

KATHARINA GROSSE STEFAN SCHNEIDER

TIERGARTEN Album Vinyl/DL

TAL03

International release date 04.03.2017

Worldwide distribution MORR



Walter Benjamin begins his *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, a book in the form of a series of vignettes, with the following two sentences: "Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling."

Entitled **Tiergarten**, after the eponymous park in central Berlin, this passage from Benjamin's memoir written in the 1930s anticipates what a generation later Guy Debord put forth with his concept of *dérive* (1956) – a kind of consciously counterintuitive drifting through the city in order to upend its common logic and routine. The city as a sometimes alien piece of nature that you moonwalk through can still be resuscitated, even a century after the initial experiences described.

It may be tempting to describe the first collaborative album by **Katharina Grosse** and **Stefan Schneider**, titled **Tiergarten** as a collaboration of an internationally renowned visual artist and an equally internationally renowned musician. Grosse's distinctive approach to non-representational painting on an architectural scale, well beyond the limits of the canvas, has been the subject of exhibitions worldwide, at art institutions including *New York's MoMA PS1*, *Chicago's Renaissance Society*, or the *Palais de Tokyo* in Paris. And **Schneider's** musical activities have gone from being a founding member of Dusseldorf outfit *Kreidler*, through his longtime commitment as a member of Berlin-based trio *To Rococo Rot*, to his many performances and recordings with musicians including Krautrock legends *Hans-Joachim Roedelius (Cluster)*, *Klaus Dinger (Kraftwerk, NEU!)*, and *Hans-Joachim Irmler (Faust)*, or contemporary drumming virtuoso *John McEntire (Tortoise, The Sea and Cake)*.

But while each of **Grosse's** and **Schneider's** activities have resonated around the globe, the rather technical, disengaged term "collaboration" seems inept to describe what they do together. Rather, it's a sort of almost telepathic understanding that has grown out of a long friendship. **Tiergarten** is an instrumental album of two performers on analogue synthesizers interacting, communicating, contemplating, complementing each other through their instruments and intuitions.

The two first met in the late 1980s. Both were studying fine arts at Dusseldorf Academy. **Grosse** painted, **Schneider** photographed. Conversations between **Schneider** and **Grosse** never stopped; throughout the 1990s and 2000s, on their different trajectories as artist and musician respectively, they stayed in touch.

After a number of performances between 2008-2015, often with and within **Grosse's** painted and sculpted environments, the two decided to record an album together. The self-imposed limit of two players with a synthesizer each came natural – grown out of that first encounter back at artschool, but with increasing mutual understanding, developed over decades. While **Grosse** was new to the Bass Station Innovation 2 synthesizer she acquired, she quickly and fastidiously explored its possibilities. Meanwhile **Schneider** used an DSI Evolver (a small, versatile digital-analogue hybrid), and a 1980s Schlumberger sinus generator. That's pretty much it.

Over the course of two years, with this sparse set-up, the two made recordings. They prepared for these recordings, but separately – and then, intuitively and listening to one another playing live, formed clusters of sound, an intensive conversation "without fixations" (**Grosse**).

However, what these tracks evoke are not concrete, static images, but surprising, lively scenes. Analogue synthesizers – at least the way **Grosse** and **Schneider** make use of them in a sense of personal as well as aesthetic trust – are in themselves reminiscent of living organs in the sense that they can be more than simply tools giving a linear output to straightforward input, instead drifting into unknown territory.

Benjamin's way of navigating the city almost like blindfold, perceiving the street names like the snapping of twigs and the sunlight in small streets like the echo of mountain valleys, becomes the musical programme of the unprogrammable. A sort of heightened sense of listening to one another, second by second. However, this is not about mutual accompaniment, nor is it about alternately leading, but about two players' contribution becoming so intricately intertwined it's sometimes hard to keep them apart. No policy of distinct layers or loops, but a kind of polymorphous surging and quivering.

"We don't discuss, but we do come to an agreement nevertheless," says **Grosse**. There is no target they aim for, other than the formal parameters of an album, with nine tracks, with the shortest, **Schattenmodell**, just over a minute – sounding like a positively nervous flock of robot birds –, and the longest the opening track **Blueberry** at 8:19 minutes, a slowly probing venture into the bass and treble strata of a musical exoplanet. In other words, the time window here is compatible more with pop rather than environmental ambient or symphony. The nine tracks form a cycle in which certain motifs or soundscapes reoccur and subtly mutate – like sirens, dark rivers, gravel, a rippling water surface, cells multiplying, ice melting.

And the album artwork in turn is a visual resonance of that relationship. The cover features the close-up onto a detail of one **Grosse's** spray-painted works, shimmering in hues of green and blue on a corrugated cardboard surface. You see paint runs and spray coronas, and still the tones and textures make you think of an insect's wing, or snake skin. The inner sleeve, in turn, shows photographs by **Schneider**: a scree slope up in the high mountains, just at the upper end of the treeline, a bird's eye view onto a majestic yet delicate structure punctuated by green brushes and grey stones. Just as the music, the artwork of cover and inner sleeve suggests a flip-flopping between micro- and macro perspectives.

Grosse's non-figurative painting is, just like the music she and **Schneider** have recorded, non-semantic, neither defined by presenting meaning or sense, nor actual nonsense. That said, presences, atmospheres, and affects are surely at play, and they are not just the incidental music to an expressed meaning, but *are* the meaning. As **Grosse** puts it: "In our music, affects such as aggression or delicacy are not active agents that are good, or objectionable – instead, they just *are*." There are no role models to embrace or personas to identify with. Hence one may attempt to describe the music palpably as reminding of Sci-Fi worlds or organic tissue under the microscope. You still need these slightly lopsided metaphors to describe something that you, strictly speaking, never heard before, because **Grosse** and **Schneider** manage to squeeze and tickle sounds out of these instruments that are still quite unfathomable.

After *Weissensee* by NEU!, and *Neukoln* bei Bowie and Eno – both named after districts of Berlin – **Grosse** and **Schneider**, with **Tiergarten**, bring their very own, fresh approach to this short but significant tradition of pulsating analogue synthesisia dedicated to Berlin and its historic and aesthetic landscape.

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