a faster rate than the earth and its ecosystems can cope with and therefore they create a boundary or a limit to economic growth.⁴ As we all know, this has led to growing concern regarding the sustainability or 'maintenance' of the environment which has been part of the social agenda since the latter half of the twentieth century.

In *Fragile Ecologies*, the catalogue for the 1992 exhibition of the same name, curator Barbara C. Matilsky presents the origins of 'ecological art' and reveals its objectives.⁵ She explains its formation was due to the political climate in the 1960s and the backlash of the Vietnam War.⁶ She claimed that the artists 'turned to nature and began interpreting its life-generating forces'.⁷ Similar awe-inspired views of nature date back to eighteenth and nineteenth century Romanticism. The picturesque landscape was regarded as a cross between the beautiful and manicured and the more sublime wilderness but, more importantly, was separated from industry and the city which in turn was seen as 'the great creator and destroyer'.^{8,9} Many of the works included in *Fragile Ecologies* aimed to restore and revive the natural ecosystems that were 'abused' by the capitalist structure of industry.¹⁰ However, as T.J. Demos notes, Matilsky's optimistic Cartesian view of the nature/culture

¹ Williams, Raymond, *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 110

² Matilsky, Barbara C., *Fragile Ecologies* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992) 4

³ Meadows, Donella H. et al., *The Limits to Growth: a report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind* (London: Pan Books, 1974) 45

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Matilsky, *Fragile Ecologies*, 4

⁶ Demos, T.J., 'The Politics of Sustainability: art and ecology,' *Radical Nature: art & architecture for a changing planet 1969-2009* (London: Koenig Books, 2009) 19

⁷ Matilsky, *Fragile Ecologies*, 36

⁸ Carlson, Allen, 'Environmental Aesthetics', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/environmental-aesthetics>

⁹ Skrebowski, Luke, 'All Systems Go: recovering Hans Haacke's systems art,' *Grey Room* 30 (Winter 2008) 57

¹⁰ Demos, 'The Politics of Sustainability,' 20

(or perhaps ecology/economy) divide doesn't seem to take into account the use of the machinery and technology upon which many Land Artists and Eco Artists depended.¹¹ Perhaps then it is necessary to review the way in which Matilsky (as well as many other critics) reads the work: a shift in acceptance of relation between industry and nature could allow them to be read as problem solving initiatives.

From a philosophical standpoint, we can see the reinterpretation of the nature/culture dichotomy has been greatly theorised. When commenting on 'love' for the planet, Slavoj Žižek talks about acceptance; an acceptance for the world as it is, rather than aspiring to a reductive view of nature that rejects industrialisation.¹² Leo Marx suggests we no longer have a choice. In his essay 'American institutions and the ecological ideal', he argues that we simply have to recognise that industry that has fuelled our economy is now part of, and indistinguishable from, nature: 'an ecosystem not only includes all living organisms (plants and animals), but also the inorganic (physical and chemical)'.¹³

We are far enough into industrialisation that many global ecosystems have adapted to a more polluted environment and simply reverting the damage may actually be damaging in itself. Guattari recalls a TV experiment conducted by Alain Bombard in which a 'healthy, thriving, almost dancing octopus' was moved from one tank containing heavily polluted Marseille port water (where it had been found) to a tank of 'clean' seawater. Within seconds the octopus 'curled up, sank to the bottom and died'.¹⁴ Guattari, uses this example as proof that, even if we wanted to, nature can no longer be separated from culture (I use the term 'culture' as linked to 'material culture' and human development through economic growth as explained by Williams).¹⁵ ¹⁶ The environment has adapted. Acknowledging that 'nature' today is no longer that of the Romantics – and that finding a way to move forward with economy and ecology hand in hand – might be mutually beneficial.¹⁷ By recognising the importance of technological advancement as crucial to our economic growth we could begin to find a way for it to be used to positively impact the environment.

