

Thomas Schönauer: Artist-philosopher

A conversation with [Irene Daum](#) and [Peter Tepe](#) | Section: [Interviews](#)

Part I ([Go to Part II](#))

The conversation with Thomas Schönauer took place on 24 May 2017 in his studio in Düsseldorf. The transcription of the recording was supplemented by several further questions and answers.

The online journal w/k is concerned with all possible connections between science and the visual arts. When it comes to the participation of individuals there are [three basic forms](#): the “border crosser” between science and visual art (1st form); the science-related artist (2nd form); and collaborations involving at least one artist and one scientist working jointly on a specific project (3rd form).

Thomas Schönauer, you are a particularly interesting case for w/k since all three basic forms coincide in your work. To begin with, in some of your works you have adopted a science-related approach. Then, in other projects you have also collaborated with scientists. Finally, you also present yourself as an artist-philosopher - your philosophical reflections can be read in the Huffington Post, for instance. So in a certain respect you are also one of the “border crossers” who do both, even though in the narrower sense you do not perform scientific research.

Your categorisation is spot on. But what are you aiming at in this conversation?

We are hoping to describe as precisely as possible the evident links between science and visual art in your work to enable a profounder understanding of your art. Once w/k readers are given the means to recognise these connections while also taking into account the reception of your sculptures and pictures, they will gain a better grasp of what you are concerned with and why you have adopted your particular approach. It is also our intention to reach beyond the usual level of “texts about art”: we certainly don’t wish to cling pedantically to the surface or gush fawning praise, but would rather delve deeper into the essence of your work.

I am with you. Maybe in the course of this conversation certain ideas that as yet I have followed only intuitively will grow clearer to me too. Besides, any exchange with intelligent collocutors is a source of inspiration.

Let's begin with the artist Thomas Schönauer who collaborates with scientists or scientifically trained experts (3rd form). Which disciplines do you work with and why do you do this?

Before answering this question I would like to offer a broader perspective. I started out with sculpture, so I am as it were a man of space. In particular, I work with abstract sculpture and concentrate, among other things, on the marginal realms of structural feasibility. My purpose is to make weight appear not heavy, to work with non-material space in the same way as with material space. The non-material describes the area between that which is materially formed and that which is materially absent, in other words a gap - an interval between elements of the sculpture, a gap between an architectural background and the sculpture.

To your question: for a sculpture located in public space that borders on the limits of technical feasibility I need a creative yet scientific, excellent structural engineer. I must clearly formulate what I want and then take on board one or more structural engineer/engineers. I would never manage this process on my own.

Could you describe your method with an example?

For my large installation *Himmelskreuz* [Heaven's Cross] for the town of Wittenberg I built a model. I approached ten different steel engineering companies. Their answers were all the same: "It can't be done". But in the end I found one creative steel engineer who said, "Of course that can be built. But we'll have to modify certain details in the form to get it structurally right". Those are the kinds of people I need.



Thomas Schönauer: Himmelskreuz im Luthergarten [Heaven's Cross in the Luther Garden] (2016). Photo: Ralph Richter.

What interests you then, is to develop aspects of the sculpture that appear to be unfeasible.

That's right. This is also a reason why I stopped creating surfaces made of oxidised metal or stainless steel in preference to colour. In our perception, rust or sheer steel offers only limited associative possibilities. The association that immediately springs to mind is "heavy metal". On the other hand, when you see a large and heavy sculpture in colour you are not cluttered with preconceptions about the material. It could be made of wood, plastic or some other substance. This is how I wish to surprise viewers. They will then get closer to the sculpture, gently knock on it to discover whether it is made of metal and maybe wonder how that is possible. To prompt such perceptual responses I need to collaborate with scientists and engineers. By contrast, however, in the case of *Himmelskreuz* and the new series of *Cultivator* sculptures, the use of colour as an "alienation effect" is not required. Here the structural and dynamic possibilities are taken to such an extreme that the steel with its treated surface is by all means "allowed" to manifest its most intrinsic quality without confining the viewer's imagination.

Are there correlations to science in your painting too?

