

A Campsite for the Avant-Garde and a Church in Cyberspace:

Christoph Schlingensiefel's Dialogue with Avant-Gardism

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Atta-Atta: a Melancholic Evocation of the Avant-Garde

In [19]68 I was eight years old, but I demand that here and now, in 2001, I am allowed to try things out.

Christoph Schlingensiefel (quoted in Heineke & Umathum, eds. 2002: 33)

Berlin, January 2003: Christoph Schlingensiefel's theatre performance *Atta-Atta: Art has Broken Out!* premieres in the Volksbühne. A motley group of 'artists', including Schlingensiefel, record themselves on video as they make an impassioned appeal for the Oberhausen short film festival committee to accept their submission. The scene, which references Schlingensiefel's beginnings in experimental film, appears to parody the beliefs its protagonists hold with regard to the radical potential of their own filmmaking visions. The next section of the performance sees Schlingensiefel as a wild 'action' painter, charging at canvases in his studio as his parents look on dubiously from the sofa in the TV room next door. The *mise-en-scène* – with the parents still visible in their small living room stage left – then opens out onto a camping site with tents, a setting which could be variously interpreted as a cheap vacation site, a place of temporary habitation, a vulnerable site exposed to the elements or possibly to an attack, a terrorist training site, or a mobile military encampment. In this semiotically ambiguous location, Schlingensiefel situates a group of artists and eccentrics.

In the course of the performance, the camp's assorted commune of oddballs enact strange ritualistic processions, witness the irrational litanies declaimed by members of their group and mimic the performances of well-known artists. Joseph Beuys with his hare, Hermann Nitsch's orgiastic experiments and Marina Abramovic's physically challenging works, familiar to the contemporary audience in terms of their photographic documentation, are clearly referenced in the piece. A giant inflatable tube of black paint invades the campsite and is wrestled to the ground by Schlingensiefel and the inhabitants who succeed in deflating its presumably malevolent intentions. The site

manager announces over the intercom: 'Everyone should leave the campsite toilet as they would wish to find it'. Throughout the performance, a pre-recorded black and white film shot in amateur style is visible on two screens above the stage. It shows a film director (Oskar Roehler) as he awaits a group of actors who slowly gather at the Brandenburg gate. They set off on a night stroll through Berlin, the purpose of which is not identified until they seem to enter the doors of the theatre, where they change into Ku Klux Klan costumes, apparently intending to invade the auditorium. One actor, Herbert Fritsch, does in fact appear onstage (in a suit), his movements followed in real time by a camerawoman. He grapples with Schlingensiefel, who finally leaves the stage, before he comments disparagingly on the prior performance and releases a number of chickens from their cages onstage, yelling 'Freedom!'.

The adumbration of live performance, pre-recorded film and live-video recording serves to disorient the audience's perceptions, not only in terms of what is actually happening in present time and what has occurred elsewhere, but also with regard to their expectations of the various mediums. The lack of perceptible purpose in the film heightens the suspense created for the audience as they see its protagonists enter the theatre foyer and attempt to prefigure what sort of denouement this may precede. As Marvin Carlson has suggested, live-video recording, 'makes possible a kind of visual experimentation that is impossible either in video or film by bringing the means of live transmission into the very space that is being transmitted' (Carlson 2008: 24). The notion of theatre operating as a 'hypermedium' has been discussed by Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt, who argue that it can offer 'multiple perspectives and foreground[ing] the making of meaning' for an audience as a space 'in-between realities' that constitute diverse media (2006: 20, 24). Put another way, theatre provides a potential space for reflexivity, both synchronic and diachronic, in its multimedial and multi-layered stagings that extend beyond corporeality to generate a series of complex resonances for its audiences.

The resonances generated by *Atta-Atta* begin with the staccato phonetics of its title, which echoes those of the nihilistic art movement Dada and simultaneously references the name of the Saudi terrorist Mohammed Atta. The brief account of certain features of *Atta-Atta* unmistakably points to Schlingensiefel's preoccupation with his artistic predecessors, their legacy or what remains of it (demystified to the condition of a campsite toilet), their status as acclaimed pioneers of the avant-garde and, primarily, the bearing of such a legacy on art and radical art practice given the social and political climate of the time. The climate in question was the build-up to the 2003 war on Iraq, following the 11 September attacks on US landmarks and the initial retaliatory bombing campaign on Afghanistan. The thematic concerns of *Atta-Atta* circumscribed art, terrorism and a questioning of the methods employed by both parties to achieve their ends, which, inevitably, require spectators and/or witnesses. The production raised questions such as: Are art and terrorism diametrically opposed? Is today's martyr the answer to the failed avant-garde artist (as Schlingensiefel proclaimed onstage)? Does art possess any weapons of its own?¹ While attempting neither to put

critical distance from its subject matter nor to offer linear or causal explanations of recent events, the performance did not avoid the megalomaniacal delusions of grandeur shared by both ‘camps’.

