

No change will be achieved by commenting on Facebook from a desk. Put your money where your mouth is: move to the city, go out onto the street, stroll through the parks, use public transportation, and get to know other people who are not political insiders. Political insiders come and go. The rest will always be there, and those are the people we are indebted to, since our primary obligation is to Puerto Rico, not to our colleagues—that is what the enabling act, our governing document and code of ethics, states.

Therefore, there is really very little to do to bring the law in line with reality. Even if the process is abandoned in favor of those who insist upon doing so little in the face of such necessity, the laws and regulations would still need to be amended to better reflect that narrow-minded laziness. All that is needed is willingness to do one thing or the other.

In the end, newcomers and veterans alike, we are not really reinventing anything at all. We only seek to do as we were taught: design and transform our reality, piece by piece, whirlwind after whirlwind.

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### THIS WAS THE FUTURE?: HANS HAACKE AND THE LANDSCAPE IN DESTRUCTION

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The route covered by the taxis from Barajas airport to the center of Madrid tends to be an experience so dull for travelers that the elements that make up the city's outskirts often go unnoticed. But if that passenger is the artist Hans Haacke, any sign can become an omen. This explains why, upon passing by the south extension of the Vallecas neighborhood, an extensive area with its urban amenities called his attention—sidewalks, lampposts, and roads—perfectly laid out and finished, and which even boasts fully constructed and operating metro stations. In that supposedly urbanized setting, however, he saw hardly anyone walking around on the sidewalks, and not even one car could be seen going down the roads. There was barely any trace of human activity.

Here and there, Haacke managed to identify housing structures in all possible stages of construction: completed, half-built, or reduced to their shells of reinforced concrete. Any other artist would have limited that episode to a mere anecdote, as simply a sign of the times we happen to live in. But a restless soul like Haacke, whose production has focused on criticizing the art system and the relationships among this system, capital, and artistic institutions, could not let the creative potential of that finding

escape. So, days later, he went back to visit the place on foot to document that ghostlike setting. As he documented it through photographs, he discovered the definitive factor that drove him to undertake this subject matter: the plotted streets carried the names of twentieth-century movements and artists—Eduardo Chillida Street, Expressionism Street, Antonio López Street, Pop Art Street, Minimal Art Street... Without thinking twice, he turned this finding into the core of what would later be a peculiar retrospective exhibit at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid.<sup>1</sup>

Given that it was to be the matrix of his work at the museum, the pieces accompanying the installation expand the scope of its meaning and endow it with a historical quality, since they sink its roots down into the beginnings of practices that have brought about disastrous results suffered by most of the world's current population. I will devote time to one of them later, as I will now focus attention on the one that gives way to the title to the exhibit itself, created as a site-specific project for the Reina Sofía Museum: *Castillos en el aire* (Castles in the Sky).

The materials that make up this part of the exhibit are organized into two rooms. The surface of one of the two side walls in the first room serves as an enormous screen on which a tracking shot parallel to the place is simultaneously projected by several projectors, shot from the inside of a moving car (**Fig. 1**). In these images, one can observe the solitary apartment blocks, one or two pedestrians on the street, and the looming presence of the half-built structures in the background. On the opposing wall, there is a series of photographs on display with details of those neighborhoods, hung out on a line with clothespins as if they were undergoing the final stage of their developing process (**Fig. 2**). On the back wall, a gigantic street map of the south development zone of Vallecas, on which the stages of construction of the properties are identified by colors and hatching, serves as a means for us to spatially frame what awaits us in the next room.

In the second room (**Fig. 3**), several photographs in which the names of the streets are guessed at are combined with authentic works of art from the movements or artists they refer to, thereby establishing an ironic interrelationship in the style of the snapshots: for example, the overwhelming repetition of the Windows on Pop Art Street next to a silkscreen print by Warhol with several razors, the geometric simplicity of the prismatic blocks on Minimal Art Street, etc. That which gives meaning to the title of the project and explicitly reveals what has been gradually foreshadowed to us, is concentrated in the center of the room: dozens of sealed copies of the mortgage for the purchase of each one of the housing units in favor of the various banking entities, all of them scantily dangling from thin threads, seem to hover over the space, and dissolve into it, like castles in the sky.



