

## Journal #23: "deviant"

### Recycling the Image of the Public Sphere in Art by: Kirsten Weiss

The term "public art" does not exist as such in the German language. The literal translation of the term öffentliche Kunst would seem like a tautology, as art is usually accessible through public museums in Germany. Unlike in the U.S., private collections are rarely on view, and, if they are, they are usually considered public. More importantly, though, öffentlich is a term that is met with ambivalence by Germans. Though the problem of defining the public is not limited to Germany, Germans cannot help but be paranoid about the combined concepts of national identity and public art as the 55-year-long absence of a public Holocaust memorial proves.<sup>1</sup> Still, there is little Germans are more intent on achieving than reconstructing a tarnished public identity in the prestigious field of culture. Many contemporary German artists succeed in the global art industry, a realm that is detached from national problematics as well as the direct involvement of a greater public. In the past, art and public involvement-or the image thereof-has been thematized by German artists repeatedly, most notably by Joseph Beuys, Hans Haacke, Klaus Staeck, and Ernst Volland in the 1960s and 1970s. The problem remains: what might constitute public involvement in art and how can the public legitimately be represented, if at all?<sup>2</sup> Can art exemplify the difficulty of locating and discerning public and private spheres statically, especially in a public sphere defined supposedly by itself?

Examples of the possibility of staging images of a representative public can be seen in the work of the contemporary German artist, Christoph Schlingensiefel, (b. 1960), who facilitates a reenacting of a simulation of public sphere. Schlingensiefel, after studying philosophy, philology, and art history, started his career in filmmaking and theater.<sup>3</sup> He soon moved on to television, talk shows, and live performances (Fig 2). One example of his performances was "48 Hours Survival for Germany-My Felt, My Lard, My Hare," or "What Are 700 Oaks in Light of 6 Million Unemployed," which was staged in 1997 at the Documenta, a prestigious show of contemporary art that takes place every five years.<sup>4</sup> At the event, invited artists and actors slept at the Documenta for 48 hours and participated in events such as viewing childhood films of Schlingen-

siefel. The subtitle "My Felt, My Lard, My Hare" was a reference to Beuys, the authoritarian social-sculpture hero and his favored materials. When Schlingensiefel started proclaiming "Kill Helmut Kohl" ("Tötet Helmut Kohl") around the thirty-sixth hour of his performance, he was arrested by the German police. Another version of the events was that Schlingensiefel was arrested because he had started singing about the death of Lady Diana to the melody of "Staying Alive."<sup>5</sup> Schlingensiefel published his own account: suspecting that the police were called by the owner of a café next door, he had used the speaker-system to warn the visitors of the café. He had announced: "I'm urging all guests of the café next door, to leave this ugliest café in Kassel; the waitress has AIDS and only a few more days to live."<sup>6</sup>

Schlingensiefel increasingly created events and campaigns that would reference and manipulate media representations not only of his own work but also the constantly reconfigured image of public culture, which he continues to use as his raw material. His activities are by now certain to be widely distributed by means of extensive media coverage and thus can take place in spaces (private or public in basic economic terms) that may retroactively be defined as "public spaces."<sup>7</sup> Using campaign slogans such as "Failure as Chance" or "Prove Your Existence" for his political party "Chance 2000," he made a point of promoting unemployed and disabled people as candidates for party offices, alluding to concepts of affirmative action in democracies.<sup>8</sup>