The campsite dwellers and their melancholy citations of avant-garde performances reveal the dilemma of the artist, as Schlingensiefel perceived it, in the post-9/11 era. The work queries whether attempts at uninhibited artistic expression – uninterpellated by political ideologies, free of instrumentalization or even a liberal humanistic purpose – are now completely redundant or even still possible after the morbid spectacle of airliners flying into skyscrapers. A performer in *Atta-Atta* asks plaintively: ‘How can one react when a few Saudi Arabian video artists lead 1:0?’, thereby provocatively highlighting the anxiety of the ‘great artist’ who cannot bear to be trumped. The very idea that the terrorist pilots could be viewed as being engaged in a media performance was introduced – albeit unintentionally – by the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen during a press conference he gave after 9/11. The frequent misquoting of Stockhausen’s comment in the media, which engendered a public furor, had him declaring 9/11 to be ‘the greatest work of art there has ever been’ (quoted in Virilio 2002: 45).

However, the televised attacks were quickly transposed from their initial occurrence in real time into a carefully edited slow-motion, before-and-after sequence, broadcast in synch with the hauntingly sad voice of the singer Enya. This transposition of a ‘real’ event follows the definition of ‘remediation’ as that which improves upon and ‘refashion[s] other forms of media “in the name of the real”’ (Bolter & Grusin 1999: 65). The same principle is, I argue, what informed the dramaturgy of *Atta-Atta*, with its aesthetic transpositions and investigations of avant-gardism and terrorism which provided the impulse for Schlingensiefel’s subsequent desire to intervene in, and remediate, public perceptions of fear at the beginning of the war on Iraq.

Schlingensiefel’s interest in replaying the radical gestures of the historical avant-garde raise the diagnosis of its end either before WWII or, at the latest, by the end of the sixties after the Cold-War avant-gardes of Happenings and Fluxus. Its demise has been frequently considered, not least by Peter Bürger (*Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 1984) and Paul Mann (*The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, 1991). But both appear to have left ajar a small window of opportunity, just in case, perhaps, the notion of a post Cold-War avant-garde was not finally and forever interred. In a later work, Bürger qualified his previously dismissive approach to the neo-avant-garde:

Instead of trying to isolate the avant-garde impulse, we should ask ourselves whether it might contain a potential which could still be developed, if art is to be more than an institution that compensates for problems arising from the process of social modernization. (1992: 152)

It seems that a regenerative or palingenetic avant-garde ‘potential’ may still be dormant, in converse fashion to the scholarly desire to ‘isolate’, historicise and categorise its subversive qualities. Mann, in contrast to the ‘death’ his book discusses, makes a cu-

rious statement that infers an ongoing ‘liveliness’: ‘If art sometimes operates through tacit collusion with discourse and sometimes through futile resistance, sometimes it also pursues a kind of resistance by collusion, a seizure of the means of discourse production’ (Mann 1991: 25). The ‘actions’ implied by the language he uses invite comparisons with the concerns and aesthetics of Schlingensiefel’s theatre praxis.

With the frequent incursions of his work into public spaces, Schlingensiefel perpetuated a longstanding dialogue with the aims of the historical avant-garde to forcibly close the gap between art and daily life. However, he also inserted politics into the mix and drew on their attempts to create his own models of ‘unpredictable fields of action’ that can be characterised by ‘improvisation and the participation of the audience’ (Berghaus 2005: 23). While it cannot be claimed that the repercussions of Schlingensiefel’s work have brought about political change in either Germany or Austria, they did nonetheless cause irritation at many levels. Works such as *Chance 2000* (1998) and the well-documented project *Bitte Liebt Österreich* (Please Love Austria) in 2000 reached an audience via mass-media coverage that included national newspaper features, internet postings and radio and television broadcasts, thus providing the sort of attention for Schlingensiefel’s projects more commonly reserved for politicians themselves, who in many instances reluctantly became protagonists in absentia (see Poet 2002; Varney 2010). Schlingensiefel achieved this most notoriously with *Please Love Austria*, which directly targeted the ‘absent’ right-wing populist Jörg Haider and called attention to his xenophobic politics.

The sombre, pessimistic tone of *Atta-Atta* was underscored by the approaching Iraq war. In response to the question of whether – in view of its inevitability – he was afraid, Schlingensiefel said: ‘I haven’t bought a campervan for nothing. A helpless attempt to escape. We are all entering the Church of Fear’ (quoted in Laudenbach 2003). Despite his pensive musings on the status of art and the vestiges of avant-gardism, Schlingensiefel’s next project abandoned the prescribed art space of the theatre building in favour of public spaces – including cyberspace, in this case, as a website was dedicated to the project – to once again explore the dialectic between art and non-art, and experiment with avant-gardist ambitions to subvert the boundaries between art and life.

The Antecedents of the Church of Fear

Schlingensiefel’s founding of the *Church of Fear* (CoF) on 20 March 2003 coincided with the day the second war on Iraq began (Koegel & König 2005: 7). A website in both German and English was set up to inform potential members of its activities. The site featured a ‘Barometer of Fear’ – with stages ranging from ‘Apocalypse’ to ‘Peace of Mind’ – and, as an introduction to virtual visitors, a video trailer could be viewed. It begins with an audio collage of religious chanting, which becomes louder as the sound of a woman’s screams can be heard. An image of an airport runway appears onscreen. Ominously dramatic music precedes a flash cut sequence of images of war zones, bombings, religious icons, political protests and prisoners, which abruptly cease as a calm, clearly British voice announces:

Welcome to the Church of Fear. [...] The Church of Fear is a community of non-believers. [...] The aim of the CoF is the achievement of an individual worldview. [...] The Church of Fear is only the launching platform for your very own missile of fear. The Church of Fear says: Fear is Power, Have Fear. Terror your own world.

