

CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF It's Not My Problem Anymore!

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MAK – Press and PR

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Press Release

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Press Conference

Tuesday, 12.5.2026, 10 am

From filmmaker to political actionist, from theater and opera director to actor, visual artist, and bestselling author: Christoph Schlingensiefel's (1960–2010) work goes beyond the limits of genres, creating exuberant layers of material and meaning that defy any categorization. Inherent in his oeuvre is a challenge to the audience to take an active stance—between irritation and insight, feeling overwhelmed and reflecting. With the exhibition *It's Not My Problem Anymore!*—a (partial) quote by the artist from 2005—the MAK together with the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) are dedicating the first comprehensive solo exhibition in Austria to Christoph Schlingensiefel (MAK Exhibition Hall, 13.5.–13.9.2026). The country, which he thrust into the heart of social contradictions with his intervention *Please Love Austria – First Austrian Coalition Week* (2000), will thus once again become the stage for his engagement with the public sphere, politics, and social responsibility.

From today's perspective, many of his works can be read as anticipations of current conflicts in society: The artistic engagement with discourses on foreignness, racist projections, populist mechanisms, and media escalation make Schlingensiefel's oeuvre a central point of reference for contemporary debates on migration, identity, and democratic fragility.

The starting point and center of the exhibition is the expansive installation *Church of Fear* (2003), which was presented for the first time at the Venice Biennale in 2003. It stylized the "faith in fear" into a dogma and transformed the global atmosphere after 9/11 into a parodic religious community. *Church of Fear* marks a focal point in Schlingensiefel's work—as an ambivalent space between religion, art, and public discourse and a reflection of how power structures can be stabilized through emotions.

Building on *Church of Fear*, the curatorial narrative unfolds along two timelines: One looks back into the past and collects political and performative

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works from the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as *Chance 2000* (1998), *Please Love Austria – First Austrian Coalition Week* (2000) in the context of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen), *Hamlet* (2001), or *Freakstars 3000* (2002). They reflect Schlingensief's artistic experimentation with political reality, media publicity, social physicality, and public-theatrical interventions.

The other timeline looks ahead into the future and focuses on cinematic and opera-like bodies of work such as *The African Twin Towers* (2005), *The Flying Dutchman* (Manaus, 2007), or the video installation *Untitled (Hasenverwesung; Drosophila Melanogaster; Holländer 2c. Ausweitung der Dunkelphase; Fremdverstümmelung)* [Rabbit Decay; Drosophila Melanogaster; Dutchman 2c: Extension of the Dark Phase; Mutilation of the Other] (2007), in which motifs regarding biopolitics, society, mythology, and media are interwoven.

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The exhibition does not unlock Schlingensief's oeuvre as a linear, chronologically ordered retrospective, but rather as a staged presence. The dialogical constellation between early and late works gives rise to a cohesive oeuvre presenting artistic action not as a development in the classical sense, but as a permanent refiguration of fear, visibility, and social bodies—between stages, streets, and institutions. This setting makes it clear how in Christoph Schlingensief's work artistic strategies from theater, film, installation, and action permeate one another, thus forming a multifaceted image of his thinking.

At the center is the movement of questioning, doubting, and failing—an attitude Schlingensief described as follows: "In my view, one can fail with great zest, joy, and purpose. In my work, this has always been the kind of failure created by suspending the finish line and the goal, space and time. If you can inwardly accept that failure is necessary to harness energy, a lot will happen."

Christoph Schlingensief, born in Oberhausen, is one of the most controversially discussed artistic personas in the German-speaking world. In his career, he constantly walked a fine line between the arts: already in the 1980s, he emerged as a filmmaker with works such as *Egomania: Island Without Hope* (1986) and *100 Years of Adolf Hitler* (1988/89). His characteristic principle of layering and overwhelming became evident early on—a work at the limits of perception, where image and sound structures collide to create new narrative spaces. In the 1990s and 2000s, he moved into the public spotlight with politically charged interventions such as *Chance 2000* or the Vienna container project *Please Love Austria – First Austrian Coalition Week*. Simultaneously, he developed a body of work in theater and opera that consistently opposed the creation of illusion. His opera stagings, particularly his radically new interpretation of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* for the Bayreuth Festival in 2004, shattered the traditional expectations of the opera audience.

