

Sarah Hegenbart

From Bayreuth
to Burkina Faso

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Opera Village Africa
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For Beatrix and Josef Werth

*I have the feeling that Opera Village will be the project
towards which I have unknowingly worked my whole life.*

—Christoph Schlingensief

Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Introduction	
Opera of Ambiguities	13
Chapter One	
<i>Egomania</i> – Germany Without Hope? Rectifying the impression that Schlingensiefel staged a Wagnerian <i>Gesamtkunstwerk</i> at the Venice Biennial 2011	37
Chapter Two	
From Bayreuth to Burkina Faso: Stripping the <i>Gesamtkunstwerk</i> of its German coordinates	57
Chapter Three	
The Mission of a Contemporary <i>Parsifal</i>: Redeeming Germany in Burkina Faso	81
Chapter Four	
Revolving Opera and Psychic Interiors: The Animatograph	105
Chapter Five	
Readymade and <i>Azione Scenica</i>: Schlingensiefel’s Expanded Definition of Opera	131
Chapter Six	
<i>Opera Village</i> as postcolonial <i>Gesamtkunstwerk</i>?	157
Conclusion	
The <i>Gesamtkunstwerk</i>: Smashed or revived?	181
Notes	185
Bibliography	239
Index	273

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Introduction

Opera of Ambiguities

Christoph Schlingensiefel conceived of his *Opera Village Africa* as failed utopia before it was even built. In his theatre production *S.M.A.S.H.–Suffocating in Aid*, he envisioned *Opera Village Africa* projected three years into the future (in 2013).¹ Schlingensiefel imagined how, at this point in time, his participatory art experiment set in Burkina Faso, a West African former French colony that only gained independence in 1960 (the year Schlingensiefel was born), would have been in danger of suffocating under development aid and occupied by United Nations troops. *S.M.A.S.H.*, destined to have its premiere on 21 August 2010 as part of the Ruhr Triennale, was never realised, since this was the very day that Schlingensiefel died prematurely of lung cancer aged forty-nine.

Opera Village Africa, however, still exists. Now, about ten years after Schlingensiefel's death, I revisit this experimental total artwork in Burkina Faso in the attempt to trace back its trajectory to a very particular moment in German history: the origins of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the work of Richard Wagner and his political endeavours to democratise society through the arts during the German revolutions of 1848/1849.

Schlingensiefel repeatedly described Wagner as his alter ego, and referenced him numerous in his diverse artistic practices, which span film, theatre, art installations, opera, performance and participatory art. Both artists—despite their profound differences—were closely aligned in their quest for German identity, driven by the romantic desire for redemption. Their understanding of what may count as German identity or a type of German self-identification differs fundamentally. While Wagner pursued a future-orientated vision of a unified Germany, in which essentialist criteria, such as national belonging and race are constitutive of identity, Schlingensiefel's engagement with German identity was driven by a necessity to critically work through the past, and to explore the on-going psychological impacts of racial ideologies expressed in colonial power structures and later the Holocaust.

Schlingensiefel's conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* resists capture in a single definition. Yet his interest in the notion might partly be explained by the experience of

growing up in post-war Germany. During the era of the so-called economic miracle, mass consumption could not fill a psychological lack: the experience of feeling decomposed and fractionalised as an individual subject—an experience already manifest in Schlingensief's early films.

This experience of failing to bring incoherent narratives together is reminiscent of the principles of Dada art, confronting the spectator with multiple diverging perspectives that can no longer be resolved into a coherent whole.² How the self resolves the conundrum of its own identity is a theme Schlingensief shares with many of the avant-garde artists who influenced him, in particular surrealists such as Luis Buñuel, filmmakers such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Hermann Nitsch and the Viennese Actionists, Martin Kippenberger, Dieter Roth, Allan Kaprow, Paul McCarthy, Paul Thek, and especially Joseph Beuys. While most of the artists who influenced Schlingensief also wrestled with the problematic of identity, for Schlingensief the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* suggested a way out. *Opera Village Africa* epitomises Schlingensief's oscillation between the romantic quest for redemption and the pragmatic realisation that this desire will necessarily result in failure.

Translocating the *Gesamtkunstwerk* from Bayreuth to Burkina Faso

My initial hypothesis is that *Opera Village Africa* attempts to realise the ideas of the young, left-wing revolutionary Wagner of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, namely audience empowerment and the transformation of everyday reality and political circumstances in particular, through the arts. It is interesting to observe how the Wagnerian idea of a pro-democracy revolution through the arts resonates in the 2014 Burkina Faso uprising aiming to remove the long-term president Blaise Compaoré who was in office for 27 years. Music featured centrally in the 2014 Burkina Faso uprising, as the rapper Serge Bambara—one of the patrons of *Opera Village Africa*, and better known under his stage name 'Smockey'—played a crucial role in removing the corrupt president. Smockey was co-founder of the grassroots movement Balai Citoyen, which was very active throughout the Burkinabe uprisings. The view of art as a transformative and democratising force does not typically spring to mind in connection with Wagner since his productions are associated with Germanic mythology, reactionary ideas and to a certain extent the racial ideologies that culminated in the National Socialist regime.