The text on the website elaborates:

Let us fight the politicians' MONOPOLY ON TERROR!
 They have taken our faith, but they will not take our fear!
 The Church of Fear is a secular church and not a political party,
 not an industry, not an institution and not beholden to any theatre! Just like you!
 (Church of Fear, s.d.)

The deeply ironic notion of a secular church, its non-identification with political ideologies and the implicit assumption of autonomy on the part of the reader signal its interest in attracting free thinkers and maintaining its independence. The activist fervour of both texts seems to indicate an interest in creating a popular, grassroots social movement, welded together by the desire of its members to publicly acknowledge fear as a weapon and to oppose those institutions that, according to the CoF, were deliberately manipulating political and social fears. The targets of its critique extended to theatre, identified, in line with the other institutions listed, as a site of oppression to which one need not feel obliged or 'beholden'.

The Church's radical aims suggest that the impetus behind its founding was Schlingensiefel's desire to intervene – in both aesthetic and political terms – in what has been termed the 'politics of fear' (Füredi 2005; Altheide 2006). This phrase has often been used in regard to the mode of public discourse employed by the neo-liberal Bush administration and its Western allies following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US. Specifically, it denotes the implicit manipulation of the populace by the ruling government to hinder public dissent. Yet the political stance taken by the US also had direct implications for those beyond its jurisdiction. The relative security that Germany had enjoyed throughout the past two decades had been shaken due to the fact that the attacks had been partially planned in Hamburg. As a result, and in line with countries including the US, UK and France, Germany sent troops to Afghanistan and drafted new anti-terrorist legislation aimed at increasing surveillance and enabling closer cooperation between police and international intelligence agencies (Safferling 2006: 1152). Capitalizing on the new measures deemed necessary for public safety, the German mainstream media networks were, as elsewhere, abuzz with talk of further 'terror', and potential 'sleepers'. With the impending war on Iraq, 'weapons of mass destruction' provided a new diversion from political issues at home, as images of military personnel seeking chemical weapons in Iraq flashed on television screens around the world with increasing regularity.

In his book *Creating Fear. News and the Construction of Crisis* (2002), David Altheide has

incisively argued that mainstream media networks are inextricably linked not only with 'spectacle and surveillance' but also with the military industrial complex, the framing of critical social issues and with agents of social control. In terms of the media coverage of the war(s) in Iraq, and pre-empting Schlingensief's project in remarkably prescient fashion, Altheide states:

the news media are the main source and tool used to 'soften up' the audience, to prepare them to accept the justificatory account of the coming action. Fear in a democratic society requires the mass media. If these media are perpetuating claims about the 'other' – the likely targets of future state action – then this fear-generating endeavor becomes an act of mass media terrorism on the 'public body', if not the individuals who subsequently suffer from state actions. (2002: 12, emphasis added)

However, as Frank Furedi has pointed out, the rhetoric of fear has also been utilised successfully by the political left as well as by a wide assortment of interest groups ranging from pharmaceutical companies to green campaigners warning against the dangers of climate change. Thus, he asserts, 'the politics of fear captures a sensibility towards life in general' and 'tends to express a diffuse sense of powerlessness' (Furedi 2005: 130). This powerlessness is in turn reflected by the preference of transnational news formats for worst-case scenarios that typically offer no in-depth analysis or background contextualization to comprehend the complex issues they claim to 'cover'.

The all-pervasive spectacle of fear that proliferated in 2003 – accompanied by political, religious and paranoid rhetoric and the media's excesses of morbid imagery – was the territory Schlingensief's project explicitly sought to engage with. Drawing on the technologies of video, surveillance and computers, the CoF encompassed installation, performance and activism, combining a media campaign with an internet presence to insert its ambiguous messages into public spaces. It intentionally blurred conventional borders between art, political dissent, social critique and reality to engage a heterogeneous public in the urban locations it traversed.

50th Venice Biennale: Preaching Fear to the Art World

The first public manifestation of the CoF was at the Venice Biennale, where it was initially unveiled in June 2003 as an art project in the opening week. A daily report that summarised the Church's daily activities was circulated to visitors. For 14 June, it read:

Venice in fear. [...] Confused by various sorts of empty art, more and more people have lost their faith in art's power to change the world. The *Church of Fear* gives even those non-believers a new home. So far more than 800 visitors have entered their names in the CoF subscription lists. [...] The internet jackpot rise up (sic) to

over 30,000 Euro. More than 4,500 holy pictures have been sold. (Van der Horst 2005, unpaginated 'Daily Report' section)

The bizarre features of the report – a church for non-believers, an internet jackpot, references to empty art, fear and holy pictures – created a semiotic jumble that I will attempt to unravel in this section.

