

### HERMANN NITSCH: AN INTENSE EXISTENCE



**Hermann Nitsch. Born 1938 in Vienna. Action artist (paints with blood and carcasses). Mythologist. Philosopher. Composer. Grandmaster of Existentialism. Sworn enemy to animal rights diva Brigitte Bardot. Highly decorated combat veteran of the “Viennese Actionism” (Golden Medal of Honor - City of Vienna, 2005; Grand Austrian State Prize for Visual Arts, 2005). And still in action.**

We met Nitsch at his castle-residence in the immediate hinterland of Vienna to talk about his life’s work in art: “The Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries” and the best places in Vienna to get royally drunk.





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## **Hermann Nitsch, how are you?**

I'm hungover. I've been in a casino yesterday. It was very macabre. A Dostojevski scenery. The gamblers appeared to be possessed. Real psychopaths. I didn't feel comfortable at first. Then I started to drink and felt better immediately. I didn't gamble that night.

## **You do gamble with the feelings of your critics sometimes, among them animal rights diva Brigitte Bardot. Your art is polarising. Is the element of provocation in your body of work based on an intention or do we have to talk about an inevitable collateral damage?**

I never wanted to provoke. I desired intensity. I was aware that people are going to get upset. There are artists who calculate scandals at the drawing board. I never did that. My intention was always to implement intense art and intense theatre. Greek tragedy always inspired me, plot and speech come to completion.

## **Your performance-art requires an intense concentration. The "Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries" is an experience of the senses. The theme: existence. The 'Sein' and the becoming aware of the 'Sein'. Your theatre guides the audience through disgust (blood rituals, sacrifices, crucifixion, evisceration, excess and frenzy) towards a catharsis - according to Aristotle a spiritual purification as impact of the tragedy; by definition of psychology a purification obtained by the experience of inner conflicts and suppressed emotions, most notably aggressions - followed by a resurrection. How would you define the intention and the impact of the "Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries"? What role does our sensory perception play in it?**

The first step towards the realisation of my theatre is my work as a painter. The painter in front of a canvas arouses himself through the substance of paint. He dives into a frenzy and his intense sensuous experience is a theatrical process. The second step is the staging of real incidences. This is the crucial new aspect in my theatre. The painter leaves the canvas, he uses blood, carcasses, nude humans. You can experience a real act through all five senses. The artist who stages real incidences is creating a 'Gesamtkunstwerk'. For this the shape is vital. In art the shape is necessary - the shape is a process of rising awareness. You can find excessive and cruel scenes over and over again. In theatre, the excessive is the cruel necessary. Catharsis always emerges, because the people are confronted with the tragic.



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**Depth-psychology has a pivotal meaning within the “Theater of Orgies and Mysteries”. In “Totem und Tabu” Freud talks about the collective-psyche and explains myths as collective-dreams of humanity, in which the central wishes, needs and longings take shape. The Unconscious is replaced by the Conscious. Psycho-analysis sheds light onto the dream and its mechanisms.**

Depth-psychology creates the premise for my theatre. Us humans are equipped with much more energy than we can utilise. Religions, politics and a phoney sense of morals constrain our energy. My theatre is doing the opposite. It's trying to reveal the repressed through sensory rituals. The repressed turns viewable and conscious. I create excesses which initiate purification.

**Friedrich Nietzsche talks about “regeneration and resurgence” (Also sprach Zarathustra). You once stated that “the eternal becoming of creation expresses itself in a fluctuation of construction and demolition. The excess resembles profound life.”**

I always looked closely at philosophy. Schopenhauer influenced me a lot. In the beginning Asian philosophy and mysticism had my attention. I discovered Nietzsche when I was twenty years old and it changed my worldview. I developed an intense life-affirmation. I believe that my work comes from the urge to show everything there is. Orgiastic. Suffering. Joy. And Excess. Total life-affirmation. Organism, blood and warmth are part of it. I want to depict life deeper. I want to infiltrate existence, life and creation. My theatre should be a school of feeling and perception. The act of perceiving until excess, until orgiastic, until purification. I truly believe in eternal recurrence. I believe in the event of creation witness that the event of existence always plays out between death and resurrection.

## **A cycle. The Dionysus-principal?**

Construction and demolition. Death and resurrection happen simultaneously - over and over again. The principal of nature. In the shape of an animal Dionysus gets ripped apart and reappears as a vegetation in the following spring. A cycle. In this particular sense Dionysus and the Crucified are similar. The myth answers to our needs. The principal of death and resurrection plays a central role in most religions. The tremendous energies, which get suppressed, are converted into life. Catharsis. I want to transform the suppressed into the excessive, into beautiful life.





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## **A celebration of life.**

That's the way I see it. The 'six-day-play' and my performances are existential celebrations. A glorification of existence and creation.

## **What relevance does music, which consists of noise-orchestra and screaming choir, have in your theatre?**

My theatre tries to detach itself from speech. I think that music has its origin within the scream. In the abreaction. The outcry, the anguished cry, the death cry and the cry of lust. I try to sublimate my music to an organ-sound. Everything is audible - the excessive scream, the departure of speech, the sublimation of sounds. Also my music knows the meditative calmness of an adagio. The tranquility of a spangled sky. The quiet pathways of the stars should be savoured and the cosmos, which loses itself in the eternal, should be explored. The music of my 'Gesamtkunstwerk' expresses life-affirming existence-mysticism. That's the court for my music.

– Oliver Schlieth

