

# Nothing



TEXT MERIT ZIMMERMANN

PHOTOGRAPHY FELIX BRAUNER

## but

Humanity's domination of nature characterises Stephan Kaluza's oeuvre just as much as people's double-sided relationship with the environment. In his works (paintings, photographs, plays, novels), the visual artist and writer, born in Bad Iburg in 1964, deals intensively with nature in all its different facets. A conceptual thinker, he is less concerned with imitating visible reality than with the analysis of complex landscape phenomena that are widely unresearched until now. In this interview, we talk about his understanding of nature, what the Anthropocene means to him, where the idea for his famous "Rhein-Projekt" came from – and more.

# Illusion?

AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST STEPHAN KALUZA





# T

he oil paintings of Stephan Kaluza seem peaceful, almost idyllic. But, as we know, appearances can be deceptive. And indeed, at a second glance, his painterly evocations of delightful and harmonious natural worlds reveal themselves to be grand illusions of reality. Interestingly enough, it is not so much a deliberate visual ploy on the artist's part that skews the perception of viewers but rather a by-product of people's tendency to uphold a highly romanticised vision of nature. In other words, we tend to impose personal values and stereotypical beliefs on Mother Earth, when, in truth, the actual circumstances are a far cry from the blissful image we see.

Those who scratch below the surface of Stephan Kaluza's works are likely to uncover deeper, otherwise hidden insights that unveil first appearances. For example: When looking at photos from his "Felder" series (2005–2011) in detail, the landscape motifs quickly turn from dreamy to dreadful. Taking into consideration the picture's telling titles, one will experience a sudden substitution of one reality with another as former sites of terror like Verdun and Auschwitz appear before the mental eye.

Making the invisible visible is a leitmotif in Stephan Kaluza's art, not just in terms of nature as a

two-faced entity that is both splendid and savage, but also with regard to (semi-)natural environments that are too vast to fathom in their entirety. His latter field of inquiry is perhaps best exemplified by the now-infamous "Rhein-Projekt" (2007), for which he walked along the river Rhine from source to mouth over a period of eight months with nothing but his camera in tow. Now, 13 years later, on the occasion of his latest Rhine project "Alles bleibt im Fluss", we met the Düsseldorf-based artist for an interview at his studio in Heerdt.

Stephan Kaluza warmly welcomes us in his "pathetic front garden"; by his side trudges a cute Bernese



mountain dog called “Biene”. While our host gives us a tour of his spacious, cabinet-of-curiosity-like studio, he casually introduces us to his three other four-legged roommates. Before we begin talking, he rolls and lights a hand-rolled cigarette that is swiftly followed by another one and yet another one. Then we’re good to go.

**When did you start working as an artist and why?**

My career took off in my early twenties when I was studying at HSD here in Düsseldorf. In 1999, I had my very first major exhibition at the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg. But, that being said, art has always been a big part of my life. Back in the day, other kids at school would comment on my doodles saying something like “Oh, wow”. This encouragement nurtured my passion for drawing from an early age onwards and might also explain why I never seriously considered practicing another profession. Only my love for writing made me doubt the road I was on. But fortunately, painting and writing came together within my practice quite organically.

**You work in an interdisciplinary fashion. How would you describe your signature as an artist?**

Multi-media artists are often called all-round talents. I don’t agree with this term because, in my opinion, artists only have one talent that can take on different forms of expression. I might be innately predisposed to painting, but photography entered my artistic practice thanks to the “Rhein-Projekt” and plays and novels were added to the mix serendipitously later on. All in all, my signature as an artist can be described as being project-related because I work on series all the time. Stand-alone works of art have never interested me.

**Is there a medium in which you feel particularly at home or preferably express yourself in?**

“One thing has never been of interest to me, and that is stand-alone works of art.”



No, I’d say it’s pretty balanced because, to me, one medium isn’t better or superior to the other. In fact, quite the contrary: Working interdisciplinarily allows me to accommodate the various forms that my ideas take on. I tend to have a conceptual traffic jam in my brain, but somehow the way I work is pretty organised. Right now, I’m rolling with the painting-flow, but in the summer I’ll switch to writing again because my cottage is just perfect for it. As regards photography, deep winter or pouring rain don’t really make for the best working conditions because my projects all entail spending a lot of time in the outdoors. So I guess this makes my practice directly linked to the seasons.

**What impact has your home town Bad Iburg had on you as an artist?**

Well, for those who don’t know Bad Iburg... Apart from a castle, which was once used to educate the kings of Prussia, there isn’t much else to see in this little nest in Lower Saxony except for woods, woods, and more woods. As a kid, I would wander through the forest for hours, mostly barefoot, by myself. Spending a big part of my childhood in the lush oasis that I then called home definitely shaped me as an artist. What sucks is



*“By docking  
onto nature,  
they too can  
engage in  
acts of divine  
creation.”*

that my life today isn't as green as it once was. I mean, just look at my pathetic front garden. I would love to own a park. Sigh.

**Nature is the major theme of your work. How do you define the abstract, ambiguous and controversial term "nature"?**

Nature only lives through terminology. I mean, who can talk about nature in its entirety, let alone understand it as a whole? Probably no one. That's why we put nature into language because words provide the clarity and precision needed for talking about something as grand as nature. But, my question is, what remains to be said when phrases and expressions are discarded?