In the Arsenale grounds, Schlingensiefel had installed a small, white wooden church from which a muezzin's call to prayer was audible. A large sign with the imperative 'Have Fear' stood outside the entrance. The interior featured a confessional booth with the phrases 'Look out behind you!' and 'Look up!' scrawled in white chalk along with childishly executed voodoo masks, an image of a rotting hare and a pug dog's anus (Koegel & König 2005: 20, 24). Visitors to the site were welcomed by CoF members who distributed printed material and explained how one's own 'congregation of fear' could be established. Interested parties were told that the church would promise nothing and make no demands on its members. There would be no pressure to subscribe to any particular dogma nor, they emphasised, would the CoF offer any solutions to the personal fears of its members.

In the Giardini nearby, the church held its first ritual, an international pole-sitting competition. The practice of pole-sitting dates back to AD 423 when the Stylites, a group of early Christian ascetics, spent days and nights atop pillars as a ritual of purification. In Venice, the poles used were constructed from roughly hewn tree trunks, approximately 2.5 metres high, with a small canopy providing limited shade and a backrest with a seat that could be supported with cushions. Atop their poles, seven contestants (from Russia, Switzerland, Mexico, Italy and Germany) were required to spend seven days, with a fifteen-minute break every three hours, meditating on their



Fig. 1 Pole-sitting at the 50th Venice Biennale, 2003 © Patrick Hilss, 2003.

fears. Whoever remained on his or her pole for the longest period of time would be declared the winner. Sitting scores for each participant were recorded on a blackboard, and visitors were permitted to pole-sit with their favourite competitor, thereby increasing the total time accrued by the sitter. Through the purchase of 'holy pictures' or by placing bets via the CoF website, spectators could enter the 'fun' and bet on the contestants.

The pole-sitting event was filmed and streamed back live to the church, where visitors were required to kneel in order to view the sitters via a computer screen visible through a low-cut slit in the wall. The conditions of viewing were a sardonic comment on the status of surveillance technology in the global city. Gabriella Giannachi has accurately identified that, with the increased monitoring of citizens both in the workplace and in urban spaces, 'Surveillance is not simply reducible to the act of putting someone under surveillance. It implies their commercial and political exploitation' (2007: 44). This act was inverted by having visitors kneel to observe those 'performing'. It was further commented upon by a sign adjacent to the pole-sitting area that read 'Win With Your Losers', which was both an encouragement to place bets and ironically extrapolated upon by the CoF website: 'Thus everybody may be in a position to profit from people degraded to a profitless position' (Church of Fear, s.d.). The slogan pointed to the 'degraded' status of those who live in fear without the possibility of profiting from it. Degradation in this context refers to the conditions of subjects in late capitalism, who see their private capital – for Schlingensiefel's purposes, fear – misappropriated by industries such as the national security sector, correctional facilities, surveillance firms, pharmaceutical and private healthcare companies and defence contractors. These industries successfully manipulate social fears to increase revenue, desirous of an anxious public that is then vulnerable to whatever solutions they propose. Degradation through fear also refers to the citizens of countries marked by war and poverty who have little or no capital and whose fears do not register as fully as those of the citizens of Western democracies.

The CoF website regularly updated photographs of the pole-sitting event and duly noted the sitting scores of the contestants. On day seven of the competition, Ralf Baumgarten of Germany – a former priest – was declared the winner and announced by the CoF to be the new 'Pillar Saint of Modernity'. The pole-sitters dismounted in ceremonial fashion and a prize cheque was handed over, while at a reception held later all the participants were appointed 'Ambassadors of Fear'. Later, on the Piazza San Marco, 350 Biennale visitors arrived to collect on their bets, and the competition was declared to be over.

Fear and Fundamentalism

In order to understand the paradoxes of the CoF's activities, it may be useful to examine the etymology of the word 'church'. The Greek word *ekklesia* is a compound of the preposition 'ek', meaning 'out', and the noun 'klesis' which means 'summons' or 'invitation'. The origins of the word generally identified an assembly or gathering of peo-

ple for any purpose, with no direct relation to those specially chosen by God (Ferguson 1996: 129-130). According to this definition, the idea of a secular church becomes less a contradiction in terms than a statement of intention, implying that the CoF was in fact a group of people who had come together to examine and consider fear in a variety of contexts, rather than a movement that aimed to denigrate all religious beliefs.

The modest white wooden church installed at the Biennale recalled those often seen in rural areas of the United States in the so-called 'Bible belt' associated with the neo-conservative religious right and its alliances with the military. The sound of the muezzin broadcast from the church was incongruous with its appearance, but it created a linkage with the concepts of an influential book by Samuel P. Huntington *The Clash Of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1998). The 'clash' of the title refers to the so-called conflict between 'Islam' and 'the West' that Huntington predicted would be an inevitable part of the post-Cold War world. For Schlingensiefel, it also alluded to religious fear as practised by both the Christian right and Islamic fundamentalists. Fundamentalism stresses strict and literal adherence to a set of basic principles and, in their attempts to impose their views on the rest of the world, religious fundamentalists are hostile to anything that does not concur with their beliefs. The common denominator of both fundamentalist groups is their use of fear as a driving force and their belief in binary constructions of good and evil, believers and unbelievers, heaven and hell and God and Satan. Both groups have extolled the approaching end of the world while making exorbitant claims of salvation for their followers. The fanatical belief they share in a controlling deity with the power to exterminate wrongdoers with his wrath relies heavily on fear as the governing principle of their faiths.