In terms of art history, this strikes a middle-ground attitude towards science; away from the forceful optimism of the Futurists and Constructivists yet not as disillusioned as the Surrealists and the Dadaists.¹⁸ This new attitude is more aware of the negative impact of industry yet acknowledges the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Žižek, Slavoj in Taylor, Astra (dir.), *Examined Life*, Documentary, (2008)

¹³ Marx, Leo, 'American Institutions and the Ecological Ideal,' Kepes, Gyorgy, *Arts of the Environment* (England: Ardan Ellis, 1972) 78

¹⁴ Guattari, Félix, *The Three Ecologies* (London & New Brunswick, NJ: The Athlone Press, 2000) 41

¹⁵ Ibid. 42

¹⁶ Williams, *Keywords*, 91

¹⁷ Meadows et al., *Limits of Growth*, 45

¹⁸ Skrebowski, 'All Systems Go,' 58

advantages of its potential when used in the right way. Gyorgy Kepes moves the artist to a more central social informative role: 'the artist's sensibility has entered a new phase of orientation in which its prime goal is to provide a format for emerging ecological consciousness'.¹⁹ The artist becomes the informant who can raise awareness via his or her work. Araeen takes it a step further and calls for the artist to resign the egocentric methods of making from the past and suggests that creativity and imagination should be used in order to construct a solution.²⁰ He therefore changes the focus from the importance of the art object to that of the entire system and its integration with everyday life.²¹ In this way, the artist is asked to conjure an economically normative solution to the ecological problem.

The work of Hans Haacke not only resonates with Araeen's 'manifesto' but with the embrace of technology and science as part of nature. In conversation with Jack Burnham, Hans Haacke claimed he 'hate(d) the nineteenth century idyllic nature-loving act. I'm all for what the big cities have to offer, the possibilities of technology and the urban environment'.²² Though often associated with Land Art and ecological movements (as in Matilsky's essay), arguably, Haacke's focus is incredibly different. Inspired by Ludwig von Bertalanffy's *General Systems Theory* (1968), Haacke's 'systems aesthetics' focuses on the similarities in complex systems such as science, society and nature. This concept resonates not just within art but also in Guattari's philosophy in which similarities can be seen between environmental ecology, social ecology and the ecology of the human psyche.²³

Haacke's *Rhinewater Purification Plant* (fig. 1) of 1972 epitomises the cohesion between economy and ecology through the eyes of the artist. The functioning bio-technological system was part of his solo exhibition at the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld and involved bringing contaminated Rhine water into the gallery space where it was stored in large glass bottles with chemical injections. The water was then pumped to an elevated basin where it passed through charcoal and sand filters before it was poured into an acrylic basin with goldfish. The surplus water would stream into a hose through the ground to the garden which could be seen through a large window in the gallery. It was accompanied by a triptych entitled *Krefeld Sewage Triptych* (fig. 2), which directly related the high pollution of the river with the industry in Krefeld. Assuming the artist takes the role of communicator to the masses and creative problem solver, as Araeen and Kepes suggest, then the 'system' translates as Haacke's message and suggested solution. Though functioning for the period

¹⁹ Kepes, Gyorgy 'Art and Ecological Consciousness,' Kepes, Gyorgy, *Arts of the Environment* (England: Ardan Ellis, 1972) 9

²⁰ Araeen, Rasheed, 'Ecoaesthetics: a manifesto for the twenty-first century,' *Third Text* 3:5 (2009) 684

²¹ Ibid.

²² Burnham, Jack, 'Hans Haacke: wind and water sculpture,' Churner, Rachel, ed., *October Files: Hans Haacke* (Cambridge, MA & London, England: MIT Press, 2015) 14

²³ Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 27

of the exhibition, the simplified aesthetic and logistical problems within the system meant that it would not be able to be implemented at an industrial level. Nonetheless, it served to raise awareness alongside the triptych and suggested a hypothetical solution that, with perhaps, the help of scientists, could have worked to purify the Rhine at a larger scale. The demonstration of a cyclical system of ecological health was achieved by the inclusion of the goldfish which, though not native to the Rhine, also provided a human relational element to the piece (though one can't help but think whether perhaps the native fish might have reacted the in same way as Bombard's octopus).

Superficially the system appears to relate solely to the issues of environmental contamination however it may delve deeper. If one observes the *Rhinewater Purification Plant* in relation to Haacke's other works that came before and after, the wider focus on systems aesthetics would suggest that his focus was not as simple as environmentalism as explained by Matilsky but more generally on systems and how they function.

