

Interview with Hermann Nitsch

Selections from Nitsch: Works from the Essl Collection, Kunst Der Gegenwart, 2003

Reprinted on the occasion of "Hermann Nitsch / Die Aktionen: 1962-2003", a retrospective exhibition at Slought Foundation (February 19-May 23, 2005) of pioneering Viennese Actionist Hermann Nitsch, featuring videos of his performances since 1962. For more information: <http://www.slought.org/content/11274/>

Karlheinz Essl. *You were one of the main protagonists of Vienna Actionism. How did you meet the other artists in that group, such as Brus, Schwarzkogler, and Mühl and, later, Rainer?*

Hermann Nitsch. In 1958 I had already had the idea of my *Orgien Mysterien Theater*. That was a festival which was to take six days. When I developed the idea I wanted all participants in the festival to experience all sensory impressions. I was not concerned with people remembering certain sensory experiences, but about the immediate experience, that is to say the taste of salt or the smell of jasmine or incense, and the sensation of touching raw meat. I stopped writing plays in which the actors play roles – someone plays King Lear or Faust – I wanted to stage real events, and that was actually the start of my theatre. The first drafts going in the direction were created 1958. Then I spent my whole time working on my theatre. It involved the spilling of liquids, for instance, on stage or in the audience. We spilled vinegar, water, wine, blood – that is to say liquids with a distinct smell. I still remember, it must have been in 1959 or 1960, there was a large-scale international exhibition of Informal Painting at the *Künstlerhaus*. It was there that I first saw a Tàpies, a Mathieu, a de Kooning, the Americans, Sam Francis and others. I was impassioned by this gestural painting. I then immediately took up Informal Painting and the pouring of paint on surfaces. That was the beginning of my *Aktionen* (action performances). At first it was only a concept and later on I actually realized it. At the time of Vienna Actionism I also worked permanently on my theatre. Mühl made informal Sculptures out of waste, Brus painted very, very good informal paintings. Their results were similar to mine. They had all seen my work. I think I was the instigator for all of them. The instigator who made them take up *Aktionen*, too. It was important to me that I worked very intensively on my *O.M. Theater*, also during the time of Vienna Actionism. All the things I showed were actually only extracts and preliminary studies for my great oeuvre.

[...] At the time when I was developing and realizing my work, a wave of *Aktionskunst* (action art) went around the world. In America, there was the Happening movement, and all the artists were concerned with transcending their respective medium in the direction of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and with developing real Happenings, which can be experienced via the senses. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* I am referring to is not simply adding up different things, e.g. poetry and music and a stage set, as in classical opera. Things do not add up but interact in a chemical bonding, like an alloy. The artist automatically involved all the five senses. He has to be able to deal with them and handle them. Therefore he is a painter, composer, poet, dramatist, choreographer. This is a completely new understanding of art – unity develops out of real events.

K.E. *To what extent have you and your painter friends such as Brus, Schwarzkogler and Mühl been influenced by the Happenings movement in the US?*

H.N. I think the Happenings movement was more of a confirmation for us than an influence, because we did something different, something even more profound and radical to my mind. Because we took depth psychology into account, which has shaped us. What did actually influence us was the emergence of Action Painting, Abstract Expressionism, but especially Tachism. In this particular aspect we have probably all been influenced by the Americans. Jackson Pollock first of all, a great deal of de Kooning, and also Sam Francis, Matthieu and Michaux. For us young Austrian artists Arnulf Rainer was very important. He has influenced me greatly. He was the big importer who actually knew all these things already and brought them to us.

K.E. *How did you get to know about American Action Painting, that is, how did the information come to Austria?*

H.N. Very sparingly, actually. Through the “documenta,” as far as I’m concerned through an exhibition in the *Künstlerhaus* or through some kinds of art journals. There were a few painters who had become somewhat established at the time, who were interested in that direction; they were Rainer, Prachensky, Mikl and Hollegha. They had become somewhat accepted at the time. When we, who were ten years younger, appeared on the scene, we had difficulties standing up to them.