However, critical opposition to Wagner's unsavoury politics need not lead us to dismiss the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* altogether since this would occlude the fact that its utopian potential still resonates in contemporary art practices such as participatory or socially engaged art. This book aims to show that the origins

of participatory art, usually situated in the happenings of the 1960s, which were inspired by artistic avant-gardes such as Dada and Futurism, can actually be traced back to the Wagnerian ambition to ‘bind all arts together’ in order to construct a novel communal identity.³ It is the question of identity construction I am particularly interested in since it relates the quest of the young Wagner to Schlingensiefel’s life-long desire to find a way of identifying with his native Germany, a country he never felt entirely comfortable in. As Vlado Kotnik points out, the success of opera lies in its capacity ‘for enacting the fantasy of a mythical or “imagined community”’.⁴ If opera enacted the ‘foundational myth of the nation state’ in Wagner’s nineteenth century, the question arises to which (and to whose) fantasy does a twenty-first century *Opera Village* in Burkina Faso respond.⁵

In order to tackle this question, this book takes the controversial notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a point of departure. This approach is only partly motivated by Schlingensiefel’s biographical references to the importance of Wagner and the relevance of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* for his final project.⁶ Rather, the historiography of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—and in particular its diverse and inconsistent interpretations inspired by the artistic avant-gardes—will serve to map out the multiple influences that drove Schlingensiefel’s work and culminated in *Opera Village*. The usual English translation of the German term *Gesamtkunstwerk* is ‘total artwork’. William Ashton Ellis uses the term ‘united artwork’ in his translation. In my view, ‘holistic artwork’ would capture the meaning of the term better since it takes account of how the aesthetic experience elicited by the synthesis of the art forms impacts on life as a whole. However, it is difficult to translate the German word adequately, which is why I will continue to use the German term.

The *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as Wagner envisioned it in 1848, brings together the individual art forms to achieve an elevated aesthetic impression that impacts on the unification of a society—the *Volk*—in order to guide it as a whole to a better future. Thus, a key function of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is identity construction. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* was Wagner’s response to a collective identity crisis in the countries that formerly belonged to the Holy Roman Empire of German Nations, which had been dissolved in 1806. This dissolution provoked the question of what German identity consisted in.

In contrast to current streams in the literature, e.g., Janke/Kovacs (2010) and Forrest/Scheer (2011), which highlight Schlingensiefel’s ironic, provocative and humorous engagement with overloaded German concepts, such as the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, this study pursues a different approach and analyses Schlingensiefel’s obsession with the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as an indicator of a serious, but ambivalent desire for a new type of (German) identity.⁷ While the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a concept commonly associated with modernism, Schlingensiefel employs post-modern aesthetic strategies, such as ambivalence, exaggeration, fragmentation,

irony, multi-perspectivism, parody and pastiche, in his interpretation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in postmodernity. He thus challenges the conventional understanding of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* often linked with a totalising conception of a novel reality. Interestingly, Schlingensiefel's deconstruction of the totalising *Gesamtkunstwerk* invites parallels to postcolonial approaches. If *Opera Village* turns out to be a manifestation of a postcolonial *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it requires a revision of the criteria Roger Fornoff (2004) and more recently David Roberts (2011) have established for its definition. Roberts employs Fornoff's definition of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as 'aesthetic and social synthesis' and summarises the four aspects Fornoff identifies as (1) 'union of different arts in relation to a comprehensive vision of the world and society'; (2) an 'implicit or explicit theory of the ideal union of the arts'; (3) a 'closed worldview' and (4) a 'projection of an aesthetic-social or aesthetic-religious utopia'⁸

The very notion of the postcolonial *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which I introduce as a foil to *Opera Village*, appears to be a contradiction, given that the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in its Wagnerian conception, invokes notions of a pure German identity, which all members of the audience are expected to share. My usage of the term 'post-colonial' refers to an intellectual debate rather than to a distinct period in history. Whilst the term might imply that we live in a time after colonialism, clearly many colonial structures remain or have merely been transferred into neo-colonial structures. So while the idea of postcolonialism is problematic, I deploy it as a label for certain characteristics, such as openness to multiple perspectives, linked with the related discourses on identity.⁹ Fluid and constantly changing hybrid identities are, in contrast to traditionalist views, a feature of its reinterpretation. The postcolonial *Gesamtkunstwerk*, I propose, engages its audiences in an open-ended dialogue and can be characterised further according to my stipulative definition by its openness to multiple narratives and fragments of reality, whose incongruity does not need to be resolved in a totalising unity. The designation 'postcolonial *Gesamtkunstwerk*' is thus intended to account for the shift from the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* in modernist interpretations to its non-essentialist meanings in postmodern and postcolonial readings.¹⁰ My suggestion is to view the 'postcolonial *Gesamtkunstwerk*' as an artistic strategy, which frees concepts of identity from national appropriation and points towards what Michael Rothberg calls 'a multidirectional revision of remembrance beyond residual Eurocentrism'.¹¹ This ties in with current debates about Germany's culture of remembrance, which have been loosely labelled as *Historikerstreit 2.0* (historians' quarrel). Initially, the *Historikerstreit 2.0* arose in response to the demand to forbid the prominent postcolonial thinker Achille Mbembe from delivering an opening speech at the Ruhr Triennale in August 2020. The FDP-politician Lorenz Deutsch accused Mbembe of anti-Semitism as he had once supported a petition by the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement.¹² In addition, Mbembe was also reproached for disseminating anti-Semitic ideas in his writing. This accusation

was later debunked as a de-contextualised interpretation of Mbembe's ideas. The debate revealed a competitive culture of remembrance in Germany, whose focus on the Holocaust led to the marginalisation of other strands of narratives, e.g. colonial histories. Prior to the debate, the building of the Humboldt Forum located in the reconstructed Berlin City Palace belied ignorance of Germany's implication in colonial atrocities. Schlingensief's *Opera Village*, as I have argued elsewhere, was intended in part to expose this cover-up and operated on an aesthetic level as a demand to confront German colonial history.¹³

