

Gallery controversy Installation based on contentious Berlin show finds a home after curators back off

Crashed car and paparazzi pics in Diana shrine as bad boy of German art heads for London

Jess Smee Berlin

A diminutive Queen raises her arm in a Hitler salute and bakes swastika-shaped cookies. Princess Diana is in bed alongside two men with Down's syndrome. Camilla has animal blood thrown at her.

In his latest Berlin performance Christoph Schlingensiefel underlined his reputation as the enfant terrible of the German art world – and now the storm of controversy is about to hit London.

Images from the blood and vomit splattered stage production *Kaprow City* will form part of his new art installation. The piece, *Last Hour*, will be shown in a warehouse gallery in east London next Tuesday, he told the Guardian.

Described by its creator as a shrine, the installation features the twisted metalwork of a crashed car and three films, including footage of a long tunnel and paparazzi-style stills of "Diana" taken from the contentious Berlin show.

"It is not meant as an attack or a provocation," Schlingensiefel insisted in an interview with the Guardian. "I am just fascinated by how Diana has become a modern icon, a myth. Conspiracy theories and speculation have created a mysterious figure. It's hard to separate myth from reality."

But what the 46-year-old German artist and filmmaker intends as a comment on the public obsession with the Princess of Hearts has been given the cold shoulder by the London art world.

The Diana-themed piece was originally destined for Regent's Park as part of the Frieze Art fair – which runs from October 12 to 15. But, after negative publicity, the organisers distanced themselves from the installation, telling news wires that "along with other works, it is not allowed".

Schlingensiefel said a number of large galleries backed off from showing his work, fearful of denting their reputations. "I've exhibited in many countries but I've never seen anything like the sensitivity of England to the Diana theme. It's genuinely caught me by surprise," said the seasoned provocateur. "It's all about memorials to the princess and planting trees to remember her. Leading galleries seem frightened of the tabloid reactions. I thought Islam had a strict approach to images, but England



Christoph Schlingensiefel's work *Kaprow City* was greeted by boos and laughter above the applause on its debut at Berlin's radical Volksbühne theatre

seems to have even tighter controls."

For want of a bigger space, the *Last Hour* will now be shown in a gallery space in Bethnal Green on October 10.

Adding to the controversy, Schlingensiefel said the car wreckage used in the installation is part of the actual Mercedes

'I thought Islam had a strict approach to images, but England [is worse]'

which crashed in August 1997, killing Diana, Dodi Fayed and their chauffeur. The Stevens inquiry into the car crash has rejected such claims, saying that they are still in possession of the vehicle.

Schlingensiefel strongly denies that he capitalises on shock and publicity stunts

– even though he has made his name by walking roughshod over taboos, etiquette and convention.

Standing out in his colourful career is a masturbation scene added to a Shakespeare production, former neo-Nazis recruited as actors and a chorus line of hundreds of honking seals imported for a Wagner opera. In 2000 Schlingensiefel created the Big Brother-inspired *Please Love Austria!* installation, where CCTV cameras were trained on 12 asylum seekers enclosed in containers on a square in Vienna. The public voted which asylum seeker would win the prize of a marriage, and thus a secure home in Austria. Amid the public outrage, Schlingensiefel defended it as a statement against rising support for the far right.

Berlin public opinion was sharply divided following his Diana-themed stage

show. Both boos and laughter sounded above the applause after *Kaprow City*'s debut, which was appropriately staged at Berlin's Volksbühne – the most radical theatre in the city.

The tabloids were indignant. "It was Big Brother meets Buckingham Palace ... Princess Diana did not deserve this and nor did we," sniffed Berlin's BZ daily. But other theatergoers saw the funny side. "I don't know what he was trying to say, but it certainly wasn't dull," said a young woman at the premiere.

Among the memorable scenes, an anonymous kilted Scot had his pubic hair shaved and a woman recounted being given electric shocks. At another point a mentally disturbed woman vomited, doubling over the toilet while being held by Princess Diana.

Schlingensiefel denied media reports

that he had sent Prince William and Harry invitations to *Kaprow City*'s premiere and they were "distracted" about the play, which ends with Diana being wrapped in plastic when she died.

"Those kids have lived through so much that they can certainly differentiate between their real mother and media versions of her," he said, adding that the princes themselves had generated controversial headlines, such as when Harry donned a Nazi uniform.

In the German-speaking world Schlingensiefel is famous for toying with German post-war sensitivities in films like *The Last Hours in the Führer's Bunker*.

But some are running out of patience. "At first it was interesting but now he prompts people to yawn," one German critic said. "It's just provocation for provocation's sake."