

# PORTRAIT 94

German artist Bea Schlingelhoff confronts the art world's self-legitimation by pulling up the floorboards hiding its many wicked inheritances. Across her works, she forgoes a distinct stylistic identity, all the better to adapt and riposte to specific sites of attack, breaking from the dismantling impulse of institutional critique with forms of cooperative exchange meant, instead, to repair. *By Harry Burke*

# BEA SCHLINGELHOFF

# ALLE TAGE SABOTAGE

Courtesy: the artist and Kunstverein München e.V. Photo: Constanza Meléndez



View of "No River to Cross," Kunstverein München, 2021

A few years ago, the artist Bea Schlingelhoff and I were in Arles for the opening of a museum. A mutual friend was unveiling a commission on its roof, and the opening coincided with his birthday, which we'd both joined to celebrate. Amid the festivities, we hatched a plan to hike to a shopping center on the ancient French city's edge to gather supplies for stick-and-poke tattoos, and that night, we inked each other.

I share this anecdote in part out of fondness for the dialogue that has blossomed between us since. But more to the point, I believe it illustrates something of the artist's method and convictions. Over the last decade, Schlingelhoff's work has gained acclaim for its militant mistrust of art's institutions and markets. Yet, while testing norms, her practice also searches for alternative forms of reciprocity and exchange, using diverse means to stretch the language of institutional critique and explore what feminist theorists describe as the "reparative turn."

imagining collaborations between major fashion designers and the small, noncommercial venue: *Yohji Yamamoto for New Jersey*, *Marni for New Jersey*, *Tierry Mugler for New Jersey*, etc. The work anticipates the increasing commingling of mainstream and alternative idioms in 2010s art and fashion: The creative agency Torso's extravagant art direction for Mugler, for instance, epitomizes this trend (as co-founders of New York-based collective DIS, David Toro and Solomon Chase of Torso collaborated with a number of artists from the New Jersey milieu), while Anne Imhof, who showed at the same artist-run space in 2013, has become synonymous with Demna's Balenciaga. Installed over a window in Schlingelhoff's exhibition was a series of archival *Vogue* advertisements, which, all portraits of women, emphasized the gendered substructure of luxury consumerism.

Schlingelhoff's practice follows a rich legacy of left-wing critique in art. As literary theorist Rita Felski explains in *The Limits of Critique*

## Museum vitrines are not inert frames, but active agents in the continuation of colonial logics.

Born in Germany in 1971, Schlingelhoff relocated to Los Angeles in the late 1990s, where she studied at CalArts under the tutelage of Michael Asher. In 2001, she moved to New York to join the Whitney Independent Study Program, in a cohort with Oscar Tuazon, Carissa Rodriguez, and Gardar Eide Einarsson. Her work at the time allied a Situationist International sensibility with an alter-globalist spirit; in punky silkscreen prints wheatpasted around Brooklyn, she probed the contradictions of a city that, in the aftermath of 9/11, was gentrifying at an extraordinary pace.

After a stint teaching art in the Lower East Side, Schlingelhoff took up a position at Zurich's University of the Arts, where she works to this day. The artist's pedagogical imprint is immense – two waves, now, of emerging Swiss artists have thrived under her mentorship. Her first European solo show, titled "The Left Is Too Right" (2012), was held at New Jersey, an artist-run space in Basel. The minimal installation featured a sequence of pithy phrases, typeset on the gallery's walls,

(2015), 20th-century critique was driven by what Paul Ricoeur famously identified as the "hermeneutics of suspicion." This distinctly modern style of interpretation – think Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, and, later, the Frankfurt School – sets out to expose "the lies and illusions of consciousness" and to root out the hidden, real meaning of culture. In the field of art, it is exemplified by the reflexive venom of institutional critique. Since the revolutionary 1960s, conceptual artists have attacked the authority of the museums and galleries that exhibit their work, taking aim at the ideologies and power structures that underlie art's circulation and display. While Asher himself was suspicious of the label, his work is typical of this lineage: In a one-person show at Claire S. Copley Gallery, Los Angeles, in 1974, the artist removed an internal, freestanding wall, revealing the dealer's office. This crystal-clear gesture presented the administrative operations of the gallery as tantamount to the work itself, pointing the viewer's eye to the economic interests that shape contemporary art.