Indeed there are. As a sculptor I have always also been preoccupied with two-dimensionality, have drawn and painted. But I was never satisfied with the results. I have experimented a lot, on paper or with oil paint, and thrown away most of what I produced. But I have never given up trying to find the third dimension of a surface. Then 15 years ago, in 2002, I got to know the head of development in an oil paint company who said, "I think I know what you want, but you have to describe it more precisely." So we sat down together and performed our first trials with acrylate polymers. To start with, these

attempts were still “classic”, in the sense that I was trying to create space on top of the surface by means of layering. Then it occurred to me, “No, that’s too conventional. The space is supposed to be an illusion, not topography.”

Can you go into more detail about your work with chemists?

I carried out some experiments together with adhesives chemists and materials researchers. We employed systems for the industrial bonding of steel, which in turn led me to use stainless steel as a painting ground. This surface no longer has an absorptive ground, thus allowing a fluid mass to spread out over it. Chemists from materials research were required so we could create spatial illusion by means of the sharp contrast between black and white acrylic-based pigments or complementary colours. On an impromptu visit to my studio Frau Bagel-Trah, a member of the supervisory board at Henkel, was fascinated by my experiments and inquired into my method. She was so enthusiastic that I was given access to the laboratories of the international market leader for adhesive systems, which of course opened up inconceivable opportunities to an artist interested in such research like myself.

Can we summarise what we have discussed so far? First, you cooperated with scientists, technicians and engineers to overcome a problem of viability for sculptures that had initially seemed irresolvable. It was only through this collaborative relationship that you were able to implement your artistic concept. Second, as a result of your cooperation with chemists and materials specialists you came across new possibilities of painting, which since then you have systematically and exhaustively probed.

That’s right. I would like to add that my activities both in sculpture and painting are marked by my quest for the unconventional. The formal language I had in mind could not be achieved using orthodox methods. So I had to turn to specialists and advisors. But there is a further aspect to this: the new painting technique makes it possible to address the structure of the micro- and macro-system – a theme that from a philosophical perspective had already interested me for quite some time.

At this point it might make sense to undertake a brief digression into philosophy. From 1974 to 1978 you studied philosophy and German literature at the Heinrich Heine University in Düsseldorf. In 1975 you were taken on as assistant to the sculptor [Friederich Werthmann](#). How did this transition from a particular field of the humanities to art come about?

Remaining materially independent during my studies was important to me, so I had to earn money and was always on the lookout for jobs. It was a pure stroke of luck that led me to Werthmann. It was a suggestion from an older fellow student who was a sculptor but had returned to uni to study because he didn’t earn enough to live on with his art. He said, “Werthmann needs an assistant in preparation for an exhibition”. So I went to see him and seemingly didn’t act too ineptly during the short probation period – and got the job.

The most influential university professors for my development were the German philologist Herbert Anton and the philosopher Rudolf Heinz. They urged me to pursue a university career. But after working for six weeks with Werthmann I realised that the wholly immaterial world was not my world. Being a haptic person, I don’t find purely intellectual activity satisfying in the long term.

For three years I managed to combine intense university studies with a technical training in Werthmann’s studio – an important experience for me. I was then confronted with the question of where to place the key focus of my life and decided to take the plunge into the unknown world of art. In 1978 I graduated from my philosophy studies and set up my own studio.

I now wanted to be an artist and earned my living by doing various jobs. One of these was building furniture. In the first few years, life was a huge struggle. Often enough I barely had a penny in my pocket because anything I earned was immediately reinvested. At the outset I made sculptures that were three to four metres high. That cost a lot of money. I seldom made any sales. In my opinion, the only way to pursue an artistic career is: onwards, forever onwards and never give up! In the meantime, I have built an oeuvre of over 400 sculptures.

What benefits did you draw from studying humanities?

I gained a lot from the fact that in the 1970s studying humanities was altogether unlike school. Attending seminars in psychology was as much part of a committed student's daily routine as were lectures in art history. The seminars in Romance Symbolist literature or about the German Expressionists took me deep into the sphere of art.

You are one of the successful artists who didn't study at an art academy. Another example from Düsseldorf is [Mischa Kuball](#) How do you explain this?

Due to circumstances, attending an academy was not really necessary for me. Life in the studio in Werthmann's building was marked by international exchange. Very early on, I got to know Christo and Jeanne Claude there. David Nash and others also crossed paths in Werthmann's Düsseldorf studio. In addition, I travelled a lot and as early as in 1977 a fortunate turn of events also brought me to Andy Warhol's studio. In 1980 I got to know Norbert Kricke, at that time the director of the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie, who in a "paternal" way took me around exhibitions and from museum to museum. In 1981 I was urged by Bernd Becher, who I had got to know three years earlier in his New York loft, to consider going to art school after all. He organised a meeting for me with Kricke's "arch enemy" Klaus Rinke, who after I'd spent one session in his class let me join his course, which I finally quit in 1983. But please don't ask me what more I was supposed to learn there - on balance it was just depressing ...

