

Table and Chair

Meinrad Buholzer

People will meet at the stones, children will explore under the table and climb on to the chair. This sculpture stands for community, brought to life in a stone.

Nadja Iseli, reflecting on her sculpture project for Brünighof

I

At first glance: Four light-colored massive blocks of stone, standing serenely in the courtyard of the new building complex. They stand out, stand in our way and block our view as we cross through the courtyard. And annoy us as we attempt to head for our destination unimpeded. With their coarsely cut surfaces, they set themselves apart from the striking and elegant clinker façade of the newly constructed building.

At second glance, however: The stones are not lying haphazardly here. They have been placed at slight angles and are directly related to one another. They also vary in size. We notice that the stone has not only been quarried, but also sculpted. Seating niches have been cut out of the blocks and polished. One block, slightly smaller than the others, almost square, has the form of a table.

Table and chair: an invitation. To take a seat. To take time. Perhaps to initiate an encounter with others who have gravitated towards the stones. Maybe even to play.

II

At the beginning of this century, trucks still drove in and out of this location. The long trapezoidal stretch of land situated between three streets – Keller-, Brünig- and Industriestrasse – was once home to the Gmür transport company and its storage facilities. Locals also entrusted Gmür as a moving company, whose green vehicles transported their belongings from former dwellings to new homes. For a long time, it was not clear whether Gmür would continue operating its business at this location, but then in 2006, Gmür + Co. decided to move to Waldibrücke in the municipality of Emmen. This plot of land in the city of Lucerne was now ready for a new and different purpose. Subsequent planning led to the Brünighof project comprised of four elements: the existing office building in the Brünigstrasse; opposite it, the atelier building (now with new ateliers featuring combined living and working spaces); adjacent to it, the six-story angular building on the northeast side (at the corner of Brünig-/Kellerstrasse); and the five-story courtyard building on the southwest side (in the Industriestrasse). In addition to a restaurant and shops, the corner and courtyard buildings have a total of 78 rental apartments, which could be occupied in August 2018.

One challenge facing the architects was to design the buildings on this relatively narrow and elongated site in such a manner that the apartments and ateliers receive ample sunlight, while ensuring that the courtyard would not be left as a desolate light shaft. This courtyard, accessible from all four cardinal points during the day, has now become an interface: between the inhabitants of the buildings and passers-by, between private and public use.

III

It was Roland Hergert, from the team of architects, who was convinced of the need to create a

distinctive artistic accent for this building project. The courtyard was singled out as the obvious site, for an appendage hidden somewhere as “art in architecture” would be unfavorable. Desirable was a work of art that would accentuate this situation, that would not be eclipsed by day-to-day life and yet be able to sustain a location exposed to all kinds of weather. With that said, the parameters were defined, not least in terms of material, which restricted any whimsical notions regarding the object.

It was the artist Peter Roesch, brought on board as a consultant by the contractor’s art commission, who recommended commissioning the sculptor Nadja Iseli. She was asked to submit a rough draft, and at the first meeting in May 2017, she presented her concept with a model. The commission backed the draft version but requested a more detailed clarification to determine its feasibility. In June 2017 Nadja Iseli was commissioned with the task.

IV

Nadja Iseli is an artist who needs a resistant material for her work. And resistance also means time. Drawing and painting are too expeditious for her, too fleeting. “Stone demands time from me, the time that I need to dwell on a work. It requires patience; my working process takes longer with stone than with other materials.” When she works on the stone, she makes a breach in a material that, for her, stands for the duration of the universe, thereby creating a present-day accent hewn in the sheer eternity of the stone. That is one side of it. The other is the stone’s capacity to sustain – literally. “Stone is a material that supports us, also in the broadest sense. We walk on stones, build with stones, protect ourselves with stones. Stone is fundamental for human beings.”

