

***Christoph Schlingensiefel: Art Without Borders*, ed. Tara Forrest and Anna Teresa Scheer  
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*Christoph Schlingensiefel: Art Without Borders*, edited by Tara Forrest and Anna Teresa Scheer, is the first English-language collection of essays about this extraordinary German artist. As Forrest and Scheer suggest in their introduction, ‘access to Schlingensiefel’s highly challenging productions has been hampered by the fact that very little has been published on his oeuvre in the English-speaking world’ (5). This collection aims to introduce English-speaking artists, scholars and academics to Schlingensiefel’s extensive, experimental, and at times highly controversial body of work across film, theatre, television, live art and activism (6).

Forrest and Scheer have structured *Christoph Schlingensiefel: Art Without Borders* as a chronological chapter-by-chapter examination of a career that spans nearly three decades – a format which functions well both to enable readers unfamiliar with Schlingensiefel to access descriptions of his work; and to see resonances, responses to changing social and aesthetic conditions, departures and returns in a retrospective of his career.

Throughout the collection, the contributors cast Schlingensiefel as an artist committed to experimentation, experimental work, and work that is willing to take risks to engage the social and political sensibilities of spectators. The central premise, the proposition the contributors return to again and again throughout the collection, is that Schlingensiefel re-stages conventional and pop cultural forms, transgresses boundaries between art and reality, and uses a variety of professional, amateur and socially marginalised actors in his works, and that this is critical to understanding the politics of his work. Schlingensiefel, the contributors contend, has continually intervened in debates about Germany history, politics and society – particularly the legacy of Fascism, social exclusion, racism, and the extremes of media representations of these topics – in ‘open, ambiguous’ (5) and chaotic

works. In doing so, his aim is not to push a specific agenda or plan for social change, but, rather, to prompt spectators to think critically about their own position and complicity in problematic social systems. As one contributor, Kristen T. Vander Lugt, puts it, for Schlingensiefel there is 'no critical position that it not itself implicated in the system' (39). Accordingly, Forrest and Scheer claim, 'Schlingensiefel is not interested in producing a particular political or pedagogical outcome, but in generating work that is fluid and open in its structure, and that encourages the audience to think critically and creatively for themselves' (15).

In the first two Chapters of the collection, Richard Langston and Kristen T. Vander Lugt examine the ways in which the aesthetic, activist and political elements that characterise Schlingensiefel's later work are inflected in his early film trilogies of the 1980s. They claim that Schlingensiefel's parodic, self-reflexive critique of New German Cinema's incapacity to overcome the legacy of fascism, his use of popular forms such as the mockumentary or the splatter film, and his use of characters that offer us specific spectatorial positions, is both a reaction to the numbness of the modern world, and a foreshadowing of future work, as Schlingensiefel moved from being the subject of talk show debate to a creator of it.

In Chapter 3, Sandra Umathum uses personal recollections of her own response to Schlingensiefel's work in the 1980s and 1990s – in particular, *Rocky Dutschke '68* (1996), a work which re-enacted a 1996 re-enactment of a 1968 attack on a student leader – to trace his shift from film to theatre. According to Umathum, Schlingensiefel's move into theatre after an invitation from incoming Volksbühne director Frank Castorf in 1992 allowed him to further his challenges to conventional patterns of spectatorial reception and engagement (63). 'As a film director,' she says, 'Schlingensiefel was initially unsure about what to do with theatre. But he soon realized that it offered him possibilities that were unavailable to him as a filmmaker' (61), and launched him into a series of theatrical 'actions' in which blurring of the boundaries between artifice and reality resulted in what Hans-Theis Lehman describes as the "uncertainty" of post-dramatic theatre.

