

His gaze is steady. "But it is the most intensive."

The actionists were prepared to act illegally to push their art and garner a reputation. Nitsch was repeatedly arrested for flouting Austrian indecency laws and jailed for the explicit nature of his performances — in one instance for a collage that featured a used menstrual pad, which feels a bit old-hat now (unlike his actions, which have maintained their astonishing power).

He remembers being sent down while clutching a copy of Jung's *Psychology of the Unconscious*: "This nice old prison guard saw that and thought I was a member of a cult," says Nitsch, who was brought up in the Catholic tradition but is interested in all religions, particularly Buddhism (with a sprinkling of the existentialist musings of Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche).

Jung was in Vienna, by then an old man, when Nitsch was developing the basics of his actions. "I was clever enough not to show him but he was a great influence on my early work." Jung's notion of the spiral as a cosmic force, symbolic of a letting-go, a surrender and release, dovetails with Nitsch's use of repetition. "My philosophy is that I believe everything is coming again. It is like in nature, the seasons. Death, resurrection, stars, moons, suns, the coming and going ... I am afraid of death but I know I am coming back, in everything that is out there."

Another pause. "Maybe the flight to Australia will kill me," he says, eyes twinkling.



Nitsch was six when his father died in the war. An only child, he was raised in Vienna by his mother, who had relatives in the village next to the castle; as a young teenager he used to burn about the surrounding fields on a motorbike, sometimes zooming all the way to Bavaria. Aged 17 he attended a concert of Mozart's late symphonies conducted by the 20th-century maestro Karl Böhm, which piqued a lifelong passion for classical music and opera. He studied graphic design, then got a job as a commercial artist at Vienna's technical museum while privately pursuing an interest in expressionism and religious figurative art.

His painting actions in 1960 marked the beginning of the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries. There were performances involving ecstatic screaming ("extreme arousal, the scream of death, pain and lust"), his so-called "abreaction plays", which he's thinking of reviving for his six-day 80th-birthday celebration/action at Prinzendorf next year. You could just use the peacocks, I say (he keeps 15 of them), and he laughs good-naturedly.

Nitsch's first wife was a schoolteacher who, while initially supportive, handing out leaflets to drum up publicity for his actions, left him when the controversy affected her status at work. He had received a commuted jail sentence and had left Austria to live in America and then Germany for a decade (1968-78) when he met his second wife, Beate, a child psychologist. The couple had planned on buying a house in



Hermann Nitsch

INTERPRETATIONS THAT PEOPLE MAKE OF MY WORK ARE MOSTLY GOOD BUT SOMETIMES STUPID

HERMANN NITSCH

Germany after Beate was left an inheritance, but on a visit to Nitsch's relatives in Prinzendorf they learned the castle was for sale.

Additional money was borrowed from friends, and for 18 months Beate negotiated with the owners (the Catholic Church, which was not happy on discovering the identity of Beate's husband), and the castle was theirs. For a while they used it as a holiday home, and had planned on turning it into an orphanage when, in 1977, Beate was killed in a car accident.



We eat lunch in the castle's downstairs kitchen, joined by two of Nitsch's staff and the sharp-witted, Romanian-born Rita, whom he met in 1986. She came to visit a friend employed by Nitsch, and the pair married just before the 1988 Sydney Biennale. One of the two small dogs (rescued animals from Romania) has its paws on Nitsch's lap and is gazing at his bowl of soup, drops of which have caught in Nitsch's beard. He pats the dog's head as we talk about his work as a set designer for operas including Philip Glass's *Satyagraha*, and the operatic nature of his Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries.

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What the critic says ...



Christopher Allen

Human beings can behave in strange ways in crowds. In most cases, as with commuters jostling in cramped streets, they are just a throng in which individuality is crushed. But sometimes, especially when they have come together for the same cause, a metamorphosis takes place and the crowd suddenly coheres into an organic whole: it turns into a mob, and the moral judgment of individuals disappears in the new and collective hysteria.

The old-fashioned kind of mob riots in the streets, loots shops and lynches its hapless scapegoats. In the contemporary world it is the digital mob with its now familiar moral outrage that gathers and whips itself into a frenzy of indignation on Twitter or Facebook.

Its latest victim is Hermann Nitsch, whose extreme performance events, evoking death, sexuality and sacrifice, have been controversial for decades.

But unappealing as the Twitter activists may be, the aesthetic and moral value of Nitsch's work remains questionable. His opponents claim an event involving ritual killing "trivialises the slaughter of animals for human usage". This is clearly nonsense.

What trivialises the slaughter is that it is done in silence and invisibly, and that sensitive souls buy their fillet steak neatly packaged in taut plastic wrap, so that they can almost forget it is part of an animal.

But it is also implausible to recast Nitsch as an animal liberation activist.

His real concern is to re-enact a kind of archaic ritual in which participants are ecstatically connected to the mysteries of life and death.

He is thinking of something like the ancient sacrifices to the Anatolian mother goddess Cybele, where the priest would apparently stand under the platform on which a bull was slaughtered and be drenched in its hot blood — as though assimilating the very principle of life in the moment that it leaves the body of the victim.

The trouble is that Nitsch's pseudo-sacrificial events lack cultural and religious context. Neither he nor his performers share the beliefs of the eunuch priests or the awed votaries of the mother goddess.

In today's world, such performances become gratuitous spectacles, sensational experiences appealing to an audience starved of belief and yearning for a feeling of lost connectedness.

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