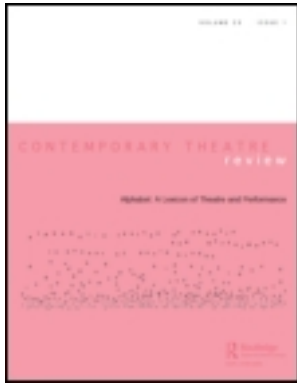


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### Christoph Schlingensief: Art without Borders edited by Tara Forrest and Anna Teresa Scheer

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In her chapter 'Feminism and Conceptual Practice', Battista offers accounts of events almost entirely forgotten by art history, such as Judy Clark's *Issues* (1973) exhibition at The Garage in Covent Garden (which the author problematically refers to as 'the first properly organized and designed alternative gallery in London', p. 120). Consisting of 'traces of the human body', *Issues*, Battista writes, 'should be seen today as a landmark in feminist art' (p. 32). Clark presented as art her own nail clippings, menstrual blood, and tissues stained with her partner's semen set inside Perspex, which offers a good example of new strategies used by feminist artists in the 1970s; according to Battista, it illustrated a struggle with the question of 'how to communicate the physical experiences of womanhood without necessarily depicting the female form' (p. 40). Conversely, the subsequent chapter, 'The Body and Performance Art', considers artists who saw the presentation of their own bodies through performance as 'an opportunity to reclaim the body from what was seen as its muse-like status' (p. 53). Battista's historicisation of poorly documented performances such as Carolee Schneemann's remarkably early *Naked Action Lecture* at the ICA in 1968, through examination of the original script and eye witness accounts, is also particularly interesting and laudable in recovering 'body events' previously marginalised in history, and their significance in finding 'a new route into the political' in art (p. 89).

*Renegotiating the Body* presents an excellently researched mass of primary evidence, drawing from an imaginative array of sources. In particular, Battista's chapter 'Alternative Spaces for Feminist Art', offers an impressive wealth of information by chronicling important spaces eclipsed by history, such as Acme Gallery, SPACE, and AIR, as well as the domestic and public sites of work that existed outside of the gallery system. For women of the 1970s, as Battista points out, mainstream galleries were simply 'unavailable' (p. 91), but these artists' innovations in art production, originally born out of necessity, provided a 'model for future activities' (p. 137), and this study offers a solid foundation for further investigation into this line of enquiry. For instance, Battista's argument for sites of feminist activity as driving a shift away from the institution, and towards 'more discursive' (p. 137), heterogeneous spaces for art and activism in the 1980s and 1990s is compelling and well illustrated through engaging examples such as Rose Finn-Kelcey's subversive *Flag* (1972), where the artist hangs a huge banner boldly stating 'POWER FOR THE PEOPLE' from Battersea Power Station. The book offers a generally convincing argument as to the importance of the artists' contributions to wider developments within

contemporary art generally, such as the shift away from the confines of the gallery space and a raised consciousness of cultural hegemony and social exclusion in arts production. This is particularly well illustrated in Battista's concluding chapter, which analyses the influence of 1970s feminist practices in the work of artists such as Tracey Emin and Hayley Newman.

There is also, however, a disappointing lack of critical rigour or interrogation of the material at times. Occasionally, the argument leans on problematic statements made by other critics. For instance, in her discussion of Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1976), Battista unquestioningly presents Barry Barker's inaccurate account of the piece as 'the first time that questions were asked in the House of Commons about art' (p. 23). The author herself also tends to make bold claims for her subjects without always presenting the range of evidence required to back up her assertions; for instance, Battista's characterisation of women's art prior to the 1970s as merely 'a history of women replicating men's work' (p. 160) is particularly questionable. It is, however, easy to sympathise with the author's enthusiasm. This book provides a strong platform for further research into historically shrouded and marginalised practices – as the author herself acknowledges, it 'only cracks the surface' (p. 88).

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**Christoph Schlingensiefel: Art Without Borders**  
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How do you take seriously an artist like Christoph Schlingensiefel, who seemed dedicated to refusing and cross-wiring distinctions between the serious and the ridiculous, between political conviction and trashy irreverence? This is, after all, the controversial figure who was arrested at Documenta X (1997) for posting a sign proclaiming 'Kill Helmut Kohl!' (then Chancellor of Germany); whose film *Terror 2000* (1992) was decried as 'sexist and racist' by protestors who stormed the projection room and destroyed the reels with acid; whose production of *Hamlet* for the Berliner Volksbühne (1993) featured neo-Nazi skinheads; and who played out his own cancer and imminent death as an over-the-top

