

DIRECTIONS

# Rudolf Schwarzkogler

November 7, 1996–January 20, 1997



*Third Action*, 1965. Photograph by Ludwig Hoffenreich. (no. 18)

**I**N THE 1960s MANY ARTISTS IN Europe and the United States began to think of paintings as relics or souvenirs of artists' actions. Viewing the production of them as the making of objects to be bought and sold, artists shifted their focus away from painting to performances or actions themselves as works of art. Such performances provided an arena for psychological exploration in which the artist's body was often used as an expressive tool and an abstract sculptural material. In Vienna, Austria, these interests were manifested in Actionism, the movement with which Rudolf Schwarzkogler (1940–1969) was associated.

While the other Actionists (Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus, and Otto Mühl) produced public spectacles, Schwarzkogler conceived of his work in private and orchestrated the Actions solely for the camera. The resulting photographs are notable for their striking formal compositions, clinical atmosphere, and enigmatic symbolism. Resisting definitive interpretation, these haunting pictures hint ambiguously at pain and healing, sacrifice and redemption, and physical vulnerability as a metaphor for suffering.

Schwarzkogler's first Action, *Hochzeit* (Wedding), took place in the apartment of his friend and fellow artist Heinz Cibulka in February 1965. The participants were Schwarzkogler himself (wearing a dark suit and tie), Cibulka, and Anni Brus (Günter Brus's wife). The Action was recorded simultaneously by three photographers: Walter Kindler, who photographed in color and black and white, and Siegfried Klein (also known as Kasaq) and Ludwig Hoffenreich, both of whom photographed in black and white. Although the use of color and the narrative quality of its second part (in which Schwarzkogler rips the

clothes of and pours paint over the hidden "bride") are atypical of Schwarzkogler's Actions, the first half of *Hochzeit* introduces the tabletop format and images of dead fish and chickens, which, together with other objects, would become recurrent ritualistic and symbolic motifs in Schwarzkogler's work. Some of the few examples of Schwarzkogler's photographic editing are from that early Action. Although prints of Kindler's color photographs (nos. 1–5) were later published, Schwarzkogler worked mostly from Hoffenreich's black-and-white prints (nos. 6–9), which he cropped quite closely, concentrating on the iconic quality of individual images.

Hoffenreich photographed Schwarzkogler's second and third Actions in the summer of 1965, again in Cibulka's apartment. In these Actions, Schwarzkogler introduced other elements of his visual repertoire: razor



*Third Action*, 1965. Photograph by Ludwig Hoffenreich. (no. 19)



blades, which had figured in his early paintings, gauze bandages, and the syringes, tubes, stethoscope, and other medical paraphernalia that had once belonged to his father. (Schwarzkogler's father, a physician, had committed suicide in 1943 after his legs were amputated as a result of injuries received in World War II. Schwarzkogler's mother had been a cosmetician, and Schwarzkogler's use of makeup and nail polish in his work is conspicuous.)<sup>1</sup>

In the second Action, Schwarzkogler (again in dark suit and white shirt) holds a fish, which he cuts open, eviscerates, and later wraps in bandages (nos. 10–12). In the second part of the Action, Cibulka, blindfolded and bandaged, appears with a fish tied to his chest (no. 13) or is attached by cables to various medicinal-looking bottles and to a ball wrapped in white gauze. The images of blindness and bondage are redolent with associations, such as helplessness, passivity, the refusal to see, and the terrible power of blind justice. In Freudian terms blindness is also associated with fear of castration; in a third set of sequences, Cibulka, naked, kneels behind the ball with a large fish attached to his body, its mouth successively propped open with razor blades and stuffed with bandages (no. 14).<sup>2</sup>

While these photographs explore disturbing subjects, Schwarzkogler also conceived them to be beautiful. One can consider in his work, for example, the elegant, Brancusi-like lines of the thighs and torso (no. 14), as well as his choice of Cibulka as a model. Nitsch and Schwarzkogler regarded Cibulka, with his classically beautiful, slim body, as an ideal type.

Cibulka is the sole model in the third Action. His torso is bared and his head bandaged, covered with tubes, or connected by them to a ball. His face is

caked with white makeup. In some of the pictures (nos. 15 and 16) the photographer's shoe, visible in the contact prints, has been cropped out, obliterating any orienting sense of direction. Prints of the images have been shown with the torso positioned horizontally (correct according to the contact sheet) or vertically. In other sequences, Cibulka is photographed standing naked with clenched fists and with a large black fish strapped to his back (no. 20); lying down, his body bandaged and painted with white stripes (no. 21); sitting on the ball with a fish attached to his body, its mouth held open with razor blades (no. 22); standing behind a black mirror set on a tabletop, a dark tube on his left arm echoing the white painted stripes seen in number 21; seated like a buddha and wrapped in bandages (no. 25); lying with his head on the black mirror (no. 26, marked by Schwarzkogler and possibly intended by him for a publication); and lying on his side, his body bandaged and attached to tubes, in a series of fetal but graceful positions (nos. 27–29). A drawing by Schwarzkogler is visible in number 28.