**Do you give artistic precedence to a certain natural-philosophical perspective?**

Yes, Rousseau's. In contrast to Voltaire or Nietzsche, he didn't base his view of nature on a phenomenon of distance or the thesis that humans are at the mercy of nature and its intolerable cruelties. Instead, what he saw first and foremost was nature's ability to be and to do good, no matter what might or might not happen within its boundaries. I too believe this to be true, not least because mother nature often serves as our companion and refuge. It provides us with a *Heimatgefühl*, a sense of place.

**For some years now, there exists an official term for the age of man-made climate change. What is your opinion on the so-called Anthropocene and does its discourse play a role in your art?**

Not in my paintings themselves, but in what I read and write, yes. I think the term sounds a bit high-handed but it's actually on point if you define it as there being damn well nothing in the entire world that is free of human influence. Everything is either man-made or man-dominated. Sadly.

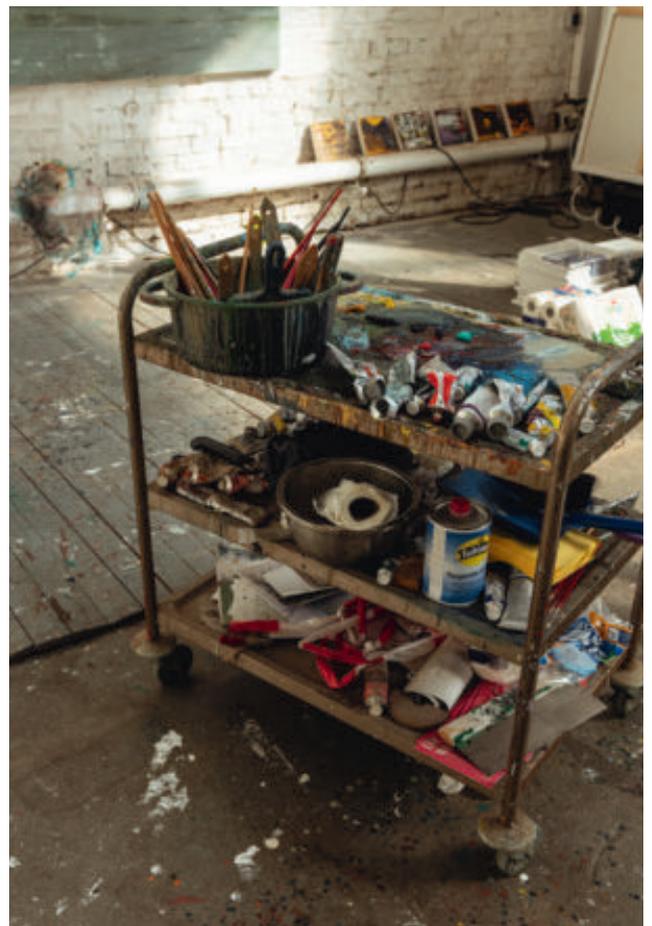
**In the "Felder" series, you use both historically contaminated and politicised places to investigate the discrepancy between the deeper meaning of a landscape and its pure visibility. What do you aim to achieve by contrasting the idyll with (past and present) reality?**

I am interested in architecture of meaning. When I exhibit photos from this series, most people react by saying something along the lines of "Oh, how beautiful". But then they see the work's title and all of a sudden their tone shifts to "Oh, how awful". To me, this effect of knowledge on people's behaviour is really intriguing.

**"I believe that most people categorise nature as a surplus of form and colour."**

It's as if our meaning-making processes are contingent on socially conditioned perceptual patterns. This mismatch as well as the materialisation of memory in nature are mainly what I explore here.

**In 2007, you walked along the entire 1620 km long shore of the river Rhine, pressing the shutter release of your camera every minute. How did you come up with this idea, which at first glance seems rather odd, and why is the "Rhein-Projekt" of social importance to you?**





The idea came to me during a walk with the dog I had before Biene. I was looking at the opposite shore of the Rhine and suddenly realised that we who live by this river tend to say stuff like: “Hey, let’s go to the Rhine”. But, accurately speaking, we should say that we’re headed to a small section or, better yet, a tiny fraction of the river. So, because our brains seem to be suffering from radius-related shortcomings, a thought occurred to me: What if we were able to grasp the Rhine in its entirety?

**Over the years, you have built up a large network in Düsseldorf and are known for being an excellent host. How did you become so well-connected?**

There’s no self-interest at play, it just happened. Honestly, I think it has a lot to do with the fact that I don’t ever go to restaurants – partially because I smoke all the time and partially because of my dogs. Fortunately, I like to cook and, since eating in company is more fun, people I know and like are welcome to join me. What’s great for them is that they can smoke here as well, no problem!

What I would say in general is that Düsseldorf profits from short physical and communicative distance. The art scene here is really tight-knit — on Hansaallee alone there’s Gursky on the right and Ruff on the left. Back in the day, everybody would meet at Spoerri’s

place near Burgplatz. To me, this close network of cultural players enlivens Düsseldorf.

**Thanks a lot!**

**STEPHAN-KALUZA.DE**

