

sotterraneo

Land Art Project between Zug and Genoa. Call to search for the treasure

The story sounds like a fairy tale: In the park of the Villa Aldo Brandini in Rome a woman hides a silver egg between a split tree and attaches a wish to it. It is not the wish for a Prince, but alas in a fairy tale one may wish for success as the woman had done.

Her wish was granted, and one year later she returned to the Villa Aldo Brandini, looking for the tree trunk in which she had hid the silver egg. But of course...it was gone! Some would suggest that the finder had nothing to do with the silver egg, it was pure chance, or perhaps that the egg did have some special meaning for the finder. That would be the beginning of a nice story. But at this point in time, a different story will be told. One that is told in a different genre to a fairy tale. It is the story of an art project by Nina Staehli. A story that is in certain ways is attached to the fairy tale above. In actual fact she did hide the silver egg in the above-mentioned park while developing the project for the art & architecture competition. The wish attached to the egg showed itself to come true, Nina Staehli won first prize. Since then, 4 oval aluminium eggs lay in the alder forest in the schoolyard of the Riedmatt School in Zug. Not only do they take the form of 2 meter high oval structures, but they are also spatially accessible, making them act like a protective cocoon in which one can withdraw from the outside world.

Oval Forms are a theme that Nina Staehli has occupied herself with over and above the Riedmatt Project, and in later works she applies the same standards to her sculptural projects. What arose are singular eggs and towers of super-imposed layers of clay, which maintain their archetypal shape and strong aesthetic figures. What is an inexhaustible form is also a burden. The preoccupation with these ovals may have become an obsession, to have an effect beyond that obsession one needs to literally dispose of it. The oval forms had this effect on Nina Staehli's work that they became ballast. Which is why Nina Staehli wanted to expose these eggs at first on the lake of Zug as floating objects? But eggs do not belong in water, at least not these ones, especially not when its material nature is terrestrial in origin. Over and above that, when one thinks of eggs, and life, one can't escape its cyclical nature. The eggs should be removed from view, but at the same time activate a "life"-cycle in the artistic sense - For Nina Staehli and the public, another reason to get active. That is when Nina Staehli decided to bury the eggs.

Not just anywhere, but on a previously determined route. This route was determined, with analogy to the eggs, but its shape.

The oval is no circle. The tapering ends can be seen as a starting and end point of motion. Since the oval does not have a pinnacle, one disposes towards thinking of one its path/tracks as being in motion all the time. Start and end points become turning points and the dynamic of it that arrival also means setting out. This is exactly the characteristic -as turning point or pendular pole - that the specific places en route Nina Staehli's biography contains - Zug and Genoa.

Albeit that Nina Stähli has worked for many years in Cham/ Zug, she is a cross border commuter. Her artistic and theatrical works have constantly led her back to Italy. The cities of Rome and Genoa play key roles in this. She has established contacts in Genoa and integrated herself in the Genovese lifestyle. A city that symbolises openness, with its ocean, where the border between indigenous and foreign are often blurred, and is repeatedly broken down and recreated. With this world knowledge and the quasi-stability of the maritime city, Nina Stähli always returns to Zug to produce and complete her works of art. With this vast array of experience, Nina Stähli makes use of her artistic talents to contrast the cities of the world.

This back and forth movement is also constant frontier crossing - in an artistic sense, and banal in the geographic sense as well. With her "oval" decisively through the various locations where the eggs should be buried, Nina Staehli creates an imaginary curve through boundaries and beyond. She ignores political boundaries, much like migratory birds on their journey of migration, or the pilgrims in earlier epochs. The locations chosen for Nina Staehli's sculptures were already memorials or places of pilgrim worship: The stations are called Saint Maurice in Switzerland, Pré Saint Didier, Sant Ambrogio, San Giovanni in Italy and finally a small church in Genoa's slum district. Then back over San Stefano D'Aveto, San Daniele Po, San Martino della Battaglia and finally back to Switzerland at San Carlo.

Before her "burial" voyage, Nina Staehli carefully researched the meanings of the locations, the history of the saints in whose honour the churches were dedicated, therefore adding to the impression that this is not just a journey, but a pilgrimage.

Those who went on pilgrimage often search for clarification or spiritual awareness. This sets out dedication and commitment that is barely possible to achieve in the secularised world. Every church visit awakes a conflict between the conscience of one's own cultural anchoring or religious upbringing - maybe even a nostalgic feeling of awe or reverence - and a critical mode of thinking that one can come up against in this form of dedication.

These are small statues which have saint-like attributes, but with their animal-heads give the impression of worship ideals of a foreign religion. She photographed these sculptures either on the altar or in front of churches or the crevices in catacombs between sacred pictures. Confrontation doesn't necessarily mean provocation, and so Nina Staehli always took into consideration the feelings and sensitivities of the priests and custodians. However, it is astonishing to see the aura that these small figures in the photos develop once placed in a religiously charged environment. An aura ascribed by the beholder, one which is throughout ambivalent. This feeling heightens the sense of one's own personal, cultural or religious bond.

This principle of normative infringement comes out in the main work as well - the Burials - and a form of literary genre is produced here. One that doesn't tell a fairy tale, but the story of the grave digger. He who buries a treasure must do so in secret, without witnesses. This operation creates a sense of adventure, and sets free a series of considerations and fears. Even before setting off with her companion,

Nina Staehli had to search for reasonable explanations with which to soothe the curious minds of many a customs official, should they ever discover the digging equipment, eggs and wooden statues. During the actual digging expedition, the two adventurers were consumed with feelings the fear of being discovered, a feeling that is not too irrational when one considers that the holes being dug had the exact dimensions in which one could bury a small child. And then it happened. What everyone had feared. On the 31st December 2004 in San Giovanni in Piedmont a farmer merrily on his way with his trusty canine companion stumbled upon the two adventurers. They tried explaining to him that it was an art project. But some things sound too strange to be true, even for the person telling it. Did the farmer believe these two odd foreigners that, in the middle of a harsh winter, on a remote piece of land, they were trying to bury eggs? One would be forgiven for doubting such a story, especially when told under such circumstances. Possibly the two grave diggers even started doubting themselves. One could sense the doubt clearly now, like a crystalline outline it stood out - which brings up the question of impact, meaning and even value that so exemplifies works of art.

With the burial Nina Staehli is trying to assert the value of the work in a clear-cut material manner and to accept this material value. She challenges the public with a blatantly provocative, yet humorous gesture. To accept, yes, even to add value to it by searching for the treasures. Nina Staehli has created a map for each location. One that details the exact location where the treasure is buried. These maps are enclosed in clay structures, which themselves (through their organic form) possess their own aesthetic value. He, who wants to see the map, must therefore destroy the clay structure. Furthermore, whoever wants the eggs must pack in a shovel and pick-axe and must experience the same fears and anxieties that Nina Staehli and companion experienced on their voyage.

Does it suffice, to possess art in its absence so to speak, virtually, representatively through a piece of paper? Or does the possession of art compel the material presence of the work? These questions lead directly to considerations about the value of art in itself - thereto, if the art possessor understands his active part in the examination of art. In this manner Nina Staehli challenges one to go out in search of the treasure, and in the worst case, one gets clarity over oneself. In the best case, one experiences an adventure and wins an art treasure, one which has even more meaning, the greater the obstacles along the way were to overcome.

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