This is not the first time that Haacke has established a close relationship between architecture, capital, and the artistic phenomenon. The outcry incited at his individual exhibit organized by the Salomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1971 is famous. One of his proposals, entitled *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System*, as of May 1, 1971, caused the exhibit to be cancelled.<sup>2</sup> Official sources explained that the work fell outside of what was considered art and proved to be too "specific." What Haacke had projected was a series of documentary materials, consisting of two maps—one of the Lower East Side and the other of Harlem—with the marks of the empty properties photographed one by one in 142 snapshots accompanied by display panels stating the price, the original owners of the buildings, the current owners, and the mortgage value of each one of them (Fig. 4). Actually, Haacke had made use of the text and the image to shed light on the fraudulent practices of Harry Shapolsky. Through the formation of over sixty enterprises that bought and sold said properties and their apartments, rented out under the table to the African-American and Puerto Rican communities, Shapolsky—who was the owner in the shadows of the majority of them, not to mention the high-level cover-up at the Housing Department—had prospered for two decades (1951-1971) off of renters' meager incomes and real estate speculation (Fig. 5).<sup>3</sup>

It is evident that Haacke's "work" cannot be valued according to the canons of traditional art or certainly the sacrosanct autonomy of art put in vogue by, among others, the art critic Clement Greenberg.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, the work's creator had designed similar projects by employing the strategies typical of the humanistic and social sciences. The museum's curator, Thomas E. Messer, years later, referred to that and other works presented by Haacke, linking them to "a rising interest in political correctness and political issues."<sup>5</sup> The artist, nevertheless, sharply denied such pretensions: "Mr. Messer is wrong about two things: first, by confusing the political stance an artist might have with the political stance that the museum showing his work may have; secondly, by affirming that my works take a position within some political cause. They do not."<sup>6</sup>

It may perhaps be Benjamin H. Buchloh who has best described the majority of Haacke's production according to the parameters of "counter-memory." Based on this, the artist establishes a genealogy of current social relationships, the origin of which should be traced back to the first decades of the 20th century and whose reason for being is based on the consolidation of a "new form of political and cultural legitimation."<sup>7</sup> The fact that the streets of the Vallecas extension bear the names of Spanish artists and Western art movements from the 20th century comes into play in the paradox of this perspective and fuels the debate on the nature of

art from multiple viewpoints: domestication of the transformative power of the avant-garde over society, a mock lifestyle formulated for the working class by the powers that be, inclusion of the cultural industry in the economic bubble at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, rejection of the autonomy of art without denying new aesthetic proposals, to name a few.

Haacke portrays, then, the remains of the shipwreck brought about by the popping of the real estate bubble. The finished buildings and those halted midway through their construction are the swan song of the urbanization model that has marked Western civilization throughout the greater part of the 20th century; a way of understanding architecture assimilated to that of a commodity that should be mass produced at a low cost.<sup>8</sup> This outrageous view of housing and its pricing practices, far from fading, continued on an unstoppable progression during the last years of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century, driven by the excess of bank credit, international immigration, the reclassification of soils—defective in many cases and sponsored by local governments—the arrival of new workers to the cities and the indifference of the politicians in office at the time, who in some autonomous communities decided to put a hold on construction of social housing or set their sales prices at market value.<sup>9</sup>

The face value of an average housing unit measuring 100 m<sup>2</sup> (about 1,080 square feet) in the municipality of Madrid has tripled over the past two decades. This increase is likewise found in residential areas located in old outlying neighborhoods, created through the construction of social welfare housing units in the 1950s and continued in the 1960s following the demolition of slums or old housing structures in dreadful living conditions: from an average of \$130,000 in 1998, it rose to \$400,000 in 2008.<sup>10</sup> In these neighborhoods, an odd phenomenon has been observed which spans beyond the scope of this text: while the old government-subsidized homes were acquired by immigrants, the new residential neighborhoods, built in the heyday of the real estate bubble, were occupied mostly by young professional couples with children. The factors that I have stated above gave way, therefore, to exorbitant changes in prices: between 1998 and 2003, homes in the south and southeast—San Blas and Vallecas—experienced an upsurge in prices greater than that of the same housing units built in the northern outskirts of the city, especially in the municipality of Tres Cantos—from an average of \$150,000 in 1998, the average price rose to \$325,000 in 2008—in a municipality further from the city center yet with excellent commuter train and bus connections (Fig. 6).<sup>11</sup>