Previously you mentioned that the new painting technique enabled you to explore the structure of the micro- and macro-system that was of philosophical interest to you. This suggests that even after studying philosophy your artistic work still bore a connection to philosophy. Could you tell us more about this?

Let's put it this way: even today, for me philosophy provides the intellectual foundation for my artistic work. To define and understand the world as a material and non-material cosmos is a philosophical act and a source of inspiration for me. This has been compounded in the course of my many years of work with my exploration of scientific disciplines: physics, chemistry and biology. It was only through understanding, generating and then also visualising the analogies in the consideration of micro- and macrocosmic systems within philosophical and scientific contexts that I was able to develop my new painting technique.

So your images relating to computer tomography are probably best viewed in this context. Is this your attempt to find direct artistic transformations of certain experiences in the realm of the micro- and macrocosm?

Yes, precisely that. Let me take for example a computer tomography from 2004. I had this taken of me without it being occasioned by any illness and then cut it up into thousands of snippets to assemble a film describing a journey into my body. The different micro-systems gave rise to the universe of the body.

Did you then proceed in a similar way in your painting?

Indeed, here too I also try to advance from micro-systems into a macro-system. If you look at certain works you can observe this opposition through associations. Let us take, for instance, the picture *CT-Universe 51/2013*. At its centre is a pulsating concretion caused by the implosion of a star. That's the macrocosmic component. Compared to this, other images instead show the microcosmic. The closer you get to the image the smaller the cosmoses get that you discover in it, as in this particular work.



Thomas Schönauer: CT-Universe 51/2013 (2013). Photo: Stefan Lindauer.



Thomas Schönauer: CT-Universe 58/2013 (2013). Photo: Stefan Lindauer.

On your homepage you speak of metaphysical sculptures. Is this a further reference to philosophy?

That is just another expression for something I described previously. I've always felt that the non-materialised space in a sculpture is sometimes more interesting than materialised space. Many art viewers fail to understand that the true drama of a sculpture resides in what happens between its visible elements and the work's immediate surroundings. This is what I mean with the metaphysical reference. Several examples: in the mid-1990s I was interested in sculptures that made explicit reference to architecture. These multiple sculptures can be compared with non-functional buildings. Here the gaps are essential components of the sculptures – without them the sculpture would be dead.



Thomas Schönauer: 16/96 (1996). Photo: Stefan Lindauer.

So, to recapitulate, can one say that while the switch from studying humanities to studying the fine arts represented a biographical caesura, certain philosophical ideas nonetheless also continued to resonate in your artistic work? Your philosophical interest, for instance, in micro- and macro-structures and in gaps has remained, but it is now being pursued in a different medium.

That is correct. This touches on the central impulse of my artistic work. I don't create sculpture for sculpture's sake but see it constantly in context.

In my sculpture *Chaos and Order*, for instance, I have created an intrinsically harmonious order by tearing up several components. "Chaos / Order" is a further philosophical theme I am preoccupied with.



Thomas Schönauer: Chaos and Order III (2017). Photo: Stefan Lindauer.

In your philosophical reflections do you feel an affinity to certain positions?

I do. I was always strongly influenced by Existentialism, especially Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. And I am still fascinated by the question of the Absurd. My interpretation of this theme is: you have to dive in at the deep end; you should seek to depart from the prescribed path. I believe this is a necessary precondition for doing art at all.

Have you also acted against prevailing norms in other areas of life?

Well, I married a black woman from Brazil, a psychologist. And I was fascinated by the experience of letting myself fall into a different cultural sphere – it's a huge challenge.

Are there other examples for this approach to life, of purposefully exposing oneself to the unknown?

For five months I travelled through the Amazon region, also in search of adventures within myself. I was driven by the urge to embrace risk, to penetrate a world that was utterly new to me. Later on, I travelled 70,000 km by train through India, in third class. That is experiencing life from an unusual perspective. If you do that you also look into yourself. In my opinion, experiences of this nature are a prerequisite if you want to be an innovative artist or a good researcher or a responsible politician. Once in your life at least you need to have come up against a truly critical situation and to have coped with it. To seek something new also always entails taking hazards, letting yourself into something if you wish to benefit from the experience, as well as to achieve personal growth.