V

When standing inside Nadja Iseli’s atelier in Emmenbrücke, one is surrounded by houses. Simple dwellings with gabled roofs, reduced to the minimum – like the ones frequently seen in children’s drawings. In various sizes, sometimes the size of dice, at times that of a book. In most cases they are standing on a knoll, over a precipice, every now and then a path leads up to this object that promises a feeling of security. For her, the house signifies “shelter, home, perhaps family in the broadest sense”. Admittedly, it is also an exposed shelter, potentially at risk due to the forces of nature, besetment or war. This archetypal need for habitation – four walls and a roof – provides a segue into Nadja Iseli’s second profession: a model builder. She constructs models of houses designed by architects – it should be noted at this point that she is married to an architect. This commissioned work and her sculptural dwellings deal with the same thing, with a fundamental human need: habitation, work, protection, as well as yearning. Inclusion and isolation. People can integrate or isolate themselves with a house. “You can even exclude yourself by living in a magnificent single-family dwelling on a mountain; but a person can also choose to live in a co-housing situation.” There are all kinds of forms – the house thus becomes at once a model of one’s own temperament and relation to the world, an indication of how we stand in this world.

VI

With her sculptures in Brünighof, Nadja Iseli now enters the house and provides a view, as it were, of the interior. Here, too, she is dealing with reduction. Table and chair and bed cover the basic living needs. These three pieces of furniture are also found in the most ascetic cells – on the one hand, in the hermitage, on the other hand in the prison cell. To be sure, we separate, at least in our latitudes, the intimate bed from the table and chair.

We receive our guests with table and chair, dine with them and entertain them. As a result, these pieces of furniture also stand for hospitality, the fundamental cultural element of coexistence (which is all too often forgotten when overshadowed by fear or the need for utility and security). Prior to

this, we denoted the courtyard as the interface between private and public use; the living room is hence the interface inside a home, the confluence of the private sphere and the space accessible to our guests. In other words: If the building complex stands for the “home”, then the courtyard with the sculpture stands for the living room. Here, too, in Brünighof, guests are welcome.

VII

In her concept Nadja Iseli views the courtyard as an “urban place of retreat”, a haven that invites people to linger. The balconies of the apartments are directed at various angles towards the courtyard and the oak trees there. Naturally, the courtyard could also be furnished with conventional chairs or benches and tables to fulfil the needs of a meeting place. But then missing would be what in this case “trips us up” and what could serve as an opportunity to reflect. A sculpture like the one before us impedes oblivious utilization. By forcing us to come to a halt, to pause, it becomes a counterpoint to everyday life, when we might otherwise take everything for granted. Perhaps it even annoys us, for our eye cannot simply glide over and beyond it. As a result, it becomes an intervention, an interposition that can change our view of the world – even if only for a brief moment, before being caught up in our daily routine again.

The four stones – the table and the seating areas – are oversized, they are too high and too wide. They therefore “reduce” the space. “Their appearance may confuse, but could also spark interest,” Nadja Iseli writes in her draft for the project. When standing next to it, a person creates a reference to the actual size of the courtyard again. The sculptor imagines how people will meet at the stones, how the stones will be explored, how children will climb on to the chair and crawl under the table. And how they will discover that, in relation to the size of the table and chairs, their parents also appear to be the size of children – with their noses barely above the tabletop.

VIII

Mid-September 2017 we drive over the Splügen Pass to Chiavenna. On the summit of the pass we are enveloped in fog so dense that only by chance are the taillights of the vehicle in front of us visible. Oncoming lorries are discernible just at the last moment. A herd of goats has also sought shelter from the miserable weather in an open-faced tunnel along the road and lick the moisture from the rock walls. For the time being we dispense with the idea of taking a side trip, of navigating the rough dirt road to the quarry, and continue driving to Chiavenna.

It was clear for Nadja Iseli that the situation in Brünighof would require a light-colored stone, a contrast to the dark façade and the play of shadows in the courtyard. She opted for the “Verde Spluga”, a light gneiss with a tint of green and white quartz inclusions. This stone with a medium-grain structure and schistose texture is quarried in the Spluga Valley, half way between Chiavenna and the top of the pass.