The *Historikerstreit 2.0* differs from the original historians' quarrel in the 1980s in endorsing a global perspective on the Holocaust, approaching it in relation to other genocides and interrogating how Germany's transformation into a migration society requires a consideration of a multiplicity of narratives. This does not suggest that the remembrance culture in Germany should abandon its focus on the genocide of the European Jews committed during the Second World War. Rather, the *Historikerstreit 2.0* debated about whether Germany must widen its perspective to integrate multidirectional memories—to employ a term Michael Rothberg coined in *Multidirectional Memory, Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009)—and how this more diverse culture of remembrance could be implemented. In *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg critically examines whether and to what extent dominant narratives suppress or influence other cultures of remembrance in the formation of collective identity. He argues that the scarcity of resources (e.g., state funding) has led to a situation in which representatives of certain cultures of remembrance have had to compete with others in order to obtain resources. Rothberg warns against seeing cultures of remembrance as competitive and is more interested in showing the extent to which they are linked and influence each other.

The ferocity with which Rothberg was attacked in Germany once his book had been translated into German in 2021 underscores the dilemma prevailing in Germany's culture of remembrance.¹⁴ While Per Leo (and along similar lines Samuel Salzborn) argues that a pseudo-identification with the victims of the Holocaust prevails in Germany, which is problematic as it instrumentalises the murdered Jews to distract from one's own and one's family's implication in the atrocities of the perpetrators, Max Czollek contends that Germany's culture of remembrance lacks diversity.¹⁵ As I show in this book, Schlingensief anticipated these issues in his works, ranging from *Menu Total*, to the animatographic journey and culminating in *Opera Village Africa*, and illustrated how the repression of the German past and the ignorance of one's own implication in the perpetrators' deeds impedes opportunities to work towards a more nuanced and diverse society.

The idea of a 'postcolonial *Gesamtkunstwerk*' involves an exploration into how Wagner's communitarian aesthetics might resonate with concepts in African philosophy. A key concept in African philosophy is the notion of *ubuntu*, which

can be translated as ‘interconnectedness-towards-wholeness’.¹⁶ The English term ‘whole’—‘all of something’—is of Germanic origin and etymologically linked with the German term ‘heil’, which can be variously translated as ‘mended’, ‘restored’, or ‘made whole again’. The idea of wholeness has to be distinguished from the Wagnerian call for ‘unity’—stemming from the Latin ‘*unus*’ (English: ‘one’)—which implies that the subjects forming this unity have to abandon their individual characteristics to resemble each other, a hallmark of totalitarian systems.

By drawing on African influences, Schlingensief’s aim was to endow the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* with a new aesthetic value: the value of living together. This aesthetics of ambiguity, as I will demonstrate, serves to disrupt the overblown Wagnerian staging in order to bring in multiple perspectives, in particular those that have been forcefully excluded. His approach to staging the *Gesamtkunstwerk* mirrors the postcolonial idea of a contrapuntal reading that endeavours to include marginalised voices in a global discourse. According to Edward Said, a contrapuntal reading extends our view ‘to include what was once forcibly excluded’.¹⁷ *Opera Village* can be read as the culmination of Schlingensief’s attempt to strip the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of all German coordinates in order offer a postcolonial *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Utilising the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a frame within which to interrogate *Opera Village* and Schlingensief’s work more broadly does not mean overlooking the fact that the ideology underlying the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is deeply problematic, since it is based on Wagner’s belief in ‘the original purity of the Aryan race’, which he took from the Comte de Gobineau.¹⁸ Given that Wagner’s final opera *Parsifal* is laced with racist ideology, it is not surprising that the Nazis seized on it to disseminate their own racist ideologies. Thus, the history of Wagner’s reception provides insights into collective identity construction in Germany, as well as the historical shifts involved in these processes. In using Wagner as a reference point, Schlingensief provokes reflections on whether Germans have actually succeeded in critically working through the racial ideologies that led to the atrocities of the Third Reich, and he challenges his audience to critically interrogate the narratives that formed part of a collective German identity. The recent election of right-wing parties in Germany, such as the AfD (‘Alternative for Germany’) as well as the global rise of the ‘alt-right’, lends the questions Schlingensief poses about processes of identification in Germany renewed urgency.

The quest for identity and recognition by the idealised Other is a motif that runs through the works of Wagner and Schlingensief. How easily a communal identity crisis can lead to the longing for a redeemer becomes clear in Wagner’s final musical drama *Parsifal*, a production which would attain major importance for Schlingensief when he was invited to stage this work at the Bayreuth Festival from 2004 until 2007.

Schlingensief highlights the role culture plays in reinforcing racial ideologies and challenges his audiences to shift their Eurocentric perspective to regions in the

Global South, whose rich cultural and artistic heritages have been marginalised—if represented at all—in history writing in the Global North. Schlingensief relocates the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in a geographic region that Wagner erased from his *Parsifal* libretto even though the original Parzival legend situated the community of the Grail's Knights in 'Africa'.