It remains strange that the most widespread typology in these newly created homes is also the blissful materialization of the economic trend that nurtured them from the very beginning: that of a



bubble. Their appearance, as well as that of most of the buildings reproduced by Haacke, bears resemblance last-minute derivations of the immuebles-villa devised by Le Corbusier after World War I. They are units facing a large interior courtyard, usually consisting of a pool, a basketball court, and a play area for children. Their design, therefore, squarely rejects the idea of social exchange between different units: all contact tends to be limited to the neighborhood corresponding to each resident upon purchasing the apartment. The residents of these condominiums crave the city that exists beyond the limits of these bubbles of bricks and concrete due to the suspicion of a threat, fueled by the sense, justified or not as it may be, of personal danger and paranoia.<sup>12</sup>

This sort of attitude explains why the residents of most of these family cells spend their free time in that other bubble—of leisure—which is the shopping center or mall.<sup>13</sup> The astronomical rise in the number of these buildings in the past decades—from the 71 built in Spain in 1988, the figure jumped to 541 in 2008 (Fig. 7)—represents a final loop that literally copies the spatial structure of the dwelling units: the common courtyard becomes the avenue and the fountain, while the private space is converted into consumption space.<sup>14</sup>

Other interesting implications exist in this residential phenomenon. As I pointed out earlier, it is mainly geared toward young families with children, thereby marginalizing the groups not included in that traditional family model. As if they were the latest evocation of the changes in U.S. society during the Cold War, these groups need to occupy other domestic spaces in tune with their generic needs, principally second-hand homes in city centers.<sup>15</sup>

The gridded morphology of the hallow structures captured by Haacke takes on a disturbing minimal appearance, as if the famous grid structures of Sol LeWitt had morphed into gigantic monuments devoid of any meaning (Fig. 8). Thus, it seems like an even more resounding homage to Minimal Art than the street bearing its name in the south extension of Vallecas. And the photo and video documentation of its presence similarly evokes the expeditions of Robert Smithson through a variety of landscapes in the suburbs of the United States, such as the Passaic River (1967), in which he offered those who would join in on the trek the chance to appreciate an experience of the sublime by coming into contact with places and abandoned architectural and engineering structures in which the past, present, and future are (con)fused. For instance:

Nearby, on the river bank, was an artificial crater that contained a pale limpid pond of water, and from the side of the crater protruded six large pipes that gushed the water of the pond into the river. This constituted a monumental fountain that suggested six horizontal smokestacks that seemed to be flooding the river with liquid smoke. The great pipe was

in some enigmatic way connected with the infernal fountain. It was as though the pipe was secretly sodomizing some hidden technological orifice and causing a monstrous sexual organ (the fountain) to have an orgasm.<sup>16</sup>

There is yet another element that links these excursions by Smithson to Haacke's artistic project on the south extension that is on display at the Reina Sofía Museum. It remains strikingly odd that, at the end of the 1920s, a group of artists linked to the Spanish avant-garde would found what was to later be known as the "Vallecas School," which also lends its name to one of the streets in the urban extension. Initially made up of the painter Benjamín Palencia and the sculptor Alberto Sánchez, these and other members of the group devoted themselves to endless walks, using Atocha station—located across from what is now the Reina Sofía Museum—as their starting point and the Vallecas town center as their final destination.

The group's intention was to seek out inspiration in nature, materialized in the vast moorland of La Mancha. What in other artists would have given way to more or less realist landscapes, in the hands of the artists of the Vallecas School was transformed into an inert, ancestral space. Their compositions were populated by fossilized monumental characters, which were evoked by the paintings of Yves Tanguy, Pablo Picasso, and Salvador Dalí; likewise, they were captured from a point of view that heighten the contrast between the moorland and the sky, just as in the photographs of enormous concrete structures conceived by Haacke. That same group, in the full-on chaos of the Spanish Civil War, came to view the conflict from a telluric and ancestral perspective, expanding the limits of time in a way similar to Picasso in his mural *Guernica*.<sup>17</sup>

Although the German artist's proposal strays directly away from the literary narrativity of Smithson and indirectly from the surreal connotations of the Vallecas School, all three artistic projects share the same chilling vision of a post-historic time, expanded and frozen in equal parts. A time that, in the case of Haacke, elapses in a world governed ad infinitum by economic activity, just as Francis Fukuyama regrettably cried out to the four winds in "The End of History".<sup>18</sup> A world "without art or philosophy", that is, a silenced world.

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## YARAUVI: A UNIVERSAL ISLAND

**Javier Boned Purkiss**

Miró-Rivera Architects (MRA) with their studio in Austin, Texas since 1997, is one of the most prominent firms of young architects in the United States.