The next day the sun is shining. Maurizio Gini, the owner of the stone quarry, picks us up. The black hole in the face of the rock can already be seen from Lago di Isola, like a cavernous, quadratic keyhole, as if made for a gigantic square wrench to gain access to the underworld. After a bumpy uphill ride in an all-terrain minivan, we stand lost in this vast cavern, comparable to a cubic cathedral. Here, in this titanic setting, Spluga gneiss is excavated. Wedges are driven into the stone until it breaks; it is sawed, bored with a drill and eventually helped along with minor blasts of dynamite. Then the block is tilted forwards, moved along the cavern with an excavator, slid on to a lorry that sinks under the load with a groan and then transported down into the valley to the Graniti Conrad plant.

The quarry has been in operation for 70 years. Initially, gneiss was only excavated in an open-pit quarry. About 25 years ago quarrying began to move inwards. Some 20,000 cubic meters are extracted from the mountain every year; a cubic meter weighs roughly four tons. These days Spluga gneiss is only excavated at this location. Although there are still a few other quarries in the region,

they are now abandoned. The stone is generally used for paving tiles, flooring, façades, kitchens. Business fared quite well 25 years ago, explains Maurizio Gini, but these days it suffers from competition from China.

IX

That afternoon at the Graniti Conrad plant in Piuro. A stock of stones in various sizes. Coarse blocks, small and large slabs. Verde Spluga, as well as Soglio Quartzite. Polished, flamed, brushed, dressed, split and sandblasted.

Nadja Iseli scouts around, examining the stone blocks from all sides, measuring them, touching them, running her hand over them. She walks from one to another and then back again, deliberating, gauging, comparing, aligning them with her ideas, with her project. "The stone needs to have a certain look about it," she explains, "an appearance that has to appeal to me. The structure of the surface, the break lines, the sides." Deciding this from afar, with photos, is impossible. She needs to stand in front of the material, to see it and to touch it. She ultimately decides on three blocks: two chairs and the table. She will choose the fourth at the next excavation. Nadja Iseli travelled to Chiavenna a total of seven times, before she had gathered her raw material.

X

Stone is not simply stone. And contrary to the widely held notion that it is imperishable, it is essentially in a constant state of change. Stone undergoes metamorphosis as well and is subject to a cycle. Gneiss, a granite-like stone, originates in the deeper layers of the Earth's crust under extreme pressure and high temperatures. It gradually comes to the surface as the overlying material erodes or due to movements (tectonics) of the Earth's crust.

"But every stone that eventually reaches the surface primarily or through subsequent tectonic uplifts," writes Max Richter in his book *Gestein*, "is subject to weathering, and every stone will eventually disintegrate – no matter what its composition or its hardness. This is because radically different chemical and physical conditions exist on the surface than at the stone's place of origin." However, this cycle for stone lasts longer than for other materials we are familiar with, a little short of "eternal" when compared to human lives. What makes stone seem so perpetual is viewing it from the perspective of our life cycle, the passage of time or, in this case, the "stone age".

XI

On November 21, two Italian trucks drive up to Nadja Iseli's atelier in Emmenbrücke. Because a construction site hinders the direct route to her atelier, they have to drive on a makeshift track running parallel to the river, the Kleine Emme. A mobile crane then lifts them from the truck and places them in the working space just outside her atelier. One of the chairs weighs roughly eight tons, the somewhat smaller "table" just over five tons. But at this point, it would be interesting to know about the actual weight of the four blocks more precisely:

- 5120 kilograms, the weight of the "table",
- 7040 kilograms, the block with one seating niche,
- 8100 kilograms, the block with two seating niches and
- 8480 kilograms, the "solitaire", placed in a separate location in the courtyard.

All told, this amounts to 28,740 kilograms, which – in addition to the other stones – are now lying outside Nadja Iseli's atelier (When those pieces removed earlier at the plant in Piuro are added, the four stones weigh in at more than 30 tons). Now the backbreaking work begins for the artist. She has allowed for a good six months, taking into account possible interruptions due to cold weather or rain. The sculptures are scheduled to be placed in Brünighof at the beginning of July 2018.