Schlingelhoff's 2019 exhibition at the Museum des Landes Glarus Freulerpalast in Näfels, dually titled "PAX/Piece of Glass," indicates her debt to this tradition. The museum, which is sited in a building constructed by Swiss military officer Kaspar Freuler (1595–1651) with funds amassed from his wartime dealings, houses a permanent display of weapons and military paraphernalia next to its temporary galleries. For the duration of this exhibition, Schlingelhoff removed the Plexiglas from the vitrines that hold this collection and, in her adjacent rooms, arranged the plastic cases and sheets either directly on the floor or stacked, like makeshift sculptures, on wooden supports.

In removing a wall, Asher's canonical work speaks to the value of transparency. Schlingelhoff's exhibition queried this value – a transparent material was removed and repositioned as an opaque, minimalist object. As Ariella Aisha Azoulay outlines in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), imperial plunder touches almost every aspect of

operations of a given institution. Schlingelhoff's solo exhibition "No River to Cross," which opened at the Kunstverein München in September 2021, attests to the merit of this approach. The infamous "Entartete Kunst" (Degenerate Art) exhibition of 1937, initiated by painter Adolf Ziegler, propagandist Joseph Goebbels, and other Nationalist Socialist politicians to deride modernist aesthetics, was partially held in the building that now houses the Kunstverein. Although the association only moved to these premises in 1953, Schlingelhoff learned while doing research in its archives that its charter had been amended in 1936 to state that "non-Aryans cannot become members of the association." While all German art institutions had to comply from 1933 onward with the Nazi policy of *Gleichschaltung* (forced assimilation), the Kunstverein's racist mandate was instigated and enforced by its own director, Erwin Pixis, only to be removed after the war.

Another literary scholar to reflect on the "hermeneutics of suspicion," Eve Kosofsky

## Reparative reading seeks to recuperate something good from even "bad" objects.

modern art and culture, something starkly evident in the stolen artifacts on view in so many museums. Yet it is not simply the act of conquest that provides art's imperial subtext – the museum itself is a site and technology of imperialism. Vitrines, with their pretenses to neutrality and transparency, are vital in this regard: When displayed in museums, objects are cut from the communities to which they belong and resituated, as Azoulay makes clear, in the extractive value system of the market; vitrines, which both direct and deflect the viewer's gaze, maintain this divide. Dust and scratches, visible on Schlingelhoff's spotlighted Plexiglass panels, served as visual reminders that display cases are not inert frames, but active agents in the continuation of colonial logics.

In the breadth of its focus, Schlingelhoff's work aligns with what art historian and curator Miwon Kwon identifies as a recent tendency among practitioners of institutional critique, articulated since the 1990s by the likes of Renée Green, Mark Dion, and Fred Wilson, to take aim at a political or historical discourse as much as at the internal

Sedgwick, published an influential article in 2003 (wickedly titled "You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You") that explores the distinction between "paranoid reading" and "reparative reading." "Paranoid reading" is the author's gloss on the suspicious mode: an anxious, academic tendency characterized by distance, distrust, and the anticipation of a certain displeasure with a text. Reparative reading, conversely, is rooted in an ethics of love and seeks to recuperate something good from even "bad" objects. It's a queer sensibility that looks for, in theologian Linn Tonstad's words, "a move at the heart of many queer temporalities – 'what might have happened but didn't.'"

