

## *Hermann Nitsch, an Artist With Guts, as Well as Blood, Dies at 83*

He was a founding father of a group of radical artists who used their bodies and other elements to upend art-making at the dawn of the 1960s.



By Penelope Green

Published April 23, 2022 Updated April 25, 2022

Hermann Nitsch, the notorious Austrian performance artist whose elaborate and grisly “actions,” as they were called, often involved slaughtered and disemboweled animals, blood, feces and viscera and evoked Christian and pagan rituals, died on Monday in Mistelbach, a town near his home in Lower Austria. He was 83.

His wife, Rita Nitsch, confirmed his death, in a hospital, but did not give the cause.

Mr. Nitsch was a founding father of the Viennese Actionists, a small group of radical artists who, starting in the 1960s, upended art-making, as many European and American artists were doing at the time, by throwing their bodies into the work, quite literally, and using all manner of materials and methods to question social norms, political systems and artistic tropes.

Joseph Beuys was cuddling a dead rabbit, and lecturing to it about art (in a later work, he and a coyote hung out at a Manhattan gallery). The Fluxus pranksters staged a mock Mass, among other Happenings, as they were known, with clergy in gorilla suits and a chorus of barking dogs. Yoko Ono invited an audience to slice off her clothes with a pair of scissors.

The action painting of the Abstract Expressionists had given way to just action — some mundane, like the New Zealand-born artist Billy Apple vacuuming the roof of his Chelsea apartment, and some just gross, like Vito Acconci masturbating for days in the Sonnabend Gallery in SoHo.

The Viennese, however, were more hard-core. Mr. Nitsch, along with Otto Muehl, Gunter Brus and Rudolf Schwarzkogler, enacted gruesome, blood-soaked performances. Often they mutilated themselves.

“Repulsed by war, resenting the continued reverberations of Nazism and rejecting the lionization of Modernist artists,” Michael Rush wrote in *The New York Times* in 2000, “the movement sought to insult the pretensions of art and society through brutal performances that unleashed unconscious impulses.”

Mr. Nitsch’s own actions — collectively known as the Orgies Mysteries Theater — were highly choreographed; they might include hundreds of participants, some naked and tied to crosses, others dressed in white priestly robes. Bulls and lambs were killed and dismembered. There were music and incantations and feasting. (Mr. Nitsch liked to point out that nothing was wasted, as the animals were cooked and eaten during the show. He was a nose-to-tail artist.) Everyone came away smeared in gore, which was the point.

“Sensual experience and living to one’s fullest are the basics of my theater,” he told *Artforum* magazine in 2018, adding: “Do I think art can save people? For sure. It saves them from being lukewarm.”

In Mr. Nitsch’s later work, only paint was used, but the effect was just as visceral: In one action, his 66th, he led a team of volunteers dressed in white garments as they hurled red paint on white canvases and then marched upon them barefoot.



Mr. Nitsch in 2008 at the Herman Nitsch Museum in Naples, Italy. His work, which reveled in blood and gore, could be hard to stomach. But he was a hero to generations of performance artists. Georg Hochmuth/EPA, via Shutterstock

His performances were often halted by the police; after a London show was shut down, his first wife divorced him. He was arrested on numerous occasions and served three short prison terms in Vienna, after which Austria banned his work for a time. He was once expelled from Italy for dismembering a sheep. At a performance in 1970 at the State University of New York at Binghamton (now Binghamton University), most of the student audience walked out. Some threw up. And the janitors who had to clean up after the event filed a protest saying that if he performed there again, they would refuse to do so.

Art critics tended to be simultaneously repulsed and unimpressed.

“You don’t need to be especially religious or fond of animals to be offended by the carnage in Mr. Nitsch’s art,” Roberta Smith wrote in *The New York Times* in a review of his first solo New York City show of paintings and photographs, in 1989. “What’s more offensive, at least artistically speaking, is the way the violence thinly disguises the work’s basic tameness and laziness.

“Despite his art’s often powerful beauty,” she continued, “there is ultimately a sense of extreme waste — of animal lives as well as artistic talent — that calls Mr. Nitsch’s undertaking into question.”

But history has been kinder to Mr. Nitsch. He has inspired generations of performance artists, who see him as a hero, the *eminence grise* (or rouge) of the discipline.