Schwarzkogler's fourth Action also took place in the summer of 1965 in Cibulka's apartment. Cibulka was the model, but the photographer was Cibulka's then-wife, Franziska Krammel-Högler. In many images from this series, only Cibulka's head (his face and hair greased) is shown. He is blindfolded, gagged, or tied with cable (nos. 30 and 31). Sometimes the hand of a woman (Edith Adam, Schwarzkogler's companion) with dark nail polish appears, making gestures that might be construed as expressions of compassion.

Schwarzkogler is the performer in his sixth and final Action recorded early in 1966 in his apartment. The photographer is Michael Epp.



Bandaged from head to toe like a ghostly mummy, Schwarzkogler appears with the now-familiar white chickens, tubes, medicine bottles, stethoscope, white ball, and black mirror (nos. 34–36). The photographs end in a sequence of meditations on the fragile, limp bodies of the white chickens with lightbulbs inserted in their stomachs (no. 37).

Schwarzkogler completed no further Actions after 1966. His death in 1969 brought his career to an abrupt and tragic end. Three years later, in 1972, a selection of photographs from his third Action were included in "Documenta," the well-known international exhibition regularly held in Kassel, Germany. In a frequently cited article published shortly after "Documenta," the critic Robert Hughes lamented the abandonment of the art object in much contemporary art, which, he felt, left artists with "nowhere to go and nothing to say." It is within that context that the critic cited Schwarzkogler as an extreme example, erroneously reporting that the photographs in "Documenta" recorded Schwarzkogler in an act of self-mutilation from which he eventually died.<sup>3</sup>

Hughes's misinterpretation of the photographs, and the rapidity with which his erroneous account was repeated, is perhaps understandable in a climate in which contemporary artists (such as Vito Acconci and Chris Burden in the United States) sometimes injured themselves or courted physical danger. Hughes, perhaps accurately, also compared the phenomenon to Expressionism, a movement characterized by scholar Reinhold Heller as "an art deeply pessimistic yet desperately yearning for a faith in optimism."<sup>4</sup> That description would seem to apply to Schwarzkogler's work as well, for his Actions embody a belief in art as a means for personal and social redemption. Connected with that belief is an aesthetic purity manifested



*Fourth Action, 1965. Photograph by Franziska (Cibulka) Krammel-Högler. (no. 31)*

in Schwarzkogler's attempt to treat the human body as an abstraction, a composition of formal shapes. That detached, controlled use of the body and the idea of art as a residue of a performance — which together make his work seem so striking in its contemporaneity—resonate with many photography-based and performance- and body-oriented works by artists as diverse as Matthew Barney, Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, Charles Ray, Cindy Sherman, and Kiki Smith working today. Like many of these artists, Schwarzkogler was guided by a reductivist sensibility and a desire to explore what is generally repressed.

While Schwarzkogler's Actions resulted in some of the most compelling images to emerge from Austria in the 1960s, his role in the final appearance of many of the photographs is speculative. The extent to which his photographers influenced the look of the images is difficult to determine. Aside from the few that were printed in Schwarzkogler's



lifetime, there is little to document how he envisioned the final prints. Most of the photographs were printed after Schwarzkogler's death, and, except for a group in the Francesco Conz archive in Verona, were cropped and enlarged according to decisions made by Edith Adam, Hoffenreich, Brus, and Nitsch; they based their judgments on the few images Schwarzkogler had edited and their general knowledge of his work.<sup>5</sup>

However problematic their status as creations by Schwarzkogler, the photographs nonetheless preserve the images he conceived of in his Actions: bandaged figures, white cloth, animal bodies, and abstract geometric forms arrayed in great formal simplicity against a bare white background. Schwarzkogler's staged photographs, with their uneasy conjunctions of cold formalism and depictions of physical and emotional distress, remain unsettling, if beautiful, conundrums.

Phyllis Rosenzweig, Associate Curator

#### Notes

1. This and other biographical information about Schwarzkogler is from *A Conversation between Edith Adam and Wayne Baerwaldt about Rudolf Schwarzkogler*, unpublished video, produced by Francesco Conz, Verona, 1992; Eva Badura-Triska and Hubert Klocker, *Rudolf Schwarzkogler: Leben und*

*Werk* (Klagenfurt: Ritter, 1992) and Scott Watson and Kristine Stiles in *Rudolf Schwarzkogler* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery, 1993).

2. According to Badura-Triska and Klocker (p. 458), Schwarzkogler owned a copy of *Totem and Taboo* (1918), the classic study in which Freud describes the kinds of ritualistic ceremonies that many of the Actions by Nitsch and others resemble and hypothesizes their connection to a primal fratricide in which hatred and fear of the father are mingled with guilt and remorse reflected in the Oedipus myth. In many other essays, Freud discusses sadism, masochism, Eros, and the death wish, also elements of Schwarzkogler's images.

3. Robert Hughes, "The Decline and Fall of the Avant-Garde," *Time*, 18 December 1972, 111-12; reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Idea Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1973), 185-94. Hughes may have confused Schwarzkogler's work with that of Brus, who sometimes cut his skin in his Actions.