K.E. *Were the extreme action performances, which culminated in the Aktion at the University, a kind of power on the part of you, the younger artists, against the more established artists in the “Galerie St. Stephan” group?*

H.N. I would say that the artists who were part of that need to give you their own interpretation of this. Of course they were all protesting, Brus, Oswald Wiener, Mühl, as we were all protesting against something. When we came together all that political fuss got on our nerves, that tremendous hypocrisy, that conservatism. Actually we always protested without being politically oriented. And then there were these *Aktionen* where everyone protested in some form or other although none of them was actually a political person. I tend to see it this way: that particular *Aktion* at the University, although it came in a political disguise, was simply an outcry, carried by a strong need for artistic expression. What is even more credit to this cause was the fact of an inmost, profound existential despair. I would not like to reduce it to the political level. I would see a great deal more in it. But maybe Brus will see that differently, or Oswald Wiener, Weibel or Mühl. I was not there myself, but I know the colleagues who were involved in it very well.

K.E. *How did your relationship with the other representatives of Vienna Actionism develop?*

H.N. I met Brus in 1962 through an exhibition which he then had at the *Junge Generation*, the same goes for Frohner, then a certain Niederbacher, who was not so prominent later on. Brus and I did not connect very well at first. Brus was always like a hungry wolf and rather wild, and started out by being offensive to everybody; but later on, I developed a very deep and warm friendship with him. The first one I met was actually Schwarzkogler, then Mühl and Frohner, and then Brus.

K.E. *One of the first spectacular Aktionen which also raised public attention was the Einmauerungsaktion (walling-in).*

H.N. Well, at the *Einmauerungsaktion* [in 1962] there were Mühl, Frohner, yours truly and Dworak as a theoretician and psychoanalyst. I do not call it a real *Aktion*, because it was actually an exhibition and an installation and there was no action going on. It was not one of the performances that were exclusively conceived as an *Aktion*.

K.E. *It was the first time that the public took note of the Actionists. It immediately triggered tremendous protests.*

H.N. True, it was a very novel thing that we did. We propagated a very aggressive type of art, not a cozy art, but an art that displayed tremendous power and intensity. And the thing with the dead sheep dismayed people greatly, of course.

K.E. *What were the protests like and what were you reproached with?*

H.N. A question that is hard to answer. There was an enormous amount of projection. People accused us of what they had in themselves; they saw us as men who tortured animals, as predators and aggressors. People looked in the mirror and perhaps saw a little bit of themselves.

K.E. *As far as I know you have been sentenced twice.*

H.N. The first time was at the occasion of the *Aktion* in Perinetgasse in Vienna’s 20th district. It was the *Aktion de psycho-physischen Naturalismus* (action performance of psycho-physical naturalism), where Mühl and I had planned two *Aktionen* independent of each other. So it was not a community *Aktion*, but each of us was to carry out his *Aktion* there.

K.E. *Did it take place in a gallery or in a public space?*

H.N. It was in Mühl's studio, a sculptor's basement where he worked. There were many people from the world of art, Rainer was there, Logothetis was there, Prantl the sculptor was there, and, I believe, Abraham, the architect and Brus. Many people were there; the entire art scene of Vienna.

K.E. *And why did the police intervene, how did they know about it?*

We had printed the programme that we wanted to perform on sheets of paper and distributed them. So this is how the police knew what was going to happen. The whole thing escalated, they were suddenly there and stopped the *Aktion*. At least I was able to carry out two-thirds of what I had planned. Mühl was not. He wanted to throw a cupboard filled with jam, symbolic of all the bourgeois stuff, out of a second floor window. That would have been his *Aktion*, but unfortunately it was not to be.

K.E. *And how did your first action performance go, what was the concept?*

H.N. It was the first of the classical action performances where I used entrails. Meat and blood with a passive performer and the carcass of a slaughtered sheep. By the way, this *Aktion* was scrupulously described in the police record. The police record was published everywhere, including in the *Spiegel* magazine. It was a sensation at the time.

K.E. *And how did the police interfere? How did this happen?*

H.N. They just stopped the *Aktion* and then we had to dispose of the things we used. We did not eat the sheep because we were so much under pressure and were scared of doing it. We then threw it in the Danube Canal – I still remember it very vividly – we put it in a sack. Brus took it, he was ecstatic, and ran off. He dragged the sack along and then kicked it into the Danube Canal. That must have been between *Friedensbrücke* and *Augartenbrücke*. From the council house windows people were screaming: "Murderers, murderers." We hopped in the car and drove off. We then all met at Mühl's place to discuss what had happened. Suddenly the police came: they had been called about a murder. We tried to explain that we had just disposed of the lamb. We got three days arrest for it, Brus, Kari Bauer and myself.