Because it apparently qualified as beneficial to public welfare, Schlingensiefel recently managed to get the production of his version of Hamlet, performed in Switzerland, subsidized by the German government. Neo-Nazis who supposedly wanted to quit being Neo-Nazis participated in the play so as to facilitate their re-socialization. The former Neo-Nazis were described by Schlingensiefel's press speaker as "Pop-nazis" as they were primarily utilizing their Neo-Naziness-clearly communicated by their stereotypical looks-as an asset for media distribution.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most complex projects of Schlingensiefel was Wien-Aktion, also called "Please Love Austria-First European Coalition Week," or "Foreigners Out-Artists against Human Rights."<sup>10</sup> Within the scope of the annual Wiener Festwochen, director Luc Bondy had commissioned Schlingensiefel to stage a performance in Vienna. From June 11 until June 17, 2000, a container was set up on the centrally located Herbert-von-Karajan-Platz adjacent to the opera (Fig. 1). Just

like in the Dutch TV-show "Big Brother" that had been immensely popular in Germany and Austria, twelve persons identified as refugees that had applied for political asylum in Austria were asked to live in the container for a week. What happened inside of the container was aired around the clock on an Internet TV channel. As in the television show "Big Brother," the audience could call in daily and place their vote for the two candidates they would most like to see deported from the country. The last refugee to stay in the container was promised a prize of 30,000 Austrian Schillings and marriage to an Austrian citizen through which the refugee would attain the status of a legal resident.

Biographies of the participants were posted on Schlingensief's website containing tabloid-style characterizations of each individual's views on sex, money, and family values. One refugee, for instance, Teresa Beqiri, was the "party girl" who would not mind having sex in front of the container cameras—a topic heavily debated in popular media—as opposed to the "family man," Wole Osifo from Nigeria.<sup>11</sup> A large banner with the inscription "Ausländer Raus!" ("Foreigners Out!") was attached to the container from the beginning and a few days later supplemented by another banner reading "Unsere Ehre heisst Treue" ("Our Honor is Called Loyalty"), an SS-motto forbidden in Germany (Fig. 3). The motto had been purportedly used by a member of the Austrian right-wing party FPÖ.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, members of the FPÖ whose successful campaign during the previous year had been based on anti-foreign sentiment reported both signs to the police with the claim that these signs were publicly encouraging violence against foreigners. While trying to make an official statement against discrimination against foreigners, they needed to avoid making a statement against art. So, Heidemarie Unterreiner, the FPÖ's cultural attaché, accused Schlingensief of "not even [being] a real director."<sup>13</sup> On June 15, what appeared to be about 600 protestors attacked the container and tried to demolish the "Ausländer raus!" sign. A spectator asked: "Is this real?" ("Ist das jetzt echt?")<sup>14</sup>

The extent of the emotions raised by the event can be seen in the weeklong public debates in Austria about the container, Austrians, Germans, Luc Bondy, and art in general (Fig. 5). A documentary about "Ausländer raus!" is reported to contain a clip of a woman getting so upset about Schlingensief's Aktion that she ends up shrieking: "Foreigners in, Piefkes Out" ("Ausländer rein, Piefkes raus!"), the latter being a de-

rogatory Austrian term for Germans. In addition, the Viennese were worried about the effect that the odd spectacle might have on tourists. With regards to reception in Germany and Austria, the performance relied heavily on superficial but common place and deeply rooted "knowledge" on the Austrian as well as the German side. While in Austria, the term Anschluss was coined for the collaboration of Austria with Nazi-Germany, implying that Austrians were not really responsible for their endorsement of National Socialism, in Germany, it is a well-known fact that Hitler was, after all, not German but Austrian. The fact that details such as these are so widely circulated makes apparent the degree of unresolved anti-sentiments between Germans and Austrians, sentiments that viciously erupt on the occasion of "Ausländer raus!" Ever since the Waldheim-affair Germans, who prefer to think of themselves as Europeans, have felt the need to be especially watchful of right-wing politics in Austria and elsewhere. Thus, the widespread support of Jörg Haider's FPÖ in Austria has been received with much concern by German liberals.<sup>15</sup> According to Schlingensief, he was satisfied to have shown the potential extent of Haider's xenophobia by facilitating the production of "dirty images from Austria," an aim that could have hardly been achieved in a more perfidious manner with regards to the extent of individuals and official Austrian institutions lastly involved.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately though, the piece was just as much about Germans as it was about Austrians as the displacement allows for an open, international rotation of German problematics.