Schlingensief's contextualisation of the Grail aligns with historical facts.¹⁹ The two main sources for Wagner's *Parsifal*—Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval, le Conte du Graal*, written in French at the end of the twelfth century, and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, written in Middle High German at the beginning of the thirteenth century—situate the community of the Grail's Knights in Spain during a time when it was ruled by North African Muslims. During the *reconquista* period, spanning the years 710–1492, a major part of the Iberian Peninsula was politically part of Africa. This is an appropriate place to point out my own practice of utilising the term 'Africa' as a geographical location referring to Sub-Saharan Africa in general, and Burkina Faso in particular. Obviously, 'Africa' is also a term denoting all the cultural, historical, and social diversity among the different countries situated on the African continent. Use of the term 'Africa' demands sensitivity to the fact that many African thinkers, such as the Congolese philosopher Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, consider the notion of 'Africa' to be an invention involving a projection of Western prejudices onto this geographical area.²⁰

In Wolfram von Eschenbach's version, Parzival has an African half-brother who is dappled in black and white.²¹ His name is Feirefiz, which etymologically originates in Old French and stands for 'colourful son'.²² Even though Wagner erased Feirefiz from his *Parsifal* libretto, Schlingensief was deeply fascinated by the character.²³ Feirefiz not only personifies how European and African heritage influence each other in the process of identity construction, but he also represents the key values of altruism, love, courage, and strength that Parzival—the younger of the two brothers—does not yet possess, at least not to the same extent. In a duel between the two brothers Parzival loses his sword and Feirefiz throws away his sword to re-establish equal conditions.²⁴ This extraordinary kindness results in a moment of recognition: the two opponents become aware that they are half-brothers. Feirefiz appears 'almost at the moment at which Parzival despairs of God' and is thus introduced as Parzival's morally superior African counterpart.²⁵ Only by recognising his brother and engaging with him in an open dialogue can Parzival acquire the compassion that entitles him to become the redeemer of the community of the Grail. It is unclear why exactly Wagner erased Feirefiz from his libretto, but his belief in racial hierarchies and adherence to Gobineau's illusory notion of a pure Aryan race suggest that he may have viewed Feirefiz as tainting the community of the Holy Grail.

The Holy Grail—key to Wagner's *Parsifal*—is an ambiguous symbol that is featured in various forms in Schlingensief's production. The Grail oscillates between

an idol—‘an image which has an unwarranted, irrational power over somebody’—and a totem—a companionable spirit that establishes a community—onto which desires are projected.²⁶ My suspicion is that *Opera Village* could just be another symbolisation of the Grail.

For Schlingensief, the character of Feirefiz exemplifies the relationship between the African and the European continent. He is convinced that Europe can only be redeemed from its suffering—and this suffering mainly refers to a communal and to some extent also to Schlingensief’s personal identity crisis—through Africa. This view of ‘Africa’ as redeemer might not only appear naïve, but deeply problematic to the extent that it manifests an inversion of a ‘white saviour complex’. While this book argues that Schlingensief’s engagement with the African continent is far more complex and nuanced than it might initially appear, it will also draw attention to the danger that Schlingensief’s project could be (mis)understood as repetition of colonial power asymmetries and the continuation of colonial dependency relations. Therefore, it will be integral to the purpose of this book to better understand the perspective of Burkinabe involved in *Opera Village*.

In summary, the shift from the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* to the postcolonial *Gesamtkunstwerk* involves a shift in perspective. While the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* presupposes an ‘ideal’ audience that shares features of a common identity, a constitutive feature of the postcolonial *Gesamtkunstwerk* is that it brings diverging perspectives into open-ended dialogue.²⁷

Opera Village

Opera Village is a concerted opera of ambiguities. Schlingensief conceived the idea of building an ‘opera village’ in Africa in early 2008, which is also when he was diagnosed with lung cancer. *Opera Village* is therefore not only motivated by the desire to overcome a communal European identity crisis, but also an identity crisis on a personal level, which is closely tied to Schlingensief’s own biography. Schlingensief documented his illness in detail in his so-called ‘cancer diary’, which bore the poetic title ‘Life in heaven can never be as beautiful as it is here’. The entry for 15 January 2008 reports his vow at the grave of his father that he will build a church, a school, an infirmary, and a theatre—an opera house—in Africa.²⁸

While the desire to leave a legacy was a fundamental motivation for Schlingensief’s final project, the idea originated in his *Parsifal* production for the Bayreuth Festival. The productions expressed Schlingensief’s keenness to explore how the myth of the Holy Grail permeates other cultures and non-Christian religions. The word play ‘Gral Kraal’ formed part of his stage design and was written on the edge of the basin in which the grail would be revealed (Fig. 1). Situating the grail in a kraal—a compound where



Fig. 1. Christoph Schlingensiefel, Detail from the *Parsifal* production at the Bayreuth Festival, 2004, photo, Bayreuther Festspiele (Photo/Copyright: Bayreuther Festspiele GmbH/ Jochen Quast).

cattle are kept in traditional African communities—suggests that the grail was originally located not in medieval Germany, but in Africa. This interpretation signalled his desire to elicit a transcultural dialogue between Germany and the African continent. A fax sent to Christoph Schlingensiefel on 29 May 2004—during the preparation of his *Parsifal* production in Bayreuth—states that Wagner’s *Parsifal* was influenced by the diaries of the missionary Carl Hugo Hahn, who was sent to South-West Africa in 1844.²⁹ In his diaries, Hahn allegedly characterised the ‘kraal’ as the Indigenous people’s holiest place, in which they kept cattle that they worshipped like gods. While it is unclear if this is true, entries in Cosima Wagner’s diary provide proof of Wagner’s meeting with the African traveller Ernst von Weber on 12 September 1879.³⁰ Weber was a strong supporter of German colonialism and utilised his widely read report to increase support for German colonies among the African population.³¹

At the same time, the ‘kraal’ symbolises the relation between colonial genocides and the Holocaust. At Shark Island in the Bay of Lüderitz, Germans created so-called prisoner’s kraale (*Gefangenenkraale*), where Nama and Herero people were incarcerated.³² While these camps have played an insignificant role in German collective memory, Namibian collective memory is strongly shaped by the violence of German colonialisers. The focus on the Nazi concentration camps overshadowed the fact that there had already been precursors to concentration camps in Africa. While the British erected camps in South Africa around 1900, the Germans copied these camps for their colonised territory in South West Africa (today Namibia).

