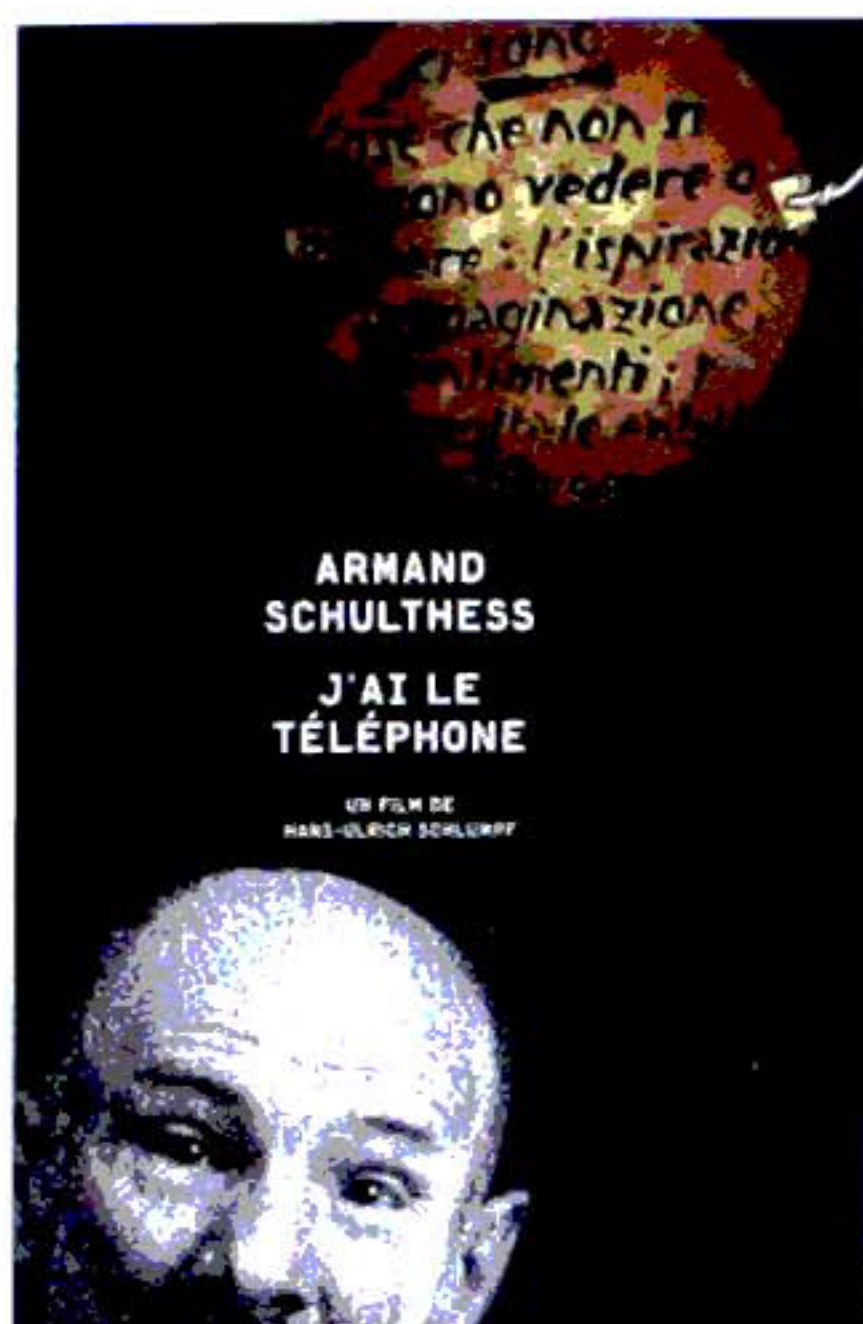


ARMAND SCHULTHESS: J'AI LE TELEPHONE

DVD release of the 1974 film by Hans-Ulrich Schlumpf (2011), 53 minutes. Available in English, German, Italian and French on one DVD from www.artfilm.ch.



It's hard to describe the experience of watching Hans-Ulrich Schlumpf's film about the little-known Swiss artist and recluse Armand Schulthess. While the film moves inexorably toward the death of Schulthess, describing along the way Schulthess' history as an employee, a villager and an artist, it is not biography in any traditional sense. Nor is it "documentary" in any traditional sense. The images and environments that he created and that Hans-Ulrich Schlumpf masterfully weaves with loose narrative stick with you, and you leave the movie feeling like you've been given access to a secret life, even if you come away knowing very few details about him.