Fig. 2 The small white church at the Venice Biennale, 2003 © Etzard Piltz, 2003.

Fear as a tool to shore up the authority of religious institutions has been in use for centuries. It is a central component of religious pedagogy promoted by Christian fundamentalists and adherents of the apocalyptic 'Rapture' movement who believe that Christ will return to earth to save his followers and then proceed to execute non-believers in a period known as 'the Tribulation' (Kagin 2003: 38). However, the conviction that politics has a moral obligation to carry out God's work was also underscored by the Bush administration and its Manichean world view. The discourse of the 'War on Terror' was validated with the unambiguously religious rhetoric of George W. Bush, whose jeremiad-style speeches on good and evil including references to the war as a 'crusade' (Kradel 2004) encroached on the religious terrain of a battle between the 'righteous' and the 'unrighteous'. While Schlingensief's project was not constructed as a direct attack on the Bush administration or its policies, its imagery exposed and exaggerated the narrative of fear underpinning both conservative neo-liberal foreign policy and Christian nationalism.

Mediatized Terror, Counter-Images and a Counterpublic

In his book *Liquid Fear* (2006), which deals specifically with rising fear in contemporary Western societies, Zygmunt Bauman discusses insecurity in relation to a wide range of concerns: the instability of a world post-9/11, global warming, the increasing precariousness of working life, the dismantling of the welfare state and the disintegration of social security as previously constructed by family, neighbourhoods and other communities. Ironically, he points out, the technological progress made in developed countries over the past fifty years has led neither to a greater sense of security nor a renewed sense of agency over the powers that inform and affect our lives (Bauman 2006: 157). Passive viewing of the daily news exacerbates a sense of helplessness while the promises made by mainstream media to keep us 'informed' encourage a sense of perpetual and anxious vigilance. The politics of neo-liberalism and unlimited globalization have, as Bauman postulates, created docile populations easily manipulated by fear and willing to surrender democratic principles in the attempt to guarantee security within and around their national borders. Politicians vow to protect national borders, fight 'terror', increase public safety, secure natural resources and defend economic prosperity on the condition that the public shows support for their political agendas, or 'belief in them', by means of the ballot box.

By employing one of the expedient features of cyberspace in terms of its capacity to extend beyond national borders, the CoF constructed a unified, global identity for itself – clearly in excess of its actual, active membership – in order to demand 'non-belief' in the political discourses circulating in regard to fear and terrorism. In its radical calls for 'non-believers' to take action, the CoF appeared to construct itself as a *counterpublic* in opposition to institutionalised power. Here, the term 'counterpublic' describes a group that sees its discourse as excluded by the broader, more dominant political and public spheres and which seeks to mobilise communication networks to advance its in-

terests via ‘parallel discursive arenas’ (Fraser 1992: 123). Schlingensief’s attempt to gain control over the meaning of words such as ‘sleepers’ and ‘terror’, misappropriated by political agendas, as well as the re-appropriation and spread of terms such as ‘terrorist’ and ‘explosive’ by an active cyber-community forum were central to the CoF project. The populist tone of the English flash text on the website reveals the subversively political ground of the project:

You sleepers of the world! Wake up now! Are you planning a terrorist action?
Stand up for your right to personal terror! Become a member of the CHURCH OF
FEAR and take part in our actions worldwide!
Fear is power
Fear is our explosive
Confess your fear
Terror Your World!!!
(Church of Fear, s.d.)

Staking its claim to fear as private property, the CoF used a form of rhetoric more common to tabloid media and cheap advertising techniques that use rhetorical questions and exhortations to ‘Buy Now!’ The linguistic component of the work co-opts the notion of the ‘vox populi’, or ‘the people’s voice’, drawing attention to the use of language as political currency while simultaneously co-opting it for itself (Rectanus 2004: 243). By associating Christian iconography and language with the images of terror seen on the nightly news, it attempted to question both what a ‘terrorist’ actually is and how the use of the word ‘terrorism’ has been employed to create political leverage (ibid.). The deployment of ‘holy pictures’ on the website in relation to texts on fear composed by CoF members, or ‘Saints of Fear’, ridiculed the idea of religious martyrdom and ‘salvation rhetoric’ as an antidote to contemporary anxieties. Through the bizarre juxtaposition of images and language related to ‘terrorism’, both the website and the CoF’s physical manifestations sought to intervene in the dominant production of fear discourses and imagery by inserting Schlingensief’s own subversive readings of socio-political events. Schlingensief’s intentional clashing of images, context and language recall his reference to the container event in Vienna as a ‘Bilderstörungs-maschine’ (in Poet 2002). This self-coined term describes a machine that functions as a disturbance or produces malfunction or breakdown in the ‘Bilder’ or images it is connected with. The intermedial strategies of the CoF project were similarly designed to ‘scramble’ the connections usually made in terms of the graphics, images and text that served the interests of those propagating the dominant fear discourses of 2003.