4. Reinhold Heller, "German and Austrian Expressionism: The Analogy," *Arts Magazine* 52, no. 10 (June 1978): 152.

5. For information on the various editions and portfolios see Badura-Triska and Klocker, 139-47, 158-60.



## BIOGRAPHY

Born November 13, 1940, in Vienna. Attended Graphische Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt (Pedagogical and Experimental Institute for Graphics), 1957–61. Served in Austrian army, 1962–63. Met Edith Adam, 1963. Worked as commercial artist, 1964. Completed six Actions, 1965–66. Fell or jumped from window and died, June 20, 1969.

## SELECTED RECENT EXHIBITIONS

1988: "Von der Aktionsmalerei zum Aktionismus, Wien 1960–1965/ From Action Painting to Actionism, Vienna 1960–1965," Museum Fridericianum, Kassel; and tour to Kunstmuseum Winterthur; Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh.

1989: "Der zertrümmerte Spiegel/The Shattered Mirror," Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna; Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

1992–94: "Rudolf Schwarzkogler: Leben und Werk," Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, Vienna; and tour to Národní Galerie, Prague; Musée national d'art moderne Centre Pompidou, Paris; Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt.

1993: "Rudolf Schwarzkogler," University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery, Vancouver.

1994: "Journey into an Altered State: Paul McCarthy, Rudolf Schwarzkogler," Austrian Cultural Institute, New York.

1995: "Identity and Alterity, Figures of the Body 1895/1995," Venice Biennale 46, Museo Correr, Venice.

1996: "Rudolf Schwarzkogler Aktions 1965–1966," Forum for Contemporary Art, Saint Louis.

## CHECKLIST

Except for nos. 1–5, all photographs are gelatin silver prints. Dimensions are in inches followed by centimeters. Abbreviations are provided to indicate photographs lent by Francesco Conz, Verona (FC), or Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna (MMK).

*Hochzeit* (Wedding), 1965: nos. 1–5. Color photographs by Walter Kindler, 23 3/4 x 19 3/4 (60 x 50), FC; no. 6. Collage by Rudolf Schwarzkogler, 9 1/2 x 12 1/2 (24 x 32), MMK;

no. 7. Contact prints by Ludwig Hoffenreich, marked by Schwarzkogler for cropping, 7 1/8 x 2 3/8 (18 x 6) overall. Hubert Klocker, Vienna; no. 8. Photograph by Ludwig Hoffenreich, 9 x 6 3/4 (23 x 17), Hubert Klocker, Vienna; no. 9. Photograph by Ludwig Hoffenreich, 8 1/4 x 6 3/4 (21.8 x 17), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, 1995.

*Second Action*, 1965, photographs by Ludwig Hoffenreich: no. 10. 15 1/4 x 11 1/2 (39.5 x 29), MMK; no. 11. 12 x 11 1/2 (30.5 x 29.5), MMK; no. 12. 7 x 9 1/2 (18 x 24), FC; no. 13. 13 1/2 x 13 1/2 (34.2 x 34.2), MMK; no. 14. 11 1/2 x 15 1/4 (29.5 x 39.5), MMK.

*Third Action*, 1965, photographs by Ludwig Hoffenreich: no. 15. 11 3/4 x 15 3/4 (29.5 x 39.5), MMK; no. 16. With Schwarzkogler's drawing along contour of shoulder, 5 1/2 x 6 1/2 (14 x 16.5), Alan R. Cravitz and Shashi Caudill; nos. 17–19. 9 1/2 x 7 (24 x 18) FC; no. 20. 17 3/4 x 14 (45 x 36), J. Hummel, Vienna; no. 21. 15 3/4 x 11 3/4 (39.5 x 29.5), MMK; no. 22. 2 1/4 x 2 1/4 (5.5 x 5.5), Alan R. Cravitz and Shashi Caudill; nos. 23–24. 15 3/4 x 11 3/4 (39.5 x 29.5), MMK; no. 25. 6 1/4 x 6 (15.5 x 15.2), Evi Geyer, Vienna; no. 26. 5 x 6 (12.5 x 15.5), Evi Geyer, Vienna; nos. 27–29. 15 1/2 x 11 3/4 (39.5 x 29.5), MMK.

*Fourth Action*, 1965, photographs by Franziska (Cibulka) Krammel-Högler: no. 30. 13 1/2 x 13 1/2 (34.2 x 34.2), MMK; nos. 31–32. approx. 14 x 11 (35 x 28), FC; no. 33. 13 1/2 x 13 1/2 (34.2 x 34.2), MMK.

*Sixth Action*, 1966, photographs by Michael Epp: no. 34. 25 1/2 x 19 3/4 (65 x 50), FC; no. 35. 13 1/2 x 13 1/2 (34.2 x 34.2), MMK; nos. 36–37. 15 1/4 x 11 1/2 (39.5 x 29.5), MMK.

All works illustrated are from the collection of Francesco Conz, Verona.

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