When Wagner was still pondering art's role within the revolution, the German explorer and scholar Heinrich Barth became the first European to make contact with locals in Burkina Faso, during his one-week long-stay in the city of Dori in 1853.³³ More research is needed to establish whether Barth's trip marked the beginning of an exchange of artistic ideas between the two countries. As for the exchange of thoughts about political systems, the communist ideals that had influenced the young Wagner did not take root in Burkina Faso until 1983 under the presidency of Thomas Sankara.³⁴ Sankara, a pan-African socialist thinker and hugely popular president, gave the country its new name on 4 August 1984. The territory formerly known as Upper Volta became Burkina Faso, literally the 'land of the upright people'. The name 'Burkina Faso' would certainly have appealed to Schlingensiefel's stated hope of encountering people of integrity, who would accept him as the person he was.³⁵

Interestingly, Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* resonates in Sankara's ideas and the importance he attributed to art within the process of community formation. *Opera Village*, I will argue, represents a translocated *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Schlingensiefel transposes the medieval legend of the Grail to Burkina Faso since the attempt to construct a collective and personal identity in Germany had, for him, failed. Pointing out that he never felt comfortable in Germany due to its self-deception, Schlingensiefel projected his longings—his desire to be loved—onto Burkina Faso.³⁶

This projection appears naïve if one considers the social and political situation in Burkina Faso. Throughout the planning phase of *Opera Village*, the government of Burkina Faso's then president Blaise Compaoré was still in power. Compaoré had been in office since 15 October 1987, and was a controversial figure in Burkina Faso for numerous reasons. While Compaoré was initially a supporter of the popular Marxist thinker and pan-African president Thomas Sankara, he was later accused of having been part of the political complot resulting in Sankara's murder on 15 October 1987, the very day Compaoré's presidency began. Compaoré's excessively long presidency—despite his unpopularity among the Burkinabe people—was probably only possible because he 'had become the strongest ally to France and the US in the region'.³⁷ Four years after Schlingensiefel's death, in October 2014, the uprisings and the protest against Compaoré became so violent that he fled the country. Interim president Michel Kafando, who took over after Compaoré, faced tensions in the process of organising new elections, which had to be rescheduled numerous times. On 16 September 2015, Gilbert Diendéré—a long-term confidant of Compaoré's, and commander of the presidential guard—arrested interim president Kafando and Prime Minister Isaac Zida in a coup d'état, which was defeated on 23 September 2015. Regular elections finally took place on 29 November 2015. Roch Marc Christian Kaboré became the newly elected president. On 24 January 2022, another coup d'état spearheaded by the military officer Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba resulted in the disposal of Kaboré. He was replaced by Damiba, whom the military junta announced as

interim president. Since then, Burkina Faso's membership in ECOWAS (Economic Community Of West African States) and the African Union has been suspended.

This book seeks to unearth how *Opera Village* operates as a testing ground for the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, stripped of its German coordinates. My comparison between Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Schlingensief's exploration of it in his *Opera Village* will concentrate on three aspects: first, the different strategies pursued to facilitate the blurring of the boundaries between art and life in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*; second, on opposing ways of bringing individual artistic media together, and third, the eudaimonistic aspect of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, i.e., the ways in which it impacts the realisation of individual and collective potential, and identity construction.

Opera Village, however, is not merely an idea. It took physical shape in a newly constructed village on a twelve hectare site in Laongo, located thirty kilometres east of Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou; a territory that was, until 1960, a French colony, and that is still francophone. *Opera Village* will eventually comprise a festival theatre at its centre, surrounded by a school, an infirmary, workshops, guest houses, and a sports field. In May 2009, having visited a variety of venues in Cameroon, Mozambique, and Burkina Faso, Schlingensief was directed to what would eventually become the *Opera Village* location, about one kilometre away from *Sculptures de Laongo*—a sculpture park exhibiting works by a group of international contemporary artists—and about four kilometres away from Ziniaré, the hometown of Burkina Faso's long-term president Blaise Compaoré.³⁸ Sibylle Dahrendorf's film *Crackle of Time* documents the founding of the village, and spans the period May 2009 – October 2011.³⁹ In collaboration with the Berlin-based Burkinabe architect Diébédo Francis Kéré, Schlingensief refined his architectural concept of the village. A computer animation visualises how the festival theatre is intended to form the centre of the village (Fig. 2). The theatre opens up to a square around which houses of various sizes are arranged. While one of Schlingensief's early sketches (Fig. 3) emphasises the festival theatre, which forms the centre of a snail-like architectural structure that comprises accommodation, studios, and gardens, it does not include the school building, thus revealing that the school was not part of the initial plan. However, Schlingensief quickly realised that he must prioritise the school over the festival theatre. This reversed the order of the building phases. The first phase began in February 2010 and ended in October 2011 with the opening of the school. Key to the second building phase (April 2012 – June 2014) was the construction of an infirmary. The third building phase, which focuses on the building of the festival theatre, is still in its planning stages and requires more funds—about 700,000 euros—to be realised.⁴⁰ A comparison of Kéré's architectural plan after the completion of the infirmary (Fig. 4) and a map (Fig. 5) in which the as yet unrealised buildings are marked in red shows that *Opera Village* is still missing its central piece: the platform for intercultural collaboration.