In "No River to Cross," Schlingelhoff balanced these two strategies. The centerpiece of the exhibition was a letter, drafted by the artist and edited and co-signed by the Kunstverein's director and curator, respectively Maurin Dietrich and Gloria Hasnay, that apologized for the association's complicity with the Nazis:

Yohji Yamamoto for New Jersey Bless for New Jersey  
legrino for New Jersey Gucci for New Jersey M  
Margiela for New Jersey Valentino for New Jersey  
for New Jersey Givenchy for New Jersey Drie  
for New Jersey Bally for New Jersey Krink for  
A.P.C. for New Jersey Louis Vuitton for New Jersey  
for New Jersey Marni for New Jersey Hugo B  
New Jersey Acne for New Jersey Aston Martin for  
Cartier for New Jersey Barbour for New Jersey  
Ceremony for New Jersey Thierry Mugler for

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View of "The Left Is Too Right," 2012, New Jersey, Basel

## A mess can be a “queer map” to a place beyond unaccommodating institutions.

“We believe [that] accountability and restorative justice, rooted in a request for forgiveness, are only initial steps towards reconciliation and healing, and yet that these steps are necessary in becoming an anti-racist venue for art and an anti-racist institution.”

Furthermore, Schlingelhoff pushed to add a new preamble to the Kunstverein’s constitution that would reiterate this apology and commit to non-discrimination and equality going forward. After several months of discussion, the artist’s proposal passed a majority vote at a member’s assembly only days before the exhibition opened. (The amendment was subsequently submitted for review by the responsible registry court, whose decision is expected this coming summer.)

The letter and preamble were printed, framed, and presented in the gallery in lieu of a vinyl wall text, and made available on the institution’s website for free download and adaptation by other Kunstvereins. The remainder of the floorplan was spare, drawing the eye toward areas of darkened paint on the exhibition space’s sage-green walls, which outlined to scale where paintings were positioned during “Degenerate Art.” The works in the 1937 display were hung in intentionally shoddy and unflattering ways, which Schlingelhoff’s ivy monochrome translated into a cluttered, eerie pattern. The haunting installation recalled the stripping of approximately seventeen thousand works of art from over one hundred museums by the Nazi regime. In its dramatic interplay of absence and presence, it adverted to fascism’s lingering shadow in the present.

The queer tenor of Sedgwick’s essay, written in the wake of the devastating losses of the AIDS crisis in the US in the 1980s and 90s, is not ancillary to Schlingelhoff’s address of the Kunstverein München’s complex history. As well as confiscating modern art, the Nazis burned books – their first attack was on volumes looted from the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute for Sexual Science), a Berlin research and consultation center that advocated for, among other things,

women’s emancipation and the rights of LGBT+ people. Today, in the US, the UK, Italy, and other liberal democracies, assaults on abortion rights and trans people are cornerstones of a resurgent fascism, with support for these policies growing, tacitly and terrifyingly, even among political centrists. Forging a distinction between paranoid and reparative reading practices is not simply an academic matter, as Sedgwick emphasizes, but an urgent response to a radicalized right-wing that has unmasked itself in broad daylight.

Two of Schlingelhoff’s ongoing projects further her commitment to a reparative aesthetics. Since 2017, the artist has designed a string of jagged, bold typefaces that honor women freedom fighters, four of which – named after and dedicated to Anne-Marie Im Hof-Piguet, Elise Hampel, Olga Oppenheimer, and Marianne Baum, who each resisted the Nazis – were used in “No River to Cross.” Likewise in 2017, the artist began the series “soft mime win” (until 2020 known as “wimminfesto”), which sits somewhere between a participatory artwork and a nonbinding contract. In each iteration, Schlingelhoff responds to the invitation to exhibit at a given art space by sharing, discussing, and editing with the curatorial and directorial staff a two-page document containing anti-misogynist credos such as: “Whenever asked to recommend, nominate, or employ artists, we will name, hire, and recruit women of any race, socioeconomic grouping, sexuality, age group, and ability” and, more philosophically, “We recognize separatist action as a strategy, not an ideology.” The document, which is signed if all parties agree to its terms, is framed and displayed for the duration of the artist’s show.