For his *Chickens Hatching* (1969) (fig. 3), Haacke brought chicken eggs into the gallery and stored them in incubators and hatched them within the gallery environment. He seems not to distinguish between the chicks hatching in the gallery from those that would hatch on a normal chicken farm, noting that if they were to be returned to the farm, they would be 'indistinguishable from all other chickens there'.²⁴ As seen also in many other of his biological systems such as *Grass Grows* (1966) (fig. 4) and *Bowery Seeds* (1970) (fig. 5), these projects don't seem to comment on the problems in chicken farming or crop growth but appear to be isolated studies of individual systems: in these cases, life cycles. Technology is used to recreate natural environments and the effects are observed.

Similarly, in work happening simultaneously, and after *Rhinewater Purification Plant*, Haacke turned to more social and political systems. His *MoMA Poll* (1970) (fig. 6) is also an isolated study of a social and political system taken into the gallery. He asked gallery goers: 'Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?' and inserted 'yes' or 'no' answers into clear acrylic ballot boxes that are reminiscent of the acrylic basin from the *Rhinewater Purification Plant*. The social and political movements of the gallery goers were observed through the simple transparent boxes – that we are familiar with from the *Rhinewater Purification Plant* – and provide for a clear display of the systems at work. This clearly demonstrates Haacke's highly systemic approach. Burnham even goes as far as

²⁴ Haacke, Hans, 'Provisional Remarks,' Alberro, Alexander; Stimson, Blake, *Institutional Critique* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009) 121

to joke that his studio was a 'laboratory' and that Haacke would use 'not lake water but distilled chemist's H₂O'.²⁵

Haacke claims to have been influenced by Jack Burnham whose 'Systems Esthetics' essay outlined the importance of systems theory in art. He translates the the change in focus from product to system in the art world as a change that stems 'not from *things*, but from *the way things are done*'.²⁶ This relates back not only to Araeen's move away from the art-object, but the call for responsible economic growth. Burnham talks about balance and maintaining balance in order to create an on-going stable dialogue between the organic and the non-organic.²⁷ In order to stop a system spiralling out of control, or in this case the biological liveability of the earth, Haacke's purifying system cleans the water, returns it to the river, via the goldfish that prove its liveability, and allows for an extension to the limit of economic growth. The 'creative' use of technology and scientific innovation is used as a blueprint for sustainable and ecologically responsible development.

This raises questions about the incentive of environmentalism. Do we strive to restore balance in order to rehabilitate the environment or is the purpose of rehabilitation in order to allow us to continue with industry as it pushes back to limits imposed by the ecosystem? Perhaps then the shift is not only accepting that industry can be used in a positive way to ameliorate the ecological situation but that our motivations might be more anthropocentric. T.J. Demos reflects on this when considering the definition of 'sustainability': 'whose interests does it promote, and whose are left out'?²⁸ He uses the definition provided by the then Norwegian Prime Minister, Gro Brundtland, at the UN-convened World Commission on Environment and Developments of 1987 in which development that 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' can be deemed 'sustainable'. What are our 'needs'? If the needs of the western world are in fact dependant on economic growth, then perhaps 'sustainability' is as anthropocentric as Demos suggests.

With this in mind, perhaps Araeen is veering towards the optimism demonstrated by Matilsky. Can the artist ever really create solutions without an egocentric motivation? If the objective is to create a stable environment in which we can continue to economically grow and evolve, the incentive that 'places high premium upon ingenious methods for circumventing these limits', is, ultimately, still narcissistic.²⁹ According to philosopher, Bruno Latour, solutions such as this one acknowledge the

²⁵ Burnham 'Hans Haacke: wind and water sculpture,' 15

²⁶ Burnham, Jack, 'Systems Esthetics,' *Artforum* 7:1 (September 1968) 31

²⁷ Burnham, 'Systems Esthetics,' 32

²⁸ Demos, 'The Politics of Sustainability,' 18

²⁹ Marx, 'American Institutions,' 87

necessary shift in attitude that comes from a shift from the Holocene era into the Anthropocene.³⁰ It is simply the new economic model that takes into account that humans are the deepest affecting factor in the changing of the planet and that without our natural resources, we 'threaten the continuation of life on earth'.³¹