Fig. 2. Diébédó Francis Kéré, Architectural plan for the *Opera Village Africa* in its early planning stages, ca. 2010, computer animation (Photo/Copyright: Kéré Architecture).

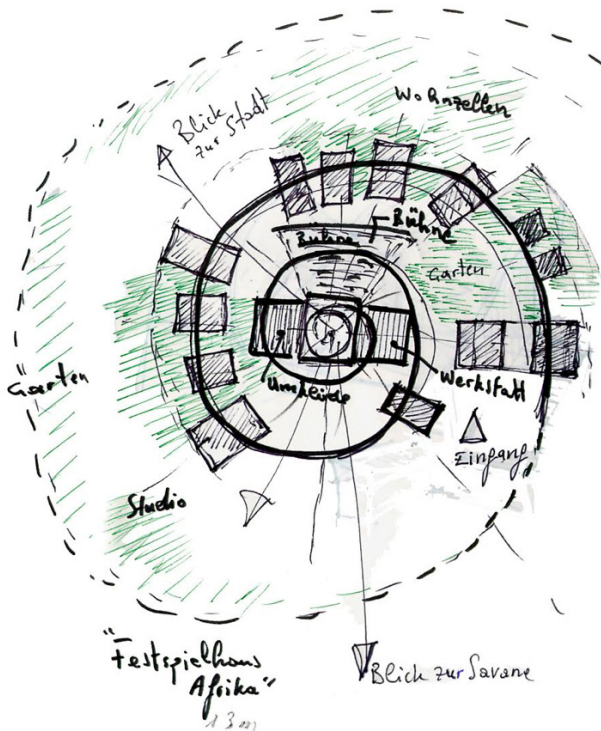
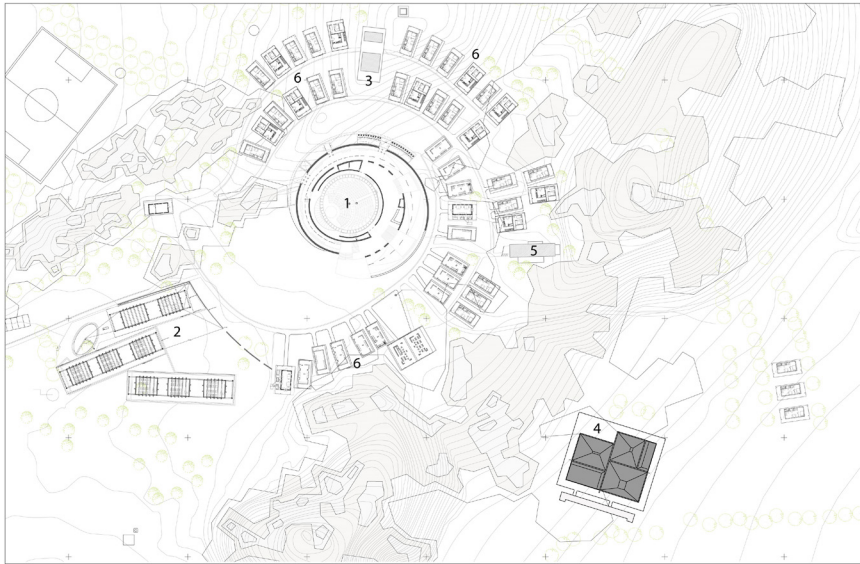


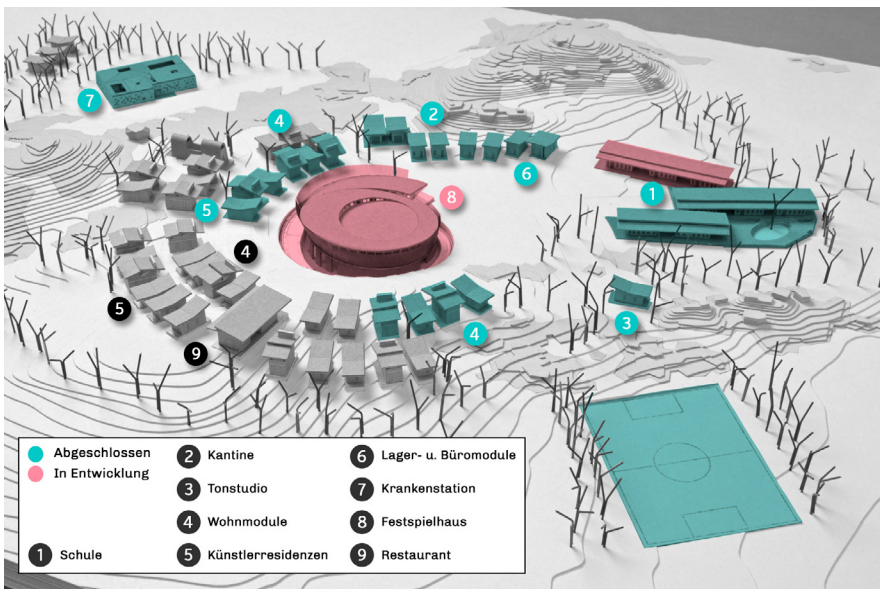
Fig. 3. Christoph Schlingensiefel, Sketch of the *Festspielhaus Afrika* in its early planning stages, ca. 2009, drawing (Photo/Copyright: Festspielhaus Afrika gGmbH).