When she sets about working on the stone and cuts into it with the diamond disk of her Flex (the

cutting machine), the sculptor is fully immersed in her work and the stone. And she is wrapped up beyond all recognition in a face mask, bandana, goggles, gloves and ear plugs in order to protect herself from the deafening noise and clouds of dust. She maintains utmost concentration while working, does not allow herself to be distracted. Like a meditation, for she is the single calming element amidst this din and scattering stone.

In an essay on Nadja Iseli's sculpture *"An die sechs Quellen"* in Bad Salzhausen, curator Axel Wilisch quotes from one of the artist's letters:

"Incidentally, it is wonderful to imagine and contemplate while cutting the stone and doubtlessly, it is a wonderful story. Thoughts are spellbound by the inner life of the stone, meaning is lent to the merest of grains as they surface like thousands of souls trapped in solidified lava and, in the end, they lie under the slight sheen of the surface. Perhaps a somewhat fanciful point of view, but also exhilarating as a mental image, don't you think?"

Nadja Iseli prefers working with hard stone. With basalt. Or porphyry, also a volcanic rock. And now with gneiss. We have already pointed out that she has a penchant for resistant material, prefers it to pliable, soft materials. Hard stone, she explains, can be sanded and polished. In her work, however, she also likes lending the hard stone an expression of softness.

Rarely, however, does she sculpt a stone all around. She prefers limiting her intervention, retaining as much material as possible as it was found, for example, the break lines. So that one can see how it was found. Hard stone is also better suited for this. "On the one hand, this contrast between the stone as it was found in nature or quarried and, on the other hand, the intervention, this is a fundamental theme of my work."

This juncture between the crude, coarsely quarried and the sculpted, polished stone also marks the transition from nature to culture, from the unwrought to the polished. The sculpture thus provides a variation on Claude Lévi-Strauss's assertion in his "Mythologiques" series, in which the anthropologist charts this transition on the threshold between the raw and the cooked. Whereas culture for him is eaten, assimilated, in Nadja Iseli's work it is rendered visible, tangible, palpable – it can be felt.

XII

In a first step at the plant in Chiavenna, the seating niches and legs of the table were approximately cut out. Now in the atelier, these parts are shaped, chiseled and polished, with the last step divided into two stages: an initial coarse, dry sanding and then a finer, wet sanding.

Whatever Nadja Iseli experiences while working remains hidden to us as outsiders. For instance, the tone of the stone. Basalt sounds like glass when struck. It splits into sharp-edged pieces, so jagged one could easily be cut. They also smell, the stones, and she likes smelling them while working on them, immersed in dust. (Apart from those that stink: for example, those that reek of rotten eggs, which sometimes occurs with varieties of limestone.)

Aside from the two working stages, two challenges await the artist in her outdoor atelier. For one thing, the weather. Cutting or sanding is almost inconceivable when it rains heavily or snows, or at low temperatures because then the Flex gets wet. It is comfortable at 10 degrees or more. It becomes practically impossible at 5 degrees or less, when the stone and tools are frozen. And sure enough, the cold snap that hit Switzerland at the end of February 2018 thwarts her time plan. She falls behind schedule. But then in April, after Easter, as the temperatures begin to warm, she can make up for lost time.

The other challenge is the table. As a start, Nadja Iseli sculpted, cut and polished the four legs of the table. In order for her to be able to work on the tabletop now, the five and a half tons have to be literally turned upside down. It is not simply a matter of tipping the table, however, because the risk of the legs breaking under the tremendous weight is too great – and then all of her work

would have been for nothing, five and a half tons of “scrap”.

And so on the afternoon of April 26, a rather precarious and critical undertaking with a mobile crane begins, and lasts about two hours. The table is rotated 90 degrees, laid on its side, then the heavier half is heaved on to a construction with wooden pallets, with the legs protruding sideways. From this position, the block is now – ever so slowly and carefully – tipped, yet braced by the pallets as they are gradually skidded sideways until the table is standing on all four legs (Although there is a brief moment, dreaded by all, during which the block was standing on two legs only). Everyone breathes a sigh of relief. Nadja Iseli declares this a “milestone”. She had anticipated this moment with apprehension, endured sleepless nights. Initially, even the crane operator, despite years of experience, had his reservations.