His visual art works also deepened his interest in the materiality of film, in decomposition, layering, and moments of interruption between images.



Installations such as *Kaprow City* (2006/07) at the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art in Zurich or *18 Bilder pro Sekunde* [18 Frames per Second] (2005) at the Haus der Kunst in Munich demonstrate the complexity of his reflections on media and perception. With the long-term project *Operndorf Afrika* [Opera Village Africa] (2009–) in Burkina Faso, Schlingensiefel expanded his work into a cultural and social engagement that has an impact far beyond the aesthetic dimension.

His late works, influenced by the diagnosis of lung cancer in 2008, process existential questions in an artistic way, such as *A Church of Fear vs. the Alien Within* (2008). Despite his illness, Schlingensiefel remained inexhaustibly productive until his death in 2010. Posthumously, in 2011, he was awarded the Golden Lion for the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, which was curated by Susanne Gaensheimer in cooperation with Aino Laberenz.

In line with his artistic path, the exhibition *CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF: It's Not My Problem Anymore!* outlines a dynamic field of tension, in which art can be experienced as a proposition, as something overwhelming, and a questioning of societal realities. Visitors encounter an oeuvre that breaks boundaries, allows for contradictions, and invites reflection—in the spirit of Schlingensiefel's radical impulse to think of art as an experience that irritates, overwhelms, stirs, and opens up new perspectives.

The exhibition is curated by Swiss art historian and curator Raphael Gyax in collaboration with Aino Laberenz, long-time companion and wife of Christoph Schlingensiefel. Raphael Gyax is a recognized expert in time-based art as well as performative and cinematic practices. He has curated numerous international exhibitions and regularly works with artists and artist estates. Aino Laberenz is a stage and costume designer as well as a curator. As director of the *Operndorf Afrika* initiated by Christoph Schlingensiefel and executor of his estate, she has been dedicated to the preservation and continuation of his artistic legacy for many years.

Raphael Gyax is also the curator of a further exhibition on Christoph Schlingensiefel in the Gropius Bau in Berlin, which will be on show from 9.10.2026 to 17.1.2027 as a joint project by the Gropius Bau / Berliner Festspiele, Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Freie Republik Wien, and the MAK – Museum of Applied Arts.

The bridge to the ongoing relevance and urgency of Christoph Schlingensiefel's work in the context of current social and political tensions is also created by a multifaceted program accompanying the exhibition at the MAK, which will offer a special educational approach for a young audience. In addition, artists like Milo Rau, director and artistic director of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen), director Kurdwin Ayub, and Susanne Kennedy will provide insights into their artistic engagement with current political lines of conflict. Details regarding the accompanying program are available at [MAK.at/christophschlingensiefel](https://www.mak.at/christophschlingensiefel) and continuously updated.



A joint project of the MAK, the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Freie Republik Wien, and Gropius Bau/Berliner Festspiele.

Press photos are available for download at [MAK.at/en/press](https://mak.at/en/press).



Works in the Exhibition

CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF: *It's Not My Problem Anymore!*

Church of Fear (2003)

Church of Fear provides a central point of reference in Schlingensief's exploration of fear, insecurity, and social control. Created against the backdrop of the global atmosphere after the attacks on 11 September 2001, the project addresses the instrumentalization of fear in politics and media. Schlingensief designed the *Church of Fear* as a parodic religious community with the sole dogma of "believing in fear." Installations, sermons, and ritual-like actions prompt the audience to reflect on their own fear and its social construction.

The work opens up an ambivalent space between religion, art, and public discourse and highlights how power structures can be stabilized through emotions. At the Venice Biennale in 2003, *Church of Fear* became known to an international art audience and established Schlingensief's reputation as a transgressive artist between aesthetic proposition and political intervention. In 2008, he reactivated the project in the form of a theater evening of the same name, where he again addressed the topics of fear, dying, surveillance, and a society of control and brought these to the stage.