Lageplan Operndorf
M 1:2000

- 1 Festspielhaus
- 2 Schulen
- 3 Restaurant
- 4 CSPS
- 5 Direktorenhaus
- 6 Wohnmodule, Katine, Lager

Fig. 4. Diébédo Francis Kéré, *Opera Village Africa* with the completed infirmary, 2014, architectural plan (Photo/Copyright: Kéré Architecture).



- | | | |
|----------------------|--------------|------------------------|
| ● Abgeschlossen | 2 Kantine | 6 Lager- u. Büromodule |
| ● In Entwicklung | 3 Tonstudio | 7 Krankenstation |
| 1 Schule | 4 Wohnmodule | 8 Festspielhaus |
| 5 Künstlerresidenzen | 9 Restaurant | |

Fig. 5. Map indicating the completed building phases of *Opera Village Africa*, June 2014, computer animation (Photo/Copyright: Festspielhaus Afrika gGmbH).

When I visited *Opera Village* in October and November 2015, the centre of the village square featured a sculpture rather than a festival theatre (Fig. 6). This sculpture evoked references to Schlingensiefel's so-called 'animatograph', a rotating stage with which he travelled to various regions not typically known as centres of operatic tradition to reinvigorate and reinvent what he conceived of as Western high culture. At the time of my visit, 250 children attended *l'École de Village Opéra*, where they were taught in five classes according to the Burkinabe curriculum. The Burkinabe curriculum is still based on that of the former French colonisers, and the classes are taught in French. The school also provides facilities for art workshops and other activities. The sculpture in the village square, for example, was designed by the art teacher Paulin Zongo in collaboration with the school children using found materials such as tins, soap, ropes, and shoes.

Schlingensiefel only lived long enough to celebrate the ground-breaking ceremony on 8 February 2010, where he gave a speech in which he expressed his expanded definition of opera, alluding to Joseph Beuys's definition of social sculpture. According to Schlingensiefel, the scream of a baby can possess more beauty than an operatic aria:

And when the first visitors join us, they will perhaps already be able to spend the night at the opera village and eat here; perhaps they will be looking for an opera singer who sings most wonderfully, but perhaps they will then hear the primal scream of a new-born baby that has just come into the world at our little clinic here in the opera village. What wonderful song! The first scream of a child. By far better than opera, and truer by far than anything we can otherwise present on our stages.⁴¹

Schlingensiefel died two months after a final trip to Burkina Faso in June 2010. The building process was suspended from July 2010 until March 2011. Then Aino Laberenz, Schlingensiefel's widow, took charge of the project and has been working towards its completion ever since. Laberenz is the director of the non-profit limited company Festspielhaus Afrika GmbH, which operates *Opera Village*.⁴² She is supported through her Berlin office, run by Annika Turkowski and Tatjana Scheikert (currently on maternity leave) and a local office in Burkina Faso, run by Motandi Ouoba and Sévérin Sobgo. In addition, *Opera Village* employs six teachers—Edwige Compaoré Kiswendsida, Habibou Bonkoungou Zongo, Moussa Sawadogo, Nicole Ilboudo-Zongo, Asséta Sawadogo, Victoire Marie Yidiè Tianhoiun Kamund, the principal of the school, Abdoulaye Ouedraogo, the artistic manager François Bouda, the team in the infirmary, namely Blandine Tiendrebeogo, Issa Ouedraogo, Omar Ouedraogo, Clarisse Estelle Ouédraogo and Gompoko Martine Sawadogo, a cook in the canteen, security guards and



Fig. 6. Sculpture in the centre of *Opera Village Africa*, October 2015, photo (Photo/Copyright: Sarah Hegenbart).

janitors, namely Denise Compaoré, Tapsoba Tennoaga (aka Prosper), Patouletale Tapsoba (aka Abdoulaye) and Dieudonné Touwendabo.⁴³

The inaugural building work was made possible by grants from the German Foreign Office, the Goethe Institute, and private donors. However, this funding structure raises questions about whether the project's identity as 'anti-development aid' can be upheld. Since the project has so far been primarily financed by German sources, this monograph also considers the potentially problematic implications of this asymmetrical power relationship, which could be viewed as perpetuating colonial dependencies.

It is important here to distinguish between Schlingensiefel's vision of *Opera Village* and the implementation of this vision after his death, at which the majority of criticism is directed. This book is primarily concerned with the nature of *Opera Village* as part of Schlingensiefel's artistic practice, but it will also scrutinise to what extent the criticism targeting the posthumous implementation of Schlingensiefel's project can be applied to his initial vision.

In its early stages, several designations were used to refer to *Opera Village*. The village was initially called Remdoogo, which is an apt translation of *Festspielhaus* (festival hall) into Mooré—one of the official languages spoken in Burkina Faso. The name 'Remdoogo' can be misleading since it suggests that it is the name of an actual village that existed in the area of *Opera Village* before its foundation. While

Schlingensief's project has most commonly been referred to as *Opera Village* (in German: Operndorf), the term 'Festival Hall Africa' (in German: *Festspielhaus Afrika*) is also in use and has the advantage of preventing the frequent misunderstanding that traditional operas from the European repertoire are produced in *Opera Village*.