Part of the shift from the Holocene to a hypothetical Anthropocene is a change in economic objective to a more systematic approach in which rather than looking at the immediate product-based outcome, more focus has been placed on methodology in order to maintain the biological liveability of the earth.³² This creates a cyclical motion that is reflected – though most prominently in *Rhinewater Purification Plant* – in much of Haacke's oeuvre. Burnham goes as far as to suggest that the cyclical process is the reason for Haacke's success. The continuous movement and flow of energy and nature provide 'a sense of completion with the further knowledge that the cycle will begin all over again'.³³ Water will be polluted again and cleaned again to create a continuous looping system that allows for less constraining limits to economic growth and exploitation of natural resources.

The dependencies between economics and ecology are reflected in the work of Hans Haacke, particularly in his *Rhinewater Purification Plant*. Haacke provides a hypothetical technological solution that raises awareness for the rehabilitation of the Rhine. The cyclical system not only cleans the polluted water but provides a study on the actions that could be taken in order to balance the ecological equilibrium whilst allowing industry to carry on. It provides a metaphor for the way in which industry could positively impact the environment without unrealistically rejecting it altogether. It also signals a way to increase productivity without affecting the environment. In this way it returns to Williams' definitions of 'economy' and 'ecology' and provides a study of the maintenance of our planetary 'household'.

³⁰ Latour, Bruno, 'The Affects of Capitalism,' Lecture, The Royal Academy Lecture in the Humanities and Social Sciences, The Black Diamant, Royal Library, Copenhagen, Denmark, 26th February 2014

³¹ Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 27

³² Latour, Bruno, 'The Anthropocene and the destruction of the image of the globe,' Lecture, *Facing Gaia: a new enquiry into Natural Religion*, Gifford Lecture series, St Cecilia's Hall, the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland, 25th February 2013

³³ Burnham 'Hans Haacke: wind and water sculpture,' 7

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Hans Haacke *Rhinewater Purification Plant* (1972)



Figure 2

Hans Haacke *Krefeld Sewage Triptych* (1972)