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In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, Anna Teresa Scheer, Solveig Gade and Denise Varney examine Schlingensief's every-increasing engagement with public space, and the public sphere, in works in the 1990s and 2000s – *Passion Impossible* (1997), *Chance 2000* (1998), and *Please Love Austria* (2000) respectively. Though these essays, like the collection as a whole, favour description of performance practices over overly-dense theorisation of Schlingensief's work, the authors at this stage deploy a variety of theoretical frameworks – from Erving Goffman's theories of public self-performance, to Jacques Ranciere's theories of public politics to Brecht and even Baudrillard – to enable readers to understand the themes and techniques operating in the work. Scheer argues that *Passion Impossible*, in which Schlingensief used public space performance to replay, parody and critique the staging of poverty and social exclusion in a Hamburg railway station, can be understood as a work in which the negotiation and contestation that Erving Goffman sees as characteristic of the "backstage" component of public self-performance is brought to "frontstage" (72). The work, Scheer says, forces spectators to question their own commitment to creating an impression of moral and civic virtuousness, and who and what is included or excluded from this performance of civic virtues. Gade argues that *Chance 2000*, a hybrid public project which pulled disenfranchised people into the role of political candidates, allowed Schlingensief to engage and critique the 'theatricalized character of politics in the current society of spectacle' (89), taking his performance further into a space where its status as art / life is unclear and uncertain. In *Please Love Austria*, Varney claims, the re-staging of a *Big Brother* format in which people vote to remove immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers from the polis can be read as a Brechtian "gestic" manoeuvre when enables us to see both the action, and the attitudes that underpin it (113).

In Chapter 7, Tara Forrest considers *Freakstars 3000* (2002), one of Schlingensief's television shows, which co-opted a quiz show format to force audiences to question their complicity in excluding certain people from the public sphere. In this show, Forrest argues, the tenor of the highly politicised questions denied audiences any pleasure in knowing the answer, giving the work the effect of what Theodore Adorno calls a-tonal music, an accompaniment that throws into relief rather than reinforcing themes within a theatre or film performance (129). Again, Forrest returns to the idea that Schlingensief's

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sometimes controversial re-stagings of pop cultural ideas and forms is designed to spark, rather than settle political debates, and she notes that ‘the large number of viewer comments entered on the *Freakstars 3000* online guestbook,’ revealed that ‘not all members of the audience are comfortable with Schlingensiefel’s provocative, non-pedagogical approach’ (131).

In Chapter 8, Brechtje Beuker examines Schlingensiefel’s use of media images of violence and terrorism in *ATTA ATTA, Art Has Broken Out!* (2003), and in Chapter 9, Morgan Koerner discusses the use of similar images in his direction of Elfriede Jelenik’s *Bambiland* (2004), again highlighting the risky logic of cultural citation and recitation operating in his work (164).

In Chapter 10, Roman Berka discusses a shift to what Schlingensiefel calls ‘animatographs’ – film and still images projected onto rotating installation patterns – in his more recent work (2004-2007), noting that Schlingensiefel here re-enters the realm of art by creating an artform of his own (175, 179). At this point in the collection, a shift in Schlingensiefel’s style starts to emerge, and is expanded on in Chapters 11 and 12, in which Florian Malzacher offers a reflection on how his experience of cancer informs his final trilogy of operatic works – *Art & Vegetables / The Current State of Things* (2008), *A Church of Fear for the Stranger in Me* (2008) and *Mea Culpa: A ReadyMade Opera* (2009) – and an interview with Schlingensiefel. As Berka and Malzacher demonstrate, Schlingensiefel was moving back to art in his final works. In his own words ‘[t]hat I hurt people because I pulled them onto the stage was, perhaps, justifiable at the time, but at the moment, I have no connection to it ... One can also employ theatre as a place where one can think’ (207), and it becomes clear that he was exploring this in interesting ways in his final works. As a reader, one feels a twinge of pain at this stage of this collection – it is clear that Schlingensiefel was moving into new experiments in his work, but, sadly, he succumbed to the cancer in 2010, and Forrest and Scheer’s wonderfully engaging collection has become a sort of posthumous testament to the career of one of Germany’s most intriguing and provocative art makers.

What this collection makes clear is that Schlingensiefel – a provocateur, and a prankster (Forrest 123) – has had an enormous impact on German theatre, and showed theatre-

going publics just how far an artist can go with works that ‘attemp[t] to re-stage reality for socially critical purposes’ (Scheer 72). Indeed, the volume of work addressed in the collection makes it difficult to do this book’s scope justice here. In this sense, Forrest and Scheer have succeeded in introducing readers to Schlingensief’s oeuvre, and the emphasis on the contributor’s personal experience of engagement with this artist and his works makes the collection – particularly standout essays such as those by Forrest, Scheer, Gade and Umathum – accessible, enjoyable, and thought-provoking. One can only hope that, despite the unhappy fact that Schlingensief himself no longer with us, this collection will – as the author’s suggest – ‘provide a point of departure for further research on Schlingensief’s work’ (18).

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