

NEWS

REMEMBERING CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF

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At the end of the memorial service held for Christoph Schlingensiefel in his native hometown of the Ruhr area's Oberhausen, something went wrong. The organ that played when the coffin was carried out went wild.

The music turned from a funeral procession into elevator music, then into a Las Vegas revue theme, finally sliding into carnival music-tinged happy marching tunes. It was the artist's long-time friend, the comedian Helge Schneider, who had kidnapped the orchestration and led the weeping crowd into more cheerful territory. The church was filled with family, friends, artists, the former German president Horst Koehler and other dignitaries.

Christoph Schlingensiefel died on August 28, 2010, at the age of 49. He had married only last summer. He had written a national bestseller on dying from cancer, but then he didn't die for a while. Now he is dead.

In sad moments like this, memories get blurry, but also important moments reappear. It's the morning of August 31, 1997. It is a warm late summer Sunday in Kassel, Germany. In front of the Orangerie, which was transformed into a "hybrid workspace" intended as the media and performance stage of Documenta X, stagehands and performers are preparing the day's program.

As a nod to this Documenta's number (X) Christoph Schlingensiefel and his informal ensemble intended to restage scenes from the famous German political-activist Commune 1 as "Commune X," after its historical occurrence 30 years earlier in Berlin.

In the nearby outdoor café on the Orangerie's terrace people are ordering breakfast, joggers are running by and the adjacent Aue Park is slowly getting Sunday-busy. But this morning is different from the normal Sunday routine. There is nervousness in the air. Rumor says that only a couple of hours ago, Lady Diana died in a car crash. The news is not confirmed yet. Is she really dead, or did she just have a severe car accident?

The performance in the hybrid workspace begins. Sacks of sand are

stacked in front of the large wooden entrance door to the Orangerie. Actors in alienating costumes are becoming increasingly active. Then, Schlingensiefel yells into his megaphone: "Lady Di is finally dead! Kill Helmut Kohl!" (Kohl was the German chancellor at the time.)

The atmosphere in the performance space is heating up. The audience is getting involved and interacts with the actors and Schlingensiefel. Somebody wants the door of the Orangerie closed and barricaded. The sand bags are piled up along with a refrigerator that was formerly leaning against the entrance door, seemingly part of the stage design. Schlingensiefel is announcing the restaging of Commune 1 as Commune X.

Suddenly there is another voice strengthened by a megaphone. It is the police demanding access to the performance space. They order that the door be opened. Because there is a performance going on, the audience believes the police officers are actors in uniforms. They force their way into the space and the Japanese performance artist Hanayo is bitten by a German Shepherd police dog. Schlingensiefel and some of the other actors are put in handcuffs and taken into custody. A trail of audience members demonstrated, along with the remaining performers, trailing after the captives to the Kassel police station to protest, chanting to free Christoph Schlingensiefel.

The newspapers the next morning proclaimed "Performance artists imprisoned on Documenta stage!" It took me another day and several

talks with Christoph's lawyers to understand that he didn't only trick the police, but also the organizers and audience into recreating and replicating precisely the politically challenging, delinquent times of the late '60s in the German '90s. By creating specific, convincing fictions that closely replicate the past, Christoph made everyone believe in the reality of his actions. Neither the theater stage, nor Documenta's omnipresence in Kassel, nor his increasing celebrity status in Germany could prevent his arrest, and Christoph was in jail for having been a '60s political protester, 30 years after the fact.

Two years later Schlingensiefel came to New York to install a large Kosovo Refugee Camp at MoMA P.S.1. Emergency tents as used by the US military and the Red Cross, along with different kinds of fences, video projections and sound recordings all worked together to create an incredibly impressive environment that recreated the atmosphere of refugee camps in the former Yugoslavia.

Schlingensiefel was not only concerned with importing European emergencies to New York; he also wanted to provoke "America." In 1999 he dressed as an orthodox Jew wearing two long side curls, equipped with a German soccer "hooligan scarf" and carrying a mysterious, heavy suitcase to the Statue of Liberty. The suitcase was treated as a bomb, carried carefully, and contained 99 objects from Germany. Accompanied by a posse of

fans, numerous journalists, several fully equipped television crews and other local and international news outlets, nobody attempted to stop or bother the performance procession.

He left his soccer scarf on the steps of Lady Liberty's pedestal, and departed using the regular ferry leaving the small island, bringing in his wake the group of followers back to Manhattan. From the front of the ferry, while still nearby the statue's island, he threw the suitcase into the water to collide with the statue and, in effect, with the American dream. Reflecting, it seems unimaginable in our current day and age that nobody stopped the performance, which in essence visualized an act of imagined terror against one of America's most known symbols. A full page appeared in the *New York Times*, and the after-party took place in the Windows on the World space in New York's iconic World Trade Center. Remembering this, it is so clear how uncannily Schlingensiefel anticipated climates and incidents. He provoked awareness and wanted responsibility.

Schlingensiefel invited theater audiences to a play at the local theater and kidnapped them unannounced to an excursion into reality, leading them to a homeless asylum or local shelters. Having worked in film from his very early childhood days, and as a theater director in his early years in Berlin, his career as a performer and visual artist emerged publicly for the first time when he was in his thirties. When he was invited to direct *Parsifal* in the Richard Wagner capital of Bayreuth, he combined all of his different talents and created a serious artistic, synaesthetic version of performance, music, film and stage direction with the mandate of asking the relevant questions of today. Bayreuth might have been his masterpiece.

Christoph Schlingensiefel was selected to represent Germany in the German pavilion of the Venice Biennale next year. This year Germany has lost one of its most influential thinkers, writers, form-finders, directors and social sculptors.

Christoph Schlingensiefel. © Benedikt Jerusalem.