Thus, the slogan ‘Fear is the Answer’ that featured on CoF publicity material was, according to Schlingensief, ‘the call to see things from another perspective’ (Koegel & König 2005: 20). Such a perspective would embrace the idea of public admission to private fear as a solution to social insecurity in the form of a common bond shared by all communities, not as a problem for politicians to manipulate. The pole-sitting events

encouraged individuals to publicly display their readiness to embrace their own fears and test their endurance while admitting that they had lost the ability or desire to believe in the kind of 'fear management' offered by political and religious institutions. Fears of death, poverty, aging, terrorism or illness would, in the Church's view, become the property or – to put it in financial terms – the capital of the church member and not of a political or evangelical organization. The CoF's call to fear was a call to publicly fear such organizations and their political alliances, while valorizing private fear as a valuable commodity – one that diverse institutions sought to exploit yet with no intention of providing solutions to the underlying causes of fear such as poverty, unemployment and social injustices.

Moving Corpus: A Social Sculpture?

Actually, I want to get back into the picture and I can't do that without movement. So what should I do?

Christoph Schlingensief (quoted in Heineke & Umathum 2002: 5)

In contrast, however, to the privacy entailed by the contemplation of one's personal fears, the CoF sought external witnesses for its group activities. After gathering in Cologne, Schlingensief and CoF members walked to Frankfurt, Germany's financial capital, in a five-day procession entitled *Moving Corpus*. Images of the march show a group of people holding banners with the words 'Terror' and 'Have Fear' – people who seem, in fact, to be promoting fear. That this was indeed what they were doing does not detract from the Church's vision of a community that was made mobile through fear rather than passive and invisible, each isolated in their homes. When asked by a journalist during the *Moving Corpus* procession, 'What does it all mean?' Schlingensief responded, 'Meaning is always a problem for television. We don't have that, we are simply on the move' (Uphoff 2003: 74). His refusal to give a readymade interpretation of his project for unreflective consumption by a TV audience or a snappy sound bite for the media accentuates his reluctance to foreclose or categorise his work as politics, art or even political art. In this view, one could say that, while the CoF is not resisting hegemonic powers, it is participating in a newly configured protest movement, with the emphasis on 'movement' rather than on old ideologies and fixed binary positions.

By maintaining a deliberate ambiguity about his intentions, Schlingensief sought to avoid the dismissal that usually accompanies protest movements with 'resistance' as their core methodology. It can indeed be argued that resistance movements are all too easily absorbed by the rhetoric of freedom our democracies permit. And should that fail, their activities can be criminalised or outlawed by legislation such as the Patriot Act passed in the US in 2001, which found its counterpart in Germany's 'security package', albeit in a more moderate form (Safferling 2006: 1152). Schlingensief has claimed that generating 'contradiction not resistance' (quoted in Poet 2002) is his preferred modus operandi, and by choosing to operate within mainstream media discourses – as op-



Fig. 4 Schlingensief on the pilgrimage to Germany's financial capital © Patrick Hilss, 2003.

posed to distancing himself from them – his work provides an alternative to the weaknesses inherent in binary protest modes that focus on being *against* something.

The implication that the process is in fact the goal stands at the heart of Schlingensief's interventionist and performative cultural actions. Once a project has been conceived and set up in its raw form, it is 'exposed' in public, where unpredictable elements determine the course of action and spectators become participants critically engaging with the content, as we shall see happened in Frankfurt.

But, firstly, in view of contemporary debates on aesthetics and politics (see, for example, Rancière 2006), it is relevant to compare Schlingensief with one of his predecessors, with whom he is – in German criticism – most often equated.

While perhaps not immediately apparent, the work of Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) and his engagement with the diverse mediums of sculpture, drawing, installation, performance and political activism influenced Schlingensief primarily with regard to the latter. Like Beuys, he consistently sought to merge art, politics and daily life in his projects. References to Beuys and his works have frequently appeared in Schlingensief's numerous political *aktionen*, or 'actions,' to borrow Beuys's term for activities he distinguished from 'performance'. The title of Schlingensief's 1997 Kassel Documenta project, *My Felt, My Fat, My Hare: 48 Hours of Survival for Germany*, clearly reveals itself as a quotation of iconographic motifs belonging to the work of Beuys. In the German federal election year of 1998, he founded his own political/art party called *Chance 2000* and

borrowed Beuys's slogans 'Vote for Yourself' and 'Active Neutrality' as part of its media campaign (Schlingensiefel & Hegemann 1998: 18).

As an activist, Beuys demanded the increased participation of citizens in politics, defining his vision of *soziale plastik* or social sculpture as 'how we mould and shape the world in which we live' (quoted in Harlan 2007: 9). Beuys's endeavours to merge his artistic practice with his political goals are evident in his founding of the *Organization for Direct Democracy by Referendum* in 1971, and his *Information Office* at the Kassel Documenta exhibition in 1972, where he discussed and debated issues on current society, politics and the arts with gallery visitors for one hundred days, to cite only two such examples (Stachelhaus 1991: 108-9). A passionate advocate of the integration of art into education and life, Beuys believed it could ultimately bring about social change and political transformation.