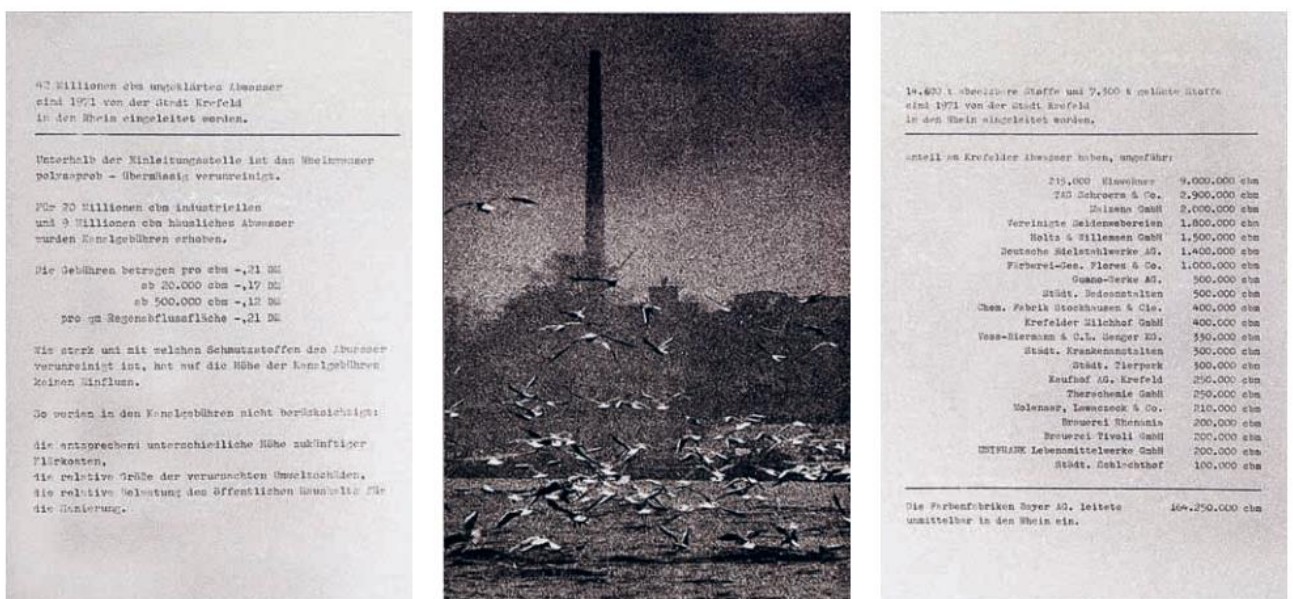


Figure 3

Hans Haacke *Chickens Hatching* (1969)

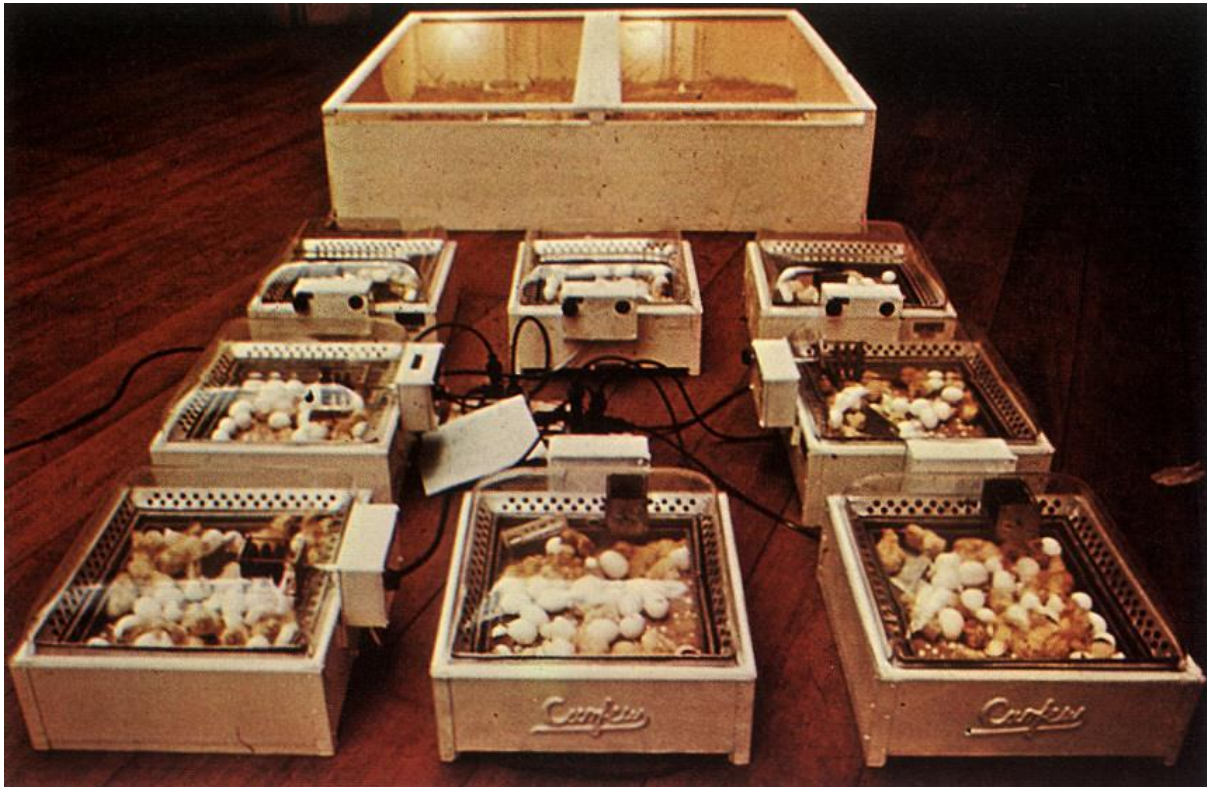


Figure 4

Hans Haacke *Grass Grows* (1966)



Figure 5

Hans Haacke *Bowery Seeds* (1970)



Figure 6

Hans Haacke *MoMA Poll* (1970)