Schlumpf's film, then, likely achieves what it sets out to do, which is to recollect and resurrect the story of Schulthess in order to make it visible to the world. The framing of the images on the screen, which shift between color and black and white, suggests this striving toward visibility even if it isn't stated. In one extraordinary moment that dominates the documentary, viewers are taken into Schulthess' compound and house (which he called "Casa Reggio"),

perched along a steep bank just outside the village of Auressio in the Onserone Valley in Switzerland. The camera hesitates outside Schulthess' front door, zooming in on a Gorgon's head while a narrator reads from some of Schulthess' writing. When the door is thrown open, we enter a realm of madness. Massive piles of papers, some stacked, some jumbled, fill the room. Pictures hang from the ceiling, articles and books litter the floor and shelves, and random collections of items like jars and dolls overflow the room, in which hardly any space remains to walk. Schulthess hoarded his possessions and creations, but the camera lens shows us something unlike the imagery from current television shows about hoarding, which leaves one with the impression of gleaming Walmart goods being collected and stashed away. In Schulthess' home, nothing is new, or white, or colorful. Everything is dark, in dusty tones of brown. Spider webs are black with dirt or smoke. Yellowing paper and collections of dusty books about astrology, sex and philosophy abound. It is gothic, and it is disturbing.

While no one can likely say how many visitors Schulthess may have had (the film mentions at least one woman whom Schulthess courted for a wife despite the fact that she was already married), it was undoubtedly few. Our voyage into the place through the lens of Schlumpf, then, is the moment of visibility, of announcement. It is the public airing of a hidden history of profound, obsessive and compulsive artistic production. The land around his house was a garden of wire and wood sculpture and was something of his public face. Leaving the garden, a somber and more sinister version of Charlie Lucas' sculpture garden or Lonnie Holley's (now destroyed) environment, Schlumpf takes us into Schulthess' house. This is the moment that his work finally becomes known to the world, and it is an extraordinarily unsettling

and intimate moment that the filmmaker has carefully created.

Filmed in the 1970s in the years leading up to Schulthess' death in 1973, *J'ai Le Téléphone* ("I Have the Telephone") has been released on DVD so that Schlumpf can make the case once again that Schulthess' work needs to be more widely recognized. The issue, however, is that the vast majority of that work was destroyed upon his death, and virtually all that remains, apparently, are a few books and this film. In that way, Schlumpf's work is as much an artistic production as is Schulthess', and as such, in its own right likely deserves a broader audience.

Schulthess was born in 1901, in Neuchatel, Switzerland, and spent the greater part of his working life as a dressmaker. When the financial crash of the 1930s put him out of business, he traveled for a brief period before returning to Switzerland. He worked for the federal government until 1951, at which point he moved to Casa Reggio. In the film, one former supervisor describes him as both meek and subservient, but not unpleasant, and the reason for his retirement to the countryside is never made clear (if it is even known). What is clear is that it was at that point that Schulthess began his artistic work and became increasingly withdrawn from society. While the people of the nearby village all knew him and knew of his project on the hillside, he apparently had no particularly close friends. When he died, his heirs employed local villagers to clean out his house and gardens. The film documents the moment when locals haul out pile after pile of paper, scavenge for useable items and then throw everything into a fire. We are witness to the loss.

Schulthess' artistic production came in primarily two forms: the rambling art environment around his house, which no

longer exists, and the creation of books. Among the chestnut trees on his land, Schulthess had created little stations, including what he called a cinema, where he placed boards, cut-out metal and paper scrawled with wisdom culled from his intensive and lifelong reading on sex, astrology and mysticism. Some of the sayings are trite, some humorous and some unsettling, and the artist apparently intended his land to be a kind of museum where the object under study was not art or nature or history, but thought itself. Similarly, Schulthess created books. He compiled articles, cut out newspaper stories, wrote notes, typewrote long ruminations and bound them into volumes. The books took up a whole wall of his house, and only a few have survived. He used his books to express his thoughts on sex, including on fetishism, and we are given a glimpse into one book that provides page after page of anatomical drawings of women's reproductive organs.

The film's strength is its access and framing of these intimate creations. Among the DVD's bonus features are pdf files of some of the books that allow you to page through the creations and see the work of Schulthess up close. (Schlumpf also has just published a book about Schulthess, though it is not yet available in English.) The DVD also contains a map of the environment and, most importantly, an extended black and white sequence that simply shows the burning of all of Schulthess' papers by the villagers. There is no voice-over, only music, and the camera for 15 minutes follows load after load as it is at first rifled through, then dumped into the fire. It is a hard sequence to forget, and it is as important as any part of the documentary itself. Schlumpf has done more than just reintroduce Schulthess to the world. He has somehow made us know him.

—ROGER THOMPSON