Schlingensiefel's attempts to break through the social inertia produced by the proliferation of fear discourses recall the efforts of Beuys to stimulate social change through the energy created by movement or *Bewegung*. Beuys considered post-war 1970s humanity 'in its present psychological configuration' to be in a state of 'deep torpor' that could only be overcome via the principle of *Bewegung* aligned with 'provocation' (Bunge 1996: 265). In a Beuysian context, provocation refers to the artist's attempts to create environments or performances that would effect a change of perspective on the part of the spectators or audience, encouraging them, in a sense, to re-vision their modes of seeing, perceiving and responding to art and its broader role in the cultural landscape.

Schlingensiefel's project differed quite considerably from Beuys's, however, who has been heavily criticised for casting himself in the role of shaman or social healer. Schlingensiefel rejected the latter's esoteric endowment of his *objets d'art* and public performance activities and was sceptical of Beuys's assertions of the healing powers of art to achieve social transformation. Whilst clearly foregrounding his own presence in his work, as did Beuys, and professing a non-cynical commitment to what he espoused, Schlingensiefel tried to avoid the accusation levelled at Beuys by art historian Benjamin Buchloh, which claimed he was 'in favour of a renewed foregrounding of the artist as a privileged being, a seer that provides deeper knowledge [...] to an audience that is in deep dependence and in need of epiphanic revelations' (Buchloh 2001: 82).

This critique has been tempered by a more recent analysis that sees Beuys's presence in his works not as a means of self-promotion but as being 'part of a process which is varied and shifting' and engaged in 'a work which is open and subject to contestation by those who enter into its space' (Nicholson 2007: 119) – a description that applies equally well to Schlingensiefel's activities. Nevertheless, I would suggest that the CoF presented a platform for Schlingensiefel to lampoon the construction of the artist as a messianic figure and 'seer'. The Beuysian dead hare was indeed one of the 'totem' figures in the small white church, but it was shown in juxtaposition to a pug dog's anus, a symbol that is unlikely to engender any significant esoteric connotations. In contrast to the mythical status that Beuys attributed to certain events in his personal history, Schlingensiefel insisted upon the bourgeois ordinariness of his background as the only son of a phar-

macist and a nurse from Oberhausen in West Germany. Thus, there remains a playful inconclusiveness about Schlingensief's position as artist and spokesman of his own church, aware perhaps of his tendency toward 'compulsive self-exposure', as Buchloh (2001: 210) would have it, while undermining his own messianic grandiosity by having a shabby plush donkey on wheels as the mascot or 'totem' accompanying the CoF's perambulations. While Schlingensief played with the notion of the artist as a godlike figure, he disavowed it by affirming himself as part of an autonomous collective (Koegel & König 2005: 44). Members of the CoF were at liberty to carry out their own actions, post reports and photographs on the website forum and influence the transmission of the church's activities, thereby undermining the concept of the artist as sole leader, visionary or high priest.

Self-Marginalization in Frankfurt

Upon the CoF's arrival in Frankfurt, a 'Last Supper' event was organised for the public in the Bockenheimer Depot. Over 800 people gathered to welcome the *Moving Corpus* procession, take part in the supper and witness the preparations for the next pole-sitting event to take place at the Hauptwache, Frankfurt's most famous square. A key difference from the Venice Biennale environment was that a public casting situation was set up for the socially marginalised, 'unemployed, homeless and/or hopeless' who would then become the centrepiece of the event. Once again passers-by were encouraged to place bets on their favourite sitter, in order to 'make visible how unemployment can be turned into consumer goods when it has entertainment value' (Görres Kulturbetrieb 2003). This statement underpins the difference between the historical avant-gardes' attack on the institutions of art, which those institutions were relatively quickly capable of subsuming, and Schlingensief's critique of commodity relations, which acknowledges that there is no outside position from which to take an objective stance. Schlingensief's self-reflexivity in regard to the socio-cultural contexts in which his work took place complies with Auslander's assertion that 'postmodernist political art must position itself within postmodern culture, it must use the same representational means as all other cultural expression yet remain permanently suspicious of them' (1994: 23). The problem remains, however, that Schlingensief's body of work concurs neither with 'postmodernist political' nor 'postmodern art'. Rather, his performance events reveal a motivation similar to that of the Fluxus movement, and Beuys, by relating to socio-political activism, playfulness, artistic aspirations and the intentional blurring of the boundaries between them all.

In Frankfurt, the status of the CoF as an art project was not foregrounded as was the case at the Venice Biennale, and members of the public, unaware of other contexts, perceived it more as a 'real' event that was extending an invitation to participate. Outside an obvious art context, the project found a new audience consisting not only of unemployed and homeless but also of 'punks gathering to support one of their own who was participating, bankers who came to poke fun, Christians who wanted to argue, culture



Fig. 5 Pole-sitters victory in Frankfurt © Patrick Hilss, 2003.

vultures to have a laugh and anti-fascists who enquired about a possible collaboration' (Malzacher 2003: 21).