The African Twin Towers (2005)

In this multifaceted video installation, Christoph Schlingensief combines film, performance, and media layering. Originally conceived as a classically narrated film about the Wagner Festival in former German South West Africa and shot in Lüderitz (Namibia), the project developed into an open, improvisational process on site: When the script failed, Schlingensief and the cast began reenacting iconic scenes from film and opera history—with simple means, in the specific setting of the Namibian landscape, and influenced by the encounter of European and African visual worlds.

The work weaves together topics such as colonialism, racism, global exploitation, and cultural hybridity with mythological and historical motifs. Inspired by Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, *The African Twin Towers* opens up a space of experience that deliberately produces layering and sense of overwhelm: each screen in the installation presents a different "classic," thus creating a polyphonic, fragmented visual space. This simultaneity—and the impossibility of grasping all layers at the same time—constitutes a central aesthetic principle of the work.

The Flying Dutchman (Manaus, 2007)

Schlingensief's engagement with opera as a total work of art originated in his staging of *Parsifal* (2004–2007) in Bayreuth. He continued this exploration in his Manaus project in 2007, inspired by the Teatro Amazonas opera house in the Brazilian rainforest. There, he conceived and realized a production that perceives the Amazon as a mythical, real space of experience and combines ecological questions with colonial and global power structures. For



Schlingensiefel, opera became a place where boundaries between art, ritual, and society are dissolved.

In the 16 mm films accompanying the project, he wove together Wagner's myth of redemption with postcolonial images of the Amazon. The series comprises twelve films; in the exhibition, one of these will be presented as an example. The resulting feverish opera fragment oscillates between ghost ship, tropical fever, and the impossibility of arriving. Projected in an endless loop, the film simultaneously addresses the evanescence of images: the loops tear, fade, and are virtually erased by the light of the projector—each copy with its own "history of suffering."

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Untitled (2007)

The video installation *Untitled (2007)* channels four cinematic sources into one overall composition: *Hasenverwesung* [Rabbit Decay] and *Drosophila Melanogaster* played a central role in Schlingensiefel's Bayreuth *Parsifal*, functioning as radical material metaphors for transformation beyond the sublime—cycles of life, decay, and new beginning. They are complemented by *Fremdverstümmelung* [Mutilation of the Other] (2007) and a film showing Schlingensiefel during orchestra rehearsals at night in the rainforest near Manaus.

His engagement with opera as the epitome of elite high culture, the mechanisms of exclusion of which he consistently questioned, becomes particularly evident. *Fremdverstümmelung* [Mutilation of the Other], created in the context of the planned opera *Freax*, refers to his collaboration with performers with physical or cognitive disabilities and addresses their visibility within the art industry. The fragmented reenactments of Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) turn into critical questioning of norms, bodies, and community.

In the installation, Schlingensiefel's central themes further take shape: the dissolution of the opera myth, the evanescence of the images, the work on and with bodies beyond normative order—and the question of how art can open up spaces that irritate, yet also connect.

Freakstars 3000 (2002)

Freakstars 3000 is a parody of a TV casting show—a production with Achim von Paczensky, Irm Hermann, Helga von Paczensky, Mario Garzaner, Kerstin Grassmann, Werner Brecht, Horst Gelloneck, Axel Silber, Brigitte Kausch-Kuhlbrodt, Susanne Bredehöft, as well as the inhabitants of the Tiele Winckler House in Berlin-Lichtenrade. The six-episodes series for Viva/Viva Plus stages a fictional talent competition, relentlessly exposing the mechanisms of TV shows such as *Pop Idol*.

Schlingensiefel undermines the aesthetics of casting realities by deliberately involving people with cognitive disabilities in the creative process and handing the stage over to them. Between loud entertainment, documentary openness, and calculated provocation, an experimental counter-concept to commercial television emerges. *Freakstars 3000* raises fundamental questions regarding



normality, visibility, and participation while simultaneously reducing the exploitive logic of reality TV to the point of absurdity. The protagonists confront the audience with an uncomfortable yet also self-empowering form of presence—a radical visualization of difference that exemplarily crystallizes Schlingensiefel's criticism of standardization in society.