In this and most other pieces, Schlingensief's dramaturgy relies on common place types as a starting point. My use of the term "common place" here is similar to that used by Svetlana Boym, who defines cultural common places as "recurrent narratives that are perceived as natural in a given culture but in fact were naturalized and their historical, political, or literary origins forgotten or disguised."<sup>17</sup> In such a construction, internationally renowned artist figures such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Josef Beuys, and Luc Bondy symbolize the bourgeois circles that still have an elitist contempt for low-brow culture found in television shows such as "Big Brother." In Schlingensief's pieces, such heroic intellectual figures are almost always paired with lower-class common place types, such as "The Unemployed" ("Der Arbeitslose") used in the television talk shows, "48 Hours Survival for Germany" and "Chance 2000." The Unemployed is the epitome of fascist potential in Germany, because the unfortunate situation of the unemployed in Weimar

Germany was one of the main causes of Hitler's rise to power according to contemporary popular German mythology. "The Refugee" (Der Asylan") is an ambivalent type, who is let into the country as an exception only under constantly changing and formally restrictive immigration policies. With regards to the underprivileged, Germans are torn between a sense of what they view as their responsibility and fear—a mixture that accounts for their permanent unease, to say the least. According to Jürgen Habermas, the resulting yearning for relief from this dilemma, is illustrated by the creation of "life lies" (Lebenslüge), the German post-reunification version being: "We Are Normal Again."<sup>18</sup> At first glance, Schlingensiefel violently questions this "life lie" as he obviously does not behave in normal terms according to supposed bourgeois notions of normalcy. At the same time, trying to behave in a normal way is not possible for an artist in post-Nazi Germany.<sup>19</sup> In addition, it is commonly known that trying to look normal can hardly ever result in one actually being—or even less looking—normal. Therefore, although the lie undoubtedly exists, there can only be evidences of its futility in the public sphere.

And, how can deviance be defined in the absence of normalcy? The art press in particular is placed in a difficult situation by Schlingensiefel who potentially impersonates an avant-garde desire for "deviance."<sup>20</sup> Deviance from what? In fact, Schlingensiefel receives far more coverage from general news and popular tabloid media. Some of this coverage is negative; some explicitly admire his "craziness" evidencing the involvement of the mass media geared towards—but certainly not representative of—a contemporary form of the German proletariat.<sup>21</sup> Within the bourgeois realm of art production and reception, conventional artistic trash-appeal is often validated by ironic distance to an origin other than itself, but Schlingensiefel renders this assumption of distance absurd by re-importing popular material to its supposed origin, i.e. the tabloid press. The absurd and the surreal derived from and redistributed in public space reference the potential existence of a heterogeneous public.

Are Schlingensiefel's spectacular activities public, or are they "private activities displayed in the open"?<sup>22</sup> They are probably neither; rather, his work—and more importantly, what becomes of it—is a simulation of different possibilities of action in the public sphere. It could be argued that by using any available "public space" for his work, especially daily news media space, Schlingensiefel reclaims public audience not as an idealized object of enlightenment through art but as mo-

mentary reference points in an otherwise indefinable mass of characterizations of the public. Polemics are thus not directed against a specific imagined group within the public sphere. Rather, common place types found anywhere are thematized with reference to different public realms. But without introduction, Schlingensiefel is probably hardly comprehensible or even interesting to anyone outside of Germany.<sup>23</sup>

As Negt and Kluge have stated, language is one of the most important mechanisms for exclusion from the bourgeois public sphere.<sup>24</sup> This is especially true for the sphere that pertains to anything clearly demarcated as "art." It seems that this barrier is less inhibiting in Schlingensiefel's case, possibly because he uses the assumed language of what Negt and Kluge term the "proletarian sphere" as represented in mass media. It is not necessarily relevant whether this is the "real" language of a proletariat, or who this might actually be—it would be naive and pretentious to try locate "the proletariat" in a static manner: Identities in public are in constant circulation and can only be defined tentatively in relation to the conditions that necessitate the act of identification. Accordingly, "the bourgeois" is not a clearly defined entity but rather—in Negt and Kluge's sense—a signifier for the provenance of a specific hegemony of definitions of publicness.<sup>25</sup>