The fundamental idea behind the founding of *Opera Village* was to release opera from its prison of high culture. Thomas George illustrated this idea in his sketch of two amphorae placed next to each other (Fig. 7). While the left amphora is self-referential only, the amphora on the right contains holes through which influences from the *Opera Village* organ can be absorbed and emitted. *Opera Village* thus facilitates a circular flow that constantly revives the concept of opera. In his posthumously published autobiography *Ich weiß, ich war's* (in English: 'I Know It Was Me'), Schlingensief describes how his strategy for the revival of the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* consists in having people engage with it, thus supplying it with novel forms of energy.⁴⁴ This view evokes parallels to the concept of inter-media introduced by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins. Moreover, it suggests a reading of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a dialogical process that only comes into being through exchange of multiple perspectives. Such a dialogical reading would disrupt the possibility of a singular narrative, and hence of a singular identity. The way in which Schlingensief envisions *Opera Village* as a platform to facilitate the coexistence of multiple, often contrapuntal, narratives opens up structural analogies to post-colonial thinking, such as the integration of narratives from the margins into the global discourse. Schlingensief's contrapuntal staging evokes interesting parallels to Edward Said's introduction of contrapuntal analysis as postcolonial strategy. I will analyse the aesthetic strategies introduced by Schlingensief to achieve this activating effect in my comparison between his, what I will provisionally label contrapuntal, *Parsifal* production with François Girard's more conventional staging in Chapter Two. *Opera Village*, I suggest, could be interpreted as facilitator for contrapuntal *seeing* with which to integrate the images of the excluded. This attempt aligns with recent endeavours in art scholarship to redress the Eurocentric art canon to pay more attention to artistic practice in the Global South (and the Black diaspora). The US-based scholars Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson have coined the neologism 'afrotrope' in an on-going series (beginning in 2017) of essays and interviews published in the *Art Journal* and *October*. 'Afrotropes' refer to 'recurrent visual forms that have emerged within and become central to the formation of African diasporic culture and identity.'⁴⁵ As the name 'afrotrope' makes clear, it draws its inspiration from central concepts in literature studies (keyword: Mikhail Bakhtin's 'chronotope'), postcolonial studies (Paul Gilroy's 'new chronotopes') and (Black) feminism (keyword: Hortense Spillers' '*pornotoping*'). The afrotrope could also be viewed as token of a 'performative utterance' and it fulfills a central role in processes of identity construction within a community.⁴⁶

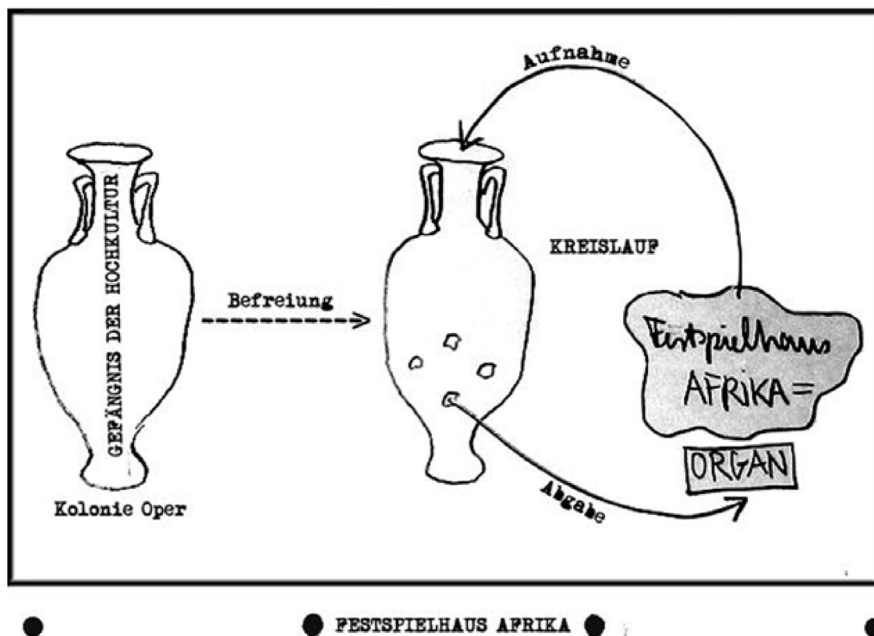


Fig. 7. Thomas Goerge, *Oper als Gefäß*, 2010, drawing
 (Photo/Copyright: Thomas Goerge/Festspielhaus Afrika gGmbH).

Pivotal to Schlingensief's vision was his belief in the power of images as a source of sensual cognition. *Opera Village* was supposed to function as a platform facilitating the creation of novel images through which a transcultural dialogue can emerge.⁴⁷ Utilising diverging images to stimulate a dialogue is a filmic strategy rooted in montage, and stems from the role the German filmmaker and writer Alexander Kluge envisioned for montage. The idea that *Opera Village* will use transcultural friction to create new images harks back to Schlingensief's early work as a filmmaker, which bears numerous parallels to the work of Alexander Kluge, as I will analyse in Chapter Three. According to Kluge, understanding a film completely is 'conceptual imperialism which colonizes its objects', which is why he instead prefers film in which the images cannot be arranged in a linear-coherent narrative.⁴⁸ Kluge advocates a type of film that requires the imagination of the spectator to be completed.⁴⁹ Kluge conducted more than forty interviews with Schlingensief, and deeply admired his approach to the filmic image, perhaps because it appeared to Kluge as the realisation of his vision of montage.⁵⁰ *Opera Village* as a facilitator of transcultural dialogue thus stands in the tradition of a kind of film, which uses montage to disrupt singular narratives.