Hamlet – This Is Your Family/Nazi Line (2001)

In *Hamlet – This Is Your Family*, Christoph Schlingensiefel confronts Shakespeare's tragedy with the debate at the time on how to deal with Neo-Nazis willing to exit the movement. Instead of anonymous relocation, which in his view merely produced displacement, Schlingensiefel demanded that those willing to exit directly confronted their own worldview—and consequently integrated them in his production for the Schauspielhaus Zurich. For the central "mousetrap" scene, he brought them onto the stage, thus creating a painful mirror of guilt, ideology, and public responsibility. The project was accompanied by provocative actions in the city, including a protest performance at the Zurich Bellevue and the publicly arranged arrival of the Neo-Nazis seeking to leave the movement at the train station. The production sparked a massive media response across Europe and was the subject of intense controversy. It opened up a space for reflection on representation, political radicalization, and their processing in society—a theater between intervention, risk, and the attempt to turn reality itself into a stage.

Please Love Austria – First Austrian Coalition Week (2000)

With *Please Love Austria*, Christoph Schlingensiefel realized one of the most controversial art interventions in recent Austrian history within the context of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen). In a container on Heldenplatz, he let "asylum seekers" live under constant camera surveillance; every day, the audience was able to "deport" two persons via online vote. The intervention was a direct response to the right-wing populist FPÖ joining the government under Jörg Haider. It combined strategies of the then-new reality TV formats—most notably *Big Brother*—with the real mechanisms of political exclusion.

Between art installation, media spectacle, and political intervention, a painful mirror for a polarized debate on integration and identity was created. Schlingensiefel literally dragged the aggressive slogans of the tabloid press—for example "Foreigners out!"—into the public space and confronted Austria with its own projections and fears.

Chance 2000 – Partei der letzten Chance [Chance 2000 – Party of the Last Chance] (1998)

With *Chance 2000*, Christoph Schlingensiefel founded a party that radically intertwined art, activism, and democratic participation. Under the motto "Failing as a Chance," the party provided a platform for those who are barely represented in the political system: the unemployed, the marginalized, and non-voters. Schlingensiefel staged the project as an open experiment—with circus tents, spontaneous candidacies under the name of "Chance Müller," and spectacular interventions such as the symbolic "flooding" of Helmut Kohl's



holiday home at Lake Wolfgang by six million unemployed people. Against the backdrop of the German federal elections in 1998 and a politically polarized Germany, *Chance 2000* turned into a political “action theater” that received national attention. Elfriede Jelinek, a close artistic ally of Schlingensiefel, contributed a manifesto to the intervention and also remained a central collaborator for him in later projects.

Despite visibility in the media, prominent supporters, and numerous public appearances, the success in the elections was marginal. Yet this is precisely where the project’s significance lies: *Chance 2000* became a unique example of artistic activism in the political arena—an attempt to redefine democratic participation, somewhere between happening and realpolitik, protest, and game. Schlingensiefel celebrated the “failure” as a performative triumph.



Press Conference

Tuesday, 12.5.2026, 10 am

Opening

Tuesday, 12.5.2026, 7 pm

Free admission to the exhibition opening

Exhibition Venue

MAK Exhibition Hall (Upper Floor)

MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna

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Exhibition Dates

13.5.–13.9.2026

Opening Hours

Tue 10 am–9 pm, Wed to Sun 10 am–6 pm

Guest Curator

Raphael Gygax in collaboration with Aino Laberenz, Christoph Schlingensief estate

Assistant Curator

Max Appel-Palma

Supporting Program for the Exhibition

continuously updated at [MAK.at/christophschlingensief](https://mak.at/christophschlingensief)

MAK Admission

€ 19/18*

reduced € 15.50/14.50*

every Tuesday 6–9 pm: admission € 9.50/8.50*

free admission for children and teens under the age of 19

* Online ticket price

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