These endeavors underscore Schlingelhoff’s deep-rooted feminism. In addition, in their open and inquisitive nature, they highlight a concern that has guided the artist’s practice since the early show at New Jersey: the obligation, imposed by the market, for artists to master the logic and demands of branding, which structures not just the way artists market their identity, but the legibility and consistency of artworks – after all, artists who embrace seriality and repetition tend to sell. Even

institutional critique gives way to this pressure: Daniel Buren’s legendary striped installations, produced *in situ* in the fiery aftermath of May 1968 to examine institutional architectural norms, are today iconic, like the Burberry check or Louis Vuitton’s interlocking monogram.

It’s to Schlingelhoff’s credit that her shows, though informed by unwavering principles and, more often than not, a low-budget sensibility, have been distinctly dissimilar from one another. Typically based upon months of conversation (including for proposals that, due to internal institutional politics, never get off the ground), each of her works is probative and dialogic which, beyond standing as a rejection of savvy branding, speaks

to the intricacies of repair. Such is signaled by the many scribbled edits on the artist’s “soft mime win” documents, but the point tracks formally, too: Her typefaces, after all, eschew the sleek professionalism of Helvetica. A notable influence on Schlingelhoff’s thinking, the feminist critic Sara Ahmed praises the messiness of complaints, and stresses that a mess can be a “queer map” to a place beyond unaccommodating institutions. In a similar manner, projects like “soft mime win” or “PAX/Piece of Glass” – what idiosyncratic, excellent titles! – point beyond patriarchal conventions and even beyond patrilineal traditions of critique.

The phrase that Bea marked on my shoulder that memorable night was *alle tage sabotage*,

Courtesy: the artist and SCHLOSS, Oslo. Photo: Vegard Kleven



*Women against Hitler*, 45 inkjet prints framed, DIN A4, 2017  
Installation view, SCHLOSS, Oslo (detail)



View of "Piece of Glass," Museum des Landes Glarus Freulerpalast, Näfels, 2019



Photos: Gunnar Meier



Views of "PAX," Museum des Landes Glarus Freulerpalast, Näfels, 2019

an imperfect rhyme that translates to “every day sabotage.” To my mind, an apt fashion analogy for Schlingelhoff’s art is a Vivienne Westwood shirt, emblazoned with one of the late designer’s spiky, seditious dictums, like the word *DESTROY* cast over a bold red Nazi swastika, or *BE REASONABLE, DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE*. Whereas Westwood’s shirts are taken off at the end of the day, my tattoo

is a mischievous gift that I’m stuck with the task of living up to. It’s offered me a compelling frame for understanding Schlingelhoff’s work. More than an exercise in deconstruction, the artist’s practice models an ethics of anti-fascist, anti-misogynist entanglement. It invites a project of engaging institutions – and each other – on revised terms, in the spirit not of dismantling, but of creating anew.



*Sand*, 2022, video installation for 7 screens, ca. 26 min.(each), black & white, mute, in loop

Courtesy: FCAC Geneva. Photo: Serge Fruehauf

*BEASCHLINGELHOFF* (\*1971, Waiblingen, Germany) is an artist living in Switzerland. Recent solo shows took place at *Künstlerhaus Stuttgart* (2022); *Kunstverein München* (2021); *Kunsthaus Glarus im Freuler Palast, Näfels* (Switzerland); *Arcadia Missa, London* (both 2019). Recent group shows include “*The Ocean*,” *Bergen Kunstball*; “*Im Volksgarten*,” *Kunsthaus Glarus* (both 2020); “*Maskulinitäten*,” *Bonner Kunstverein* (Bonn), *Kölnischen Kunstverein* (Cologne), *Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen* (Düsseldorf) (2019). Her upcoming solo show at *n.b.k. Berlin* will open on 12 September 2023.

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Museum für Fotokopie  
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