



The German pavilion has seen many bombastic artistic solutions over the years, but nothing can top this messianic splatter extravaganza.

This page, from left: Text on facade of German pavilion, Venice, as conceived by Christoph Schlingensiefel, June 7, 2011. Photo: Kate Lacey. Christoph Schlingensiefel, *A Church of Fear vs. the Alien Within: Fluxus Oratorio* (detail), 2008, mixed media, dimensions variable. Photo: Kate Lacey.

Opposite page: View of "Christoph Schlingensiefel," 2011, German pavilion, Venice. Christoph Schlingensiefel, *A Church of Fear vs. the Alien Within: Fluxus Oratorio*, 2008. Photo: Kate Lacey.

WITH JOHN WATERS ON THE JURY, there simply was no chance that Christoph Schlingensiefel's pavilion would fail to win the Golden Lion. And that, I think, is an excellent thing. The opening of this year's Biennale was packed with Germans complaining about their scandalously dreadful pavilion, but, as Waters stated in a recent interview, contemporary art and bad taste have more in common than many are willing to admit. Schlingensiefel—creator of trash masterpieces such as *100 Years of Adolf Hitler: The Last Hour in the Führer's Bunker* (1989) and *The German Chainsaw Massacre* (1990)—is certainly a case in point. But the frantically productive artist, filmmaker, and theater director, who tragically died of lung cancer before he could finish his work for the pavilion, was not only about bad taste—he was a total artist, if such a thing is still possible. In her oft-quoted obituary, novelist and playwright Elfriede Jelinek went further. "Schlingensiefel was one of the greatest artists who ever lived," she wrote in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. "I always thought one like him cannot die. It is as if life itself would be dead. He was not really a stage director (in spite of Bayreuth and *Parsifal*), he was everything: He was the artist as such."

It was Schlingensiefel's intention to turn the monumental German pavilion into what he referred to as an African wellness center, and when he passed away in August 2010, he left behind plenty of notes and sketches. But it would be naive to think that an artist and provocateur who was so quick to react to the ever-changing political landscape would not have reworked his plans numerous times before finalizing his project. Curator Susanne Gaensheimer's decision to present existing, completed works instead of the unfinished Venice proposal therefore seems appropriate. The choice also made it possible to stage something akin to a compact retrospective, a showcase for key works by an artist still almost totally unknown outside the German-speaking world. One of the pavilion's side galleries serves as a screening room for six of Schlingensiefel's feature-length cult classics—

George Romero—worthy extravaganzas of gore, political satire, and low production values, full of coke-snorting Nazis and chainsaw-wielding West Germans who do not take kindly to their eastern brethren. Another gallery houses a presentation of Schlingensiefel's last big project, which was closely connected to his ideas for the wellness center: Remdoogo, his "opera village" in Burkina Faso. Dubbed a "social sculpture" by the artist, Remdoogo is indeed an entire community centered around the production of opera and other art projects. It is represented here by architectural renderings and panoramic photographs, as well as by footage from Schlingensiefel's *Via Intolleranza II* (2010), one of his very last theater productions, which explicitly deals with the ethical dimension of his African experiment.

In the central gallery, we find ourselves in a solemn church, complete with a stained-glass window and an altar. Suspended in midair are large projection screens showing twelve 16-mm films in which Schlingensiefel and his troupe pay homage to the performances of Joseph Beuys, Valie Export, Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, and others. This is *A Church of Fear vs. the Alien Within: Fluxus Oratorio*, 2008, a replica of the church in the small German city of Oberhausen where the young Schlingensiefel was an altar boy for more than a decade. At the very center of the action, where one would expect an image of Christ, is a projection of the artist himself in the final stages of his illness. X-rays of his lungs show that he was indeed a man of flesh and blood, in case anyone was laboring under the impression that he was divine. The German pavilion has seen many bombastic artistic solutions over the years, but nothing can top this messianic splatter extravaganza. In some of his last works, such as *Requiem for an Undead Person* (2008), the pale, skinny artist, with characteristically wild hair, tries to convince us that he will somehow survive his illness and live forever. This time his presence is of a different order. Eternity has begun, but it doesn't look quite the way the priests in Oberhausen said it would.

To represent a nation is an awkward task for most artists, but to represent Germany in a pompous building reconstructed by the Nazis is a special sort of challenge, to put it mildly. When it comes to international expectations and clichés, only two types of German artists seem to exist: ice-cold engineers (Kraftwerk, the Düsseldorf photographers) and apocalyptic egomaniacs (Fassbinder, Beuys). There is no doubt which team Schlingensiefel was playing for. We all know who the original apocalyptic egomaniac was, and it is not by chance that Schlingensiefel accepted an invitation in 2003 to direct Wagner's *Parsifal*, the mother of all *Gesamtkunstwerk*, an opus that promises nothing less than final redemption. Years before, on November 9, 1999, Schlingensiefel had boarded New York's Staten Island Ferry carrying an urn that contained what he called the garbage of German politics and metaphysics. In an attempt to "sink Germany," he tossed the urn into the Hudson River to the strains of Wagner. This year's German pavilion seems to attempt something comparable. But the strategy is not one of simple negation, or one of Wagnerian redemption through synthesis. Nietzsche called Schlingensiefel's form of excessive, antidialectical intensification *Steigerung*. Let's simply call it overkill. How German is it? Totally. □

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Christoph Schlingensiefel, *Das deutsche Kettensägen Massaker* (The German Chainsaw Massacre), 1990, still from a color video, 60 minutes. Artur (Artur Albrecht).

