

The Whisper of the Stars in Siberia – Interview with Juergen Staack

Mr Staack, how did you get the idea of recording ice whispering and putting it into an artistic concept?

I was fascinated by the idea that breath freezes at very low temperatures and makes a unique sound as the ice crystals form. It's a very romantic concept and I simply couldn't get it out of my head. No-one had previously succeeded in recording this phenomenon and even during my stay in Siberia, I sometimes started to think that the whole thing is perhaps just a myth.

For a long time, I had been working on transforming photographs into speech and sounds in order to make them more abstract and to create a new inherent value. I trained as a photographer, but at the end of my training I was quickly disillusioned by photography as a medium. Everyone consumes it, no-one questions it and, within the flood of images around us, the individual photo no longer has any significance, any value.

For that reason, in my artistic work I let pictures become a kind of inspiration. I give people photos and let them talk about them, for example I ask them to describe what they see. That aroused my interest in languages. The more obscure a language is, the more encrypted the description becomes. I then need a mediator into the world of thoughts for which this language is an expression.

Did you also record voice documents in Siberia?

Yes, for the exhibition itself we recorded a geologist who lives in Oymyakon and who describes the phenomenon of ice whispering in his native Yakut – with illustrative



descriptions of temperature such as "so cold that the birds freeze to death in flight and fall to the ground". We also made recordings of Tamara, Yegorov and other inhabitants of the village.

And, of course, while we were waiting for the weather to get colder, I spent my time collecting material for my picture descriptions. In most cases, the people in my interviews initially focus on the description, but they very soon

start to tell stories and sing songs – and the folklore of a people unfolds before my very eyes. From Siberia, I brought back narratives and songs of the Evenks and Evens, who make up only 2.2 and 1.6 percent respectively of the Republic of Sakha. The recordings also include parts of “Olonkhos”, shaman tales and songs of the Yakuts, which can have between 10,000 and 40,000 verses and which are sung and narrated over several evenings.

The technical equipment that accompanied you on this journey is actually designed for much more moderate temperatures. What were the biggest challenges and what measures did you take to keep the equipment working?

We gathered as much information as possible before we left and spoke to a lot of experts, including Sennheiser. Of course, no piece of technical equipment has ever been tested under such extreme conditions, and the internet is full of the wildest stories of displays shattering and cables snapping in the cold. We then relied on both quality and quantity and took a lot of equipment with us to make sure we always had a replacement at hand if something broke down. We used equipment and accessories from as many different manufacturers as possible, took special equipment with us wherever possible and combined both analogue and digital equipment.

In fact, some of the stories were actually true – standard cables did indeed break in the cold. I once went outside in a hurry and at this very moment the cables froze rigid and couldn’t be stored anywhere. So I had to go back inside and carefully thaw them out. On the digital camera, the crystals in the displays first began to move extremely slowly before the display failed completely. The camera still worked however. On the analogue camera, I noticed the shutter slowly starting to freeze up.



So we had to develop certain techniques: we carried the battery packs and recorders close to our body and pulled the cables through our sleeves. Anything that had to be used outside was not taken out until shortly before the recordings were made and was switched on indoors before we went out. It was not only that it was impossible to operate small switches while wearing thick gloves, some of the equipment worked perfectly when it was switched on indoors but refused to start up when we tried to switch it on at -50°C...

How would you sum up your journey?

We succeeded in recording the whisper of the stars, that was the greatest success for me. I would have liked to have made a second recording, but the weather was kind to us only once. We met many wonderful people from a unique culture, people with fascinating traditions and ancient beliefs. One can really get homesick for Yakutia...

Captions:

Olonkho singers.jpg: Thomas Neumann (l.) and Juergen Staack with two Olonkho singers

Equipment.jpg: Ice age for the equipment – to keep the equipment working, it was switched on while still indoors and was worn close to the body for as long as possible when outside in the cold