Young artists are eager to make pilgrimages to Prinzendorf Castle, his estate in Lower Austria, and his foundation in Vienna. Museums have courted him and acquired his work, which is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate in London, the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna and many other international institutions.

There is a Herman Nitsch Museum in Naples, Italy — the country that once shunned him. Curators have avidly pursued him, though there have been some hiccups: In 2015, Mexico City’s Museo Jumex canceled an exhibition of his paintings, saying that because the country was experiencing so much bloodshed — 43 college students had recently been murdered by a drug gang — Mr. Nitsch’s work might be too upsetting for its citizens.

After Mr. Nitsch’s death, Alexander Van der Bellen, the president of Austria, had this to say on Twitter:

“With expressive pictures and sensational campaigns, Hermann Nitsch has redefined the local art world. Austria mourns the loss of a fascinating painter and an impressive person. His work will live on, I’m sure of it.”

Hermann Gustav Nitsch was born in Vienna on Aug. 29, 1938. His father, Johan Nitsch, was an engineer who was killed fighting for the Germans in Russia during World War II; his mother, Helene (Dostal) Nitsch, was a homemaker.



Hermann was raised Roman Catholic, though his family wasn't terribly religious. He was thrown out of grammar school, he said, for not trying. He said the bombing raids of his childhood deeply affected him and made him, as he put it, "an opponent of all nationalisms and politics."

Mr. Nitsch trained at a graphic arts college in Vienna, earning a degree in 1958. He worked as a graphic artist for a bit, but when he saw a show of work by Jackson Pollock, Sam Francis, Willem de Kooning and other Abstract Expressionists, he was inspired to become an action painter himself — though he ditched the "painter" part fairly quickly.

An early marriage to Eva Krannich ended in divorce. His second wife, Beate Konig, a child psychiatrist, died in a car crash in 1977. She had an inheritance that allowed the couple to buy a castle in 1971, an apt setting for the sort of work he wanted to make. It even has its own chapel.

He and Rita Leitenbor married in 1988. He insisted on a church wedding with all the bells and whistles, Ms. Nitsch said by email, but it was a challenge to find a local priest who would perform the ceremony. Mr. Nitsch's activities had not endeared him to the local clergy. (In the end, she said, they found one.)

In addition to his wife, Mr. Nitsch is survived by his son, Leonhard Kopp.



Works by Mr. Nitsch were shown at the Opera Gallery in London in 2021. Neil Hall/EPA, via Shutterstock

At the Venice Biennale this year, one of Mr. Nitsch's more elaborate works can be seen, laid out in an exhibition space on the island of Giudecca. It is his 20th action painting (or paintings), a gory panorama made in 1987 and presented in collaboration with Helmut Essl, who owns the work, as well as Zuecca Projects, the Galerie Kandlhofer in Vienna, the Hermann Nitsch Foundation and Pace Gallery, his New York gallerist. (Altogether, Mr. Nitsch conducted or orchestrated nearly 160 actions.)

In this work now in Venice, a 16-by-65-foot canvas is attended by smaller canvases, a floor covering and objects shaped like priestly vestments, all of which are splattered and sprayed with red paint (no animals lost their lives to this endeavor). As with most of Mr. Nitsch's work, it looks like the aftermath of something terrible.

A roly-poly man with a St. Nicholas beard, Mr. Nitsch was an impressive presence but not a threatening one. Marc Glimcher, the president and chief executive of Pace Gallery, said he had nicknamed him Rabbi Nitsch because of his resemblance to a religious elder, which seemed to amuse him.

His most recent work was a departure. For the last few years, using his hands to manipulate the paint, Mr. Nitsch had been making large abstract canvases that bloom with bright, springlike colors: greens, blues, purples, pinks and yellows. He said he was inspired by peonies and other flowers. It is shockingly pretty.

Penelope Green is an obituaries reporter for The New York Times. She has been a reporter for the Style and Home sections, editor of Styles of The Times, an early iteration of Style, and a story editor at The New York Times Magazine. She lives in Manhattan. [@greenpnyt](#) • [Facebook](#)

A version of this article appears in print on , Section B, Page 12 of the New York edition with the headline: Hermann Nitsch, an Artist With Guts, as Well as Blood, Dies at 83