Since we happen to be talking about philosophy, would it at this point be opportune to consider your own philosophical ideas, which you have published in the Huffington Post? This might focus attention on Thomas Schönauer as the “border crosser” between science

(here as philosophy) and the visual arts (1st form). What is the subject of your philosophical writings?

One of my propositions is that when science and art cease to be innovative they are effectively dead. An artist can hammer nails into wood for eighty years. At the outset maybe it was cutting-edge, but then it just turned into pure market speculation. In contrast to that, my aim is always to take new paths. That might be detrimental to me if people's response is to say, "We can't recognise who made it." But I simply get dissatisfied by doing the same thing for a long time. Then I would stop being an artist in the true sense. For me, art is the *quintessential* synonym for dynamic change. I can propel this kind of process by means of my haptically concrete activity, but also through verbal articulation – hence my texts.

Most artists tend to travel down certain established paths that they have stepped onto at some point. There are only a few who constantly raise new artistic problems which they then seek to resolve. Is that not also true of science? Don't most scientists work for their entire scientific lives within the framework of certain established theories? There is only a small number of scientists who are always in search of new approaches and develop new theories. There seems to be an analogous structure here when it comes to innovative artists and innovative scientists.

That is exactly how I see it. This ties in seamlessly with another line of my philosophical thinking. I differentiate between linear thinking that is connected to the structure of preserving the status quo and hierarchies, and disruptive, innovative, complex thinking. I advocate calling an end to linear thinking and switching to complex thinking. Its central focus should be on asking the right questions. This is an important issue both for the scientist and the artist. We need to find a way out of the crisis imposed on us by linear and hierarchical thinking that has always been bound to a certain system of answers.

From your answers to our questions it is evident that, following on from your studies of humanities, you - unlike many other artists - reflect intensely on your own artistic work and also articulate this in language. To culminate our first round of conversation maybe we could take a closer look at this aspect of the "border crosser" between philosophy and visual art.

It frustrates me to see that many of my fellow artists are too lazy to reflect on why they actually do art. One of my core precepts is: "Without a concept I cannot make art". For instance, it's too easy to say: now I am peeing against the canvas – for me that's too little. In science something of that kind won't work, as little as it would in a socially responsible position. I have to do some thinking about why I am actually doing what I do, I have to look for a central question. But then I also have to supply an answer, and in the true sense of the word "show my colours". That is my social duty. We should not be satisfied with just lying back: we have to shape the world, we carry social responsibility.

You hold a lot of lectures, particularly on the theme of innovation. What will the subject of your next talk be?

It will be about the idea of utilising art. If someone asks what the function of art is, they aren't really talking about art in its proper sense. Design has a function, but art has no function. To ordain some purpose from on high that art is supposed to serve, is an abuse of art. In my opinion art's task is to prompt people to reflect on why things are as they are. It is also with this in mind that the quality of art can be measured.

You appear to understand both forms of thinking - the hierarchical and the innovative - as cultural styles that have impact on every sphere of art, that give rise, say, to certain kinds of economic activity or theoretical construction - or to art.

That's correct. The kind of expansive, cross-linked way of thinking that facilitates innovation corresponds, for instance, with a certain manner of building. Take the headquarters of Apple, which is built in the form of a gigantic circle. Or Tesla or Microsoft, fantastic, completely twisted shapes - this is how buildings are conceived in the creative sector. The skyscraper represents speculation on extracting maximum profit from extremely expensive building ground and as such is consistent with the systems of power that inhibit innovation and depend on hierarchies. In short, this is about overcoming top-down thinking with all its cultural consequences.

That marks an excellent conclusion for the first part of our conversation. To be continued.

[Go to Part II](#)

Biographical information is available at [Contributors](#).

Picture above article: Thomas Schönauer: Cultivator I (2017). 225 x 265 x 350 cm, polished stainless steel. Photo: Stefan Lindauer.

Tags

1. Border Crosser
2. cooperation between artists and scientists
3. interview
4. Irene Daum
5. Peter Tepe
6. philosophy
7. science-related art
8. Thomas Schönauer