(soap) opera in *Church of Fear* (2008) and *Mea Culpa* (2009). Such is the challenge undertaken by the contributors to this collection on his life and work, edited by Tara Forrest and Anna Teresa Scheer, which was published in the same month as the artist's untimely death in 2010. This collection seeks to provide historical and aesthetic context to these and other provocations, as well as to make connections across the varied forms and scales with which Schlingensiefel worked. In their introduction, Forrest and Scheer argue that the labels of sensationalism and provocation are understandable but ultimately misplaced; Schlingensiefel was 'not interested in producing a particular political or pedagogical outcome, but in generating work that is fluid and open in its structure, and that encourages the audience to think critically and creatively for themselves' (p. 15).

The collection is organised chronologically, with each essay focusing on a single work or set of works from a phase of Schlingensiefel's career. Taken collectively, the contributions depict an artistic trajectory that was itself fluid and open-ended. Richard Langston unpacks some of Schlingensiefel's earliest film experiments from the early 1980s, identifying within them a confrontation between reality and artifice that would go on to characterise all of Schlingensiefel's work. Langston writes, 'Art's simulation of disruption sought to fake reality's breakdown but in the end it was art that was destroyed by the contingencies of reality itself' (p. 34). Schlingensiefel later moved from film to theatre, and Sandra Umathum describes a similar moment of crisis. As night after night of his *100 Years of the Christian Democratic Union* (1993) was panned by audiences and critics, Schlingensiefel finally could take it no more and burst onto the stage, covered in fake blood, apparently laying himself bare to his audience. Umathum presents this as an early example of what Hans-Thies Lehmann would later describe as the 'aesthetics of undecidability': 'Regardless of whether you were prepared to give credence to his emotions or not, you couldn't be sure if he was being sincere' (p. 60). From that point forward, Schlingensiefel himself would be prominently visible in all his work, as well as what Umathum describes as 'the possibility of situational resetting, of variation, of the surprise effect and the revelation of what is usually concealed' (p. 61). In relation to another of the many forms Schlingensiefel appropriated, Tara Forrest describes *Freakstars 3000* (2002), a talent casting show featuring people with physical and mental disabilities. Forrest begins by addressing the limitations of the prankster persona: 'someone who just likes to have fun and who cannot, as a result, be taken very seriously' (p. 123). But she takes him quite

seriously indeed, drawing on Theodor Adorno's distinctions between alienated amusement and critically engaged pleasure. Whereas some see this work as 'making fun of the disabled contestants', Forrest argues that these ambivalent reactions 'support, rather than undermine, one of the key points that Schlingensiefel is seeking to make: That "the freak is the situation itself, which forces us to make a distinction between what is and isn't normal"' (p. 132, quoting Schlingensiefel).

I have jumped across a few examples that address different phases of Schlingensiefel's career in order to indicate one of this collection's real strengths: the cumulative effect of tracing the artist's own trajectory reveals a coherent set of concerns rigorously pursued across disparate forms. Schlingensiefel is always the primary focus, but broader dramaturgical or theoretical arguments are invoked, particularly from within an Austro-German context; in addition to Adorno and Lehmann, there are references to Joseph Beuys, Bertolt Brecht, Elfriede Jelinek, Alexander Kluge, Oskar Negt, and Peter Sloterdijk. Although the contributions work best in relation to each other, some might be useful as standalone pieces in other contexts: Florian Malzacher's writing on Schlingensiefel's final works engages productively with illness studies and the narrativisation of disease; Denise Varney gives a useful retrospective survey and reinterpretation of Schlingensiefel's best-known work, the *Big Brother*-style concentration camp that was *Please Love Austria* (2000); and Solveig Gade makes a nuanced and eloquent argument for Schlingensiefel's circus-act-cum-political-party *Chance 2000* (1998) as a staging of Rancierian dissensus that is a more persuasive example than those that Jacques Rancière himself tends to choose.

But alongside these theoretical connections, the moments that captivated me most in this collection were those that evoked the sense of being immersed in the electrifying, sometimes terrifying, environments of chaos and ambiguity that only Schlingensiefel could create – whether it is a woman, who may or may not have had any relation to Schlingensiefel, locking the cinema door at a screening of *Terror 2000* that Umathum attended (p. 58); or a confrontation with police in which the event's status as art could alternatively signify safety or risk in Scheer's description of *Passion Impossible* (1997, p. 75). Paradoxically, it seems, by disavowing and ridiculing art's claim to autonomy and significance, Schlingensiefel generated a political function for art that, as Gade puts it, 'cannot be reduced to its "political remains"' (p. 99).