Although Schlingensiefel's own role as an artist and producer would need to be further examined, the detached position of the artist as well as the actual production of the work are already dissolved in the process of distribution in "Ausländer raus!"<sup>26</sup> At best, Schlingensiefel's projects facilitate the appearance of a great range of effects and products. And if an "authentic political language" is defined as continuously emerging from conflicts and use as well as abuse of rhetoric by various subjects, those effects and products are, at the least, an interesting example of such a contemporary (and perishable) language that offers itself for further examination and reuse.<sup>27</sup>

Notes:

1 Hans Magnus Enzensberger talks about his strategy to alternately accept or refuse German identity in Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Bin ich ein Deutscher?" Die Zeit 23.5 (June 1964). Theodor Adorno addresses the problem of being German in his "Auf die Frage: Was ist deutsch," Stichworte. Kritische Modelle 2

(Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969): 102-12. One of the most comprehensive accounts of the debate about the Holocaust memorial with regards to the problem of a public identity is given by James Young. James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). One of the most comprehensive accounts of the debate about the Holocaust memorial with regards to the problem of a public identity is given by James Young. James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

2 I am drawing on the question of the representation of bourgeois and proletarian public spheres as it is addressed by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972). Translated into English under the title *Public Sphere and Experience, Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Negt and Kluge later further illustrate their concept of the public as "public spheres of production" (*Produktionsöffentlichkeiten*) in *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1981). Also Negt and Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung: Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972): 134; and Negt and Kluge, *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1981): 388.

3 Among Schlingensiefel's first films are *100 Jahre Adolf Hitler*, 1989 (*One Hundred Years Adolf Hitler*); *Das deutsche Kettensägen Massaker*, 1990 (*The German Chainsaw Massacre*); *TERROR 2000 Deutschland ausser Kontrolle*, 1992 (*TERROR 2000 Germany Out of Control*); and *Die 120 Tage von Bottrop*, 1996 (*The Hundred and Twenty Days of Bottrop*). In *120 Tage von Bottrop*, residents from the "Rainer Werner Fassbinder Home of Aging Actors" are asked to come to Berlin to star in a remake of Pasolini's *The 120 Days of Sodom*, but end up climbing over the construction site at the Postdamer Platz in Berlin ("Europas grösste Baustelle") wearing construction helmets emblazoned with the word "SODOM." The actors, such as Irm Herman, are original actors from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films.

4 The original German title of the performance was "48 Stunden Überleben für Deutschland-Mein Filz, mein Fett, mein Hase" or "Was sind schon 700 [sic]"

Eichen gegenüber 6 Millionen Arbeitslosen." The title is a reference to the project that Joseph Beuys initiated on the occasion of the Documenta 7 in 1981. The project entailed the planting of 7,000 oak trees next to 7,000 basalt monoliths throughout the town of Kassel over the course of five years until 1987

5 Georg Seesslen, "Vom barbarischen Film zur nomadischen Politik," Julia Lochte, Julia and Wilfried Schulz, *Schlingensiefel! Notruf für Deutschland* (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1998): 48.

6 Christoph Schlingensiefel, "Wir sind zwar nicht gut, aber wir sind da," *Schlingensiefel!* 31. The slogans in the original were "Scheitern als Chance," and "Beweise, dass es Dich gibt," respectively.

7 His television talk shows, for example, take place in the mess hall of an avant-gardist theater in Berlin, the Volksbühne, and are aired via national private TV stations. The performance "48 Stunden Überleben für Deutschland" took place in an inconspicuous room at the art exhibit Documenta 10 in the small German town of Kassel.

8 "Chance 2000" was documented by an editorial crew of the public TV station ZDF (*Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen*).