K.E. *So how did that invitation to perform in America [in 1968] come about, and where was the Aktion held?*

H.N. Peter Kubelka had been invited to the USA to show his films. He was also librarian at the film archives of the United Nations. He was very successful in America and Jonas Mekas supported him greatly. Kubelka had always been a great fan of my work and told Jonas Mekas about it. And this is how the invitation came about. Kubelka intimated that I had no money at all, and this is how I then ultimately received that fated ticket that made the trip possible for me. I was told that everything was paid for and that the *Aktionen* had been prepared. On top of that I was offered a fee of 400 dollars, which was a sizeable amount of money at the time. I used the money to pay my rent arrears.

K.E. *What sort of Aktionen did you give there?*

H.N. I did two *Aktionen* in Wooster Street in New York City. One *Aktion* was in a church, and another big one at the University of Cincinnati. All were very successful. The media attention was tremendous, and I was very nicely received by the famous American artists, who appreciated my work.

K.E. *Did these Aktionen involve blood, excrements and entrails?*

H.N. Actually, I have never used excrements. The *Aktion* involved animal carcasses, entrails, blood and human bodies. There was an orchestra, a screaming choir with many performers.

K.E. *How did the Americans receive that? Were there any scandals?*

H.N. Not at all, they were thrilled. Just in Cincinnati they wanted to prohibit the whole thing. But the ban was then lifted again, and the *Aktion* was a great triumph for me.

K.E. *Actually it is surprising that puritan America accepted your Aktionen so calmly. Could the reason be that Happenings, i.e. similar action performances, were already known in America?*

H.N. Happenings and, quite generally, *Aktionen* that did not involve a stage were already known from American artists. What the Americans didn't know was this expressive type of action performance – that was new for them and greatly surprised people, in a positive sense.

K.E. *Animal activists accuse you of cruelty to animals. What is your opinion of these accusations?*

H.N. I do not understand why they call me a torturer of animals when I do nothing else but show a slaughtering process that would otherwise take place at the slaughterhouse. I show on-farm slaughtering where the animal is not mistreated, because the slaughter is executed by certified butchers under the supervision of veterinary officials. I therefore show a process which is happening somewhere else anyway, and to my mind that has nothing to do with being cruel to animals.

K.E. *What does making the slaughter process visible have to do with your artistic intention?*

H.N. I am a dramatist, see myself in the tradition of dramatic poets and they have always dealt with death. Since I'm showing real events, I would like to show the process of killing which is going on all the time anyway.

K.E. *Is provocation a part of your understanding of art, in the sense that extreme statements and shocks snap people out of their lethargy and force them to interact?*

H.N. I'm often asked this question, and my answer is always the same: I have never wanted to provoke anybody with my work. I just want to reach a certain level of intensity, of which I obviously know that it can provoke people, but being provocative is not a prime motivation for my work. What is important to me is the intensity of my art, which I want to fully get across to the recipient. It is sufficient for my own theatrical understanding to say that I do not intend to provoke, particularly not in any blatant way. But I'm not against provocation either.

K.E. *To what extent do religious rites play a role in your art?*

H.N. I started very early to take an interest in the religions of all peoples and periods, and that includes all forms of rituals. Through my studies I realized increasingly to what extent art is related to ritual and ritual to art, the two are inseparable. The earliest forms of cult were supreme works of art in terms of dance and ritual. I would say that there is a close relationship between ritual, cult and art.

K.E. *What is your attitude to Catholicism?*

H.N. There are many things in Catholicism that I find intriguing. It includes powerful symbols which originated in other religions, the issue of death and resurrection, for instance, the commandment of love or the mystery of transubstantiation. These aspects hold incredible fascination for me. But there are also things in Catholicism which I see critically. The lack of affirmation of life, for instance, seeing life merely as preparation for the beyond and, particularly, the hostile attitude towards sexuality. Through reading Nietzsche I have been very much led towards an affirmation of life and towards stressing the "here and now;" and that hostility vis-à-vis sexuality makes it difficult for me to completely embrace or pursue Catholicism.

K.E. *Do you see any danger for artistic freedom?*

H.N. Artistic freedom has been and will be endangered again and again. A discussion about it would not be necessary, if everyone had the greatness to understand the nature of art. Luckily, art has a certain leeway – showing murder is a long way from actually committing murder – there is a whole tradition of this: in Greek tragedy or in Shakespeare plays, murders are committed, but only on stage. Similarly in my theatre: although it contains many terrible, expressive, abominable scenes, no one is ever hurt by the artist. Whenever I deal with the flesh of animals, these animals were not killed by me, but by the society which has animals killed in order to use their flesh as food.