XIII

On July 10, 2018, the time has come to move the sculptures to their definitive location. Prior to this, however, the work schedule has to be altered on short notice. The original plan was to transport the sculptures into the courtyard through the wide entrance on the north side. For statics-related reasons, another solution had to be found because the parking garage for the building complex is situated under the courtyard. The weight of the sculptures alone presents no danger but, together with the transport vehicles, the permissible load limit would be exceeded. Another solution was found in a Liebherr LTM 1500 pneumatic crane. At the risk of seeming pedestrian, it is nevertheless worth pausing for a moment and examining a few figures in order to get an idea of what it entails: When this crane is under way on the street, it measures nearly 22 meters long, three meters wide and tips the scales at 96 tons; when used on site with the lateral support it is then almost ten meters wide. Its telescopic boom measures 50 meters with a maximum lifting capacity of 500 tons. This gargantuan vehicle is assembled the day before, on Monday, in the Industriestrasse, closed to all traffic for this reason.

On Tuesday morning as the blocks of stone are being hoisted over the corner building by the titanic mobile crane, they appear as “pebbles” to Nadja Iseli. “As they hovered there in the air, there was also such a lightness about them.” But as they are being lowered into the courtyard, they regain – familiar to the sculptor – their size and their full presence. “There was something surreal about them being airborne like that.”

The sculptures are positioned precisely on the place she had measured and marked the day before. She had repeatedly checked out the position on the model, shifted and repositioned the stones. Now they are standing at the very same angle as on the model. They have found their home. The project, which commenced 15 months prior to this, has now been completed. Nadja Iseli noticed something during this undertaking: how thoughtfully and sensitively the workmen proceeded, how much understanding they showed – they, whose line of work is more likely to be associated with harsh conditions and therefore rough handling of the material, with hard work and strength. Within the first few hours after the stones had been set, a boy was already climbing on them, the first appropriation. A feeling of exhilaration ensues in the courtyard, where workers are still busy with the final stages of the building project. For the sculptor, however, this means letting go of her work.

XIV

Nadja Iseli had the stones removed from their natural context in the Splüga massif, she has sculpted them in her atelier, transformed them, afforded them expression – and now placed them in a different context, where their effect can evolve, an outcome which she can no longer influence. An invitation to the residents and to passers-by in Brünighof, an open-ended invitation. In the stone’s sheer timelessness, Nadja Iseli has hewn a niche for us to ensconce ourselves for a brief moment, an ephemeral pause, as guests in passing.

With visual or tactile perception, the sculpture develops from now on a life of its own, beyond her control. Every visitor, every user forms their "own image" of it and thus creates their own individual reception. Its material presence gives rise to an imaginary museum of emotions, perceptions, images, thoughts, in constant flux. Remaining static, and this means on the ground, is only the generator of this boundless cloud we call fantasy or creativity: the sculptures. (There is no end to interpretation here: Those who prefer the temporal can also view the stony furniture as a monument to the Gmür moving company.)

XV

Nadja Iseli now sees her work, which was always an idea, in its place for the first time. Back at the atelier, the stones were not in their "proper" position. How close to the idea is the completed work? She is surprised, she remarks. A positive surprise, because the sculpture "comes very close to the inner image, actually even better than in the concept." The position of the stones appears incidental, but that was the plan, this disorder amidst order. Every now and then, when standing outside her atelier, she senses that something is missing. "The enormous responsibility that stood before me, the task that preoccupied me for so long, is now gone." But there is also a sense of relief, because everything went well. And this completion of the work on the sculpture was also foreseeable, a gradual departure from the working process.

"Now I'm searching once again. Searching for new narratives, new challenges."

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We conclude the text with a piece of advice from philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, who wrote: "One only knows a spot once one has experienced it in as many dimensions as possible," and he continues:

"You have to have approached a place from all four cardinal points if you want to take it in, and what's more, you also have to have left it from all these points."

Translated by Sharon Kroska