One German equivalent of the American concept of "affirmative action" is the concept of the "quota" (*Quote*), which entails the mandatory (or voluntary) inclusion of certain minorities into various bodies according to specific quota. The idea is met with great suspicion, so that, for instance, women who are promoted in politics are often still suspected of being a "quota women" (*Quotenfrauen*).

9 Ulrich Seidler, "Echtes Wasser. Schlingensiefels sechs neue Freunde dürfen in Zürich Hamlet mitspielen," *Berliner Zeitung*, 12 May 2001. Joachim Güntner, "Was zu Schlingensiefels Hamlet noch zu sagen bleibt," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 26 May 2001.

10 The original title was *Bitte liebt Österreich-erste europäische Koalitionswoch* or *Ausländer Raus-Künstler gegen Menschenrechte*. Many aspects of the event were soon documented in a publication. See Matthias Lilienthal and Claus Philipp, *Schlingensiefels Ausländer raus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000).

11 All biographies can be viewed at <http://www.schlingensiefel.com/auslaenderraus/html/auslaenderliste.html>, November 6, 2001.

12 FPÖ is the acronym for Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, the right-wing party led by Jörg Haider.

13 Heidemarie Unterreiner on a television show on the Austrian television channel ORF as cited in Spiegel Online, <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/0,1518,80991,00.html>, July 7, 2000.

14 Claus Philipp, "Schlingensiefs Container gestürmt; Ist das jetzt echt?" taz, die tageszeitung (June 17, 2000): 14.

15 Shortly after the former UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim was elected as the president of Austria in 1986, reports surfaced about his participation as an officer in the German Wehrmacht during the period between 1942-45, when his battalion committed atrocities in Yugoslavia. Waldheim denied any knowledge of the crimes.

16 Schlingensief in an interview in Spiegel Online, <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/0,1518,80502,00.html>, June 11, 2000.

17 Svetlana Boym, *Common Places* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1994): 4. Boym herself follows Claude Lévi-Strauss' and Roland Barthes' definition of myths as formed by cultural common places.

18 Jürgen Habermas, "Die zweite Lebenslüge der Bundesrepublik: Wir sind wieder 'normal' geworden," *Die Zeit* (December 11, 1992): 48.

19 Thomas Elsässer describes this problematic of the obligation of German artists. Thomas Elsässer, *Fassbinder's Germany: History, Identity, Subject* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996): 13.

20 In an article about Schlingensief in *Kunstforum International*, Marion Löhndorf claims that Schlingensief makes popular media uncomfortable. Marion Löhndorf, "Christoph Schlingensief, Lieblingsziel Totalirritation," *Kunstforum International* 10-12 (1998): 192.

21 A German starlet proclaims in the daily tabloid *Bild*: "I am voting for Christoph Schlingensief. He thinks as 'queer' as I do, and the country needs new people." *Bild* Online, <http://www.bild.de/service/suche/archiv/suche.html>

September 20, 1998.

22 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition: A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1959): 101-102.

23 Christopher Phillips, "Art for an Unfinished City," *Art in America* (January 1999): 67.

24 Negt and Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung*, 87-93.

25 *Ibid.*, 8. Long before Foucault, Durkheim had described society as defined by social facts that included "every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations." Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, [1895] 1938): 13.

Later, Gramsci uses the term "hegemony" to elaborate on the process of the transformation of (initially) economic interests into the social sphere, creating an apparently "universal plane." Antonio Gramsci, "The Modern Prince," *The Modern Prince and Other Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1957): 169-70.

26 Negt and Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung*, 104-105.

27 Negt and Kluge, *Massverhältnisse des Politischen*, (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1992): 58.

Illustrations:

Fig. 1: Christoph Schlingensief, "Auslander raus!" Container in Herbert von-Karajan Platz, Vienna, 2000.

Fig. 2: Schlingensief, Talk 2000, 2000. Schlingensief is here imitating the Hitler hair and moustache.

Fig. 3: SS-motto on the "Auslander raus!" container.

Figs. 4,5: Protestors and spectators of the "Auslander raus!" container.

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