For all the aforementioned interest groups, an open microphone was available to communicate with the spectators, and over the course of the contest, opinions and grievances were aired, providing an interactive dimension for this public work. Thus, in Frankfurt, the CoF became a social project, with the socially underprivileged or 'outsiders' in the position of looking down on the spectators, lending them an aura of holiness while the city went about its financial business. In essence, the pole-sitters were performing a practice of 'self-marginalization' by revealing their inability to believe in established religious and/or political doctrines. This contrasts with other public assemblies where people come together to demonstrate their 'belief' in something, be it a religious faith, a political party or social cause. The CoF's public activities draw on 'the society of the spectacle' – as conceptualised by Guy Debord – to turn performance into spectacle, utilizing its visibility and ostension to draw attention, not away from the political context (as in Roman bread and circus spectacles) but back to it. Using the methods of mass spectacle, the project subverted the principles of commodification and consumption that usually accompany it – there being nothing concrete to purchase or consume. Participation in the event, either active or passive, meant contributing to the spectacle while not necessarily being entertained by it. The spectacle of 'pole-sitting' became a public admission of personal fear and, as such, used public space more commonly dominated by consumer transactions as a site to reclaim the autonomy of one's own emotions from political manipulation.

Conclusion: A Church with no Walls

The CoF was a short-lived movement of no fixed location, building or diocese, crossing borders from art installation and cyber-community network to public activities and media event. The counter-images and fear discourses it created, in opposition to the dominant flow of images and rhetoric produced by the media and political leaders, constitute one feature of the political aspect of the work. Within the ambiguity of the Church's goals, the intention was not to dwell in a private world but to create a widespread social movement. And, according to website updates, the Church had a total of nine hundred communities with over twenty-one thousand members on six continents. However, in terms of its employment of virtual space, some criticism of its exaggeratedly colourful claims is in order. The membership numbers as stated on the website cannot be verified nor can the alleged participation of groups in La Paz, Bombay, Lüderitz or Port-au-Prince. Given that the CoF's activities took place exclusively in wealthy areas of Europe such as Venice, Cologne and Frankfurt, can predominantly white subjects with full access to technologies stand in for the bodies and the fears of those whose countries usually make the news when disaster strikes or when military measures are deemed necessary against them? Is fear the great leveller? Despite the prevailing tendency to consider the internet as having a global reach, David Lieberman (1999: 1A) has pointed out that 'the Internet revolution is largely bypassing the poor, minorities and those who live in rural communities.' Had the website been accessible in different languages, the claims to a diverse global movement may have been justified. Pole-sitting events did not take place in London or the US as announced, which, due to Schlingensief's mostly unknown status there, would have facilitated a new perspective and even expanded the CoF community in curiously interesting ways.

Although the CoF has not been active since the end of 2003, neither has it been acknowledged as 'finished', and elements of its iconography were incorporated or 'remediated' into the stage design of Schlingensief's *Parsifal* at the Bayreuth Festival in 2004, itself a bastion of bourgeois, 'high-brow' culture (Schlingensief quoted in Koegel & König 2005: 39).² The website contains no updates and the discussion forum is closed, but details of the pole-sitting events and other pages remain accessible for 'members and sympathisers'. Its main function now seems to be as a document of what *did* happen and to promote, in typically hyperbolic fashion, Schlingensief's solo CoF-related ventures. These include the publication of Museum Ludwig's *AC. Christoph Schlingensief: Church of Fear* catalogue in 2005, and the installation of the wooden church at the museum in the same year that Pope Benedict XVI visited Cologne for World Youth Day. Although Schlingensief had been invited to install the small white church as part of an exhibition, he emphasised that it was only one component of the entire work. Making it clear that the CoF did not belong in its entirety to a museum, which had only a relic of it, Schlingensief underlined its autonomy and its connections to Beuys's concept of social sculpture (quoted in Koegel & König 2005: 37-38).

The CoF's flexibility as art event, ritual procession, public intervention and cyber-movement make it an example of socially engaged art that can operate in the form of a counterpublic for a brief period before morphing into a new form. This is perhaps in keeping with the temporal, campsite location of the avant-garde in Schlingensief's *Atta-Atta* production and its 'potential' (Bürger 1992), which would appear to be a fleeting phenomenon in response to the demands of its times. The various manifestations of the CoF – in the co-optation of public spaces and the invitation to participate – raise again the possibility of art encroaching on political arenas to create a counterflow of images and turn public reflection back on itself to examine the contradictions between perception of supposedly responsible politics and irresponsible art.

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NOTES

- 1 Schlingensief raised this question in a seminar series held at the Volksbühne from 2-20 December 2002 on the thematics of art, terrorism, politics and crime.
- 2 In 2009, Schlingensief's production *Ein Kirche der Angst vor der Fremden in Mir* (A Church of Fear for the Stranger in Me) was invited to the Berlin Theatertreffen. However, this work was related to his sudden diagnosis with cancer in 2008 and, as such, was an expression of his subjective fear and was not linked to the activities of the CoF per se. In contrast to the latter, no English title was given for the work.

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