

# Depth, clarity and expansiveness.

On Nadja Iseli's "An die sechs Quellen" in the Bad Salzhausen Sculpture Park

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Ever since I can remember, I've always taken a profound interest in the people behind the works when contemplating and appreciating art. Could Michelangelo's Pieta be properly appreciated without considering the young, still largely unknown, ambitious and passionate 22-year-old sculptor Michelangelo Buonarroti? I don't think so.

My first impression of Nadja Iseli was that of a rather reserved, serene artist, delicate, concentrated yet attentively observant, when I met her for the first time at the showing in the Bad Salzhausen park hall in 2010. She had brought along a series of magnificent small-scale sculptures to this preliminary exhibition of the 3rd Sculpture Symposium. While I and many other visitors were instantly fascinated by the works, it became immediately clear that engaging herself with the setting was part of the preparatory stage of her basic concept as an artist. With basalt and diabase, she had deliberately selected materials that can be found in our region, materials which have virtually shaped our "appreciation of stone" and which constituted her initial link to the site. Consequently, Nadja Iseli took advantage of her brief stay for the opening of the exhibition to acquaint herself with Bad Salzhausen by walking through the town, exploring, gathering abundant information, filing it in a folder and taking it back home to her atelier in Lucerne. The idea of creating a setting for art in this small Hessian spa town 50 kilometres north of Frankfurt arose in 2006. A topographically appealing park grounds, with its mighty and rare types of trees arranged almost 200 years ago in the tradition of romantic landscape garden, offered an ideal setting for presenting contemporary sculpture. The idea of a symposium from which this sculpture park would emanate was deliberately chosen by our private initiative KUNST:PROJEKT.

Thus began the evolution of a project which focused on encounters between the artists themselves as well as with the public at large. Visitors could meet the artists during their creative process in a very authentic context and thus partake in the craftsmanship with all their senses, while tracing the progress of the artworks. Admittedly, this posed somewhat of a challenge in Nadja Iseli's case. Deafening noise from the machines, thick clouds of dust, countless bits of stone strewn about the park ground and, at long last, the artist wrapped up beyond all recognition in gloves, goggles, bandanna and face mask attending to her artwork. As if coming from another world, but also as if in another world, bringing her world into being. Both enraptured and protected by the process of the work itself.

But – and this indeed distinguished her from many – whenever a visitor drew near and took interest in the artist and her work, she promptly interrupted her concentration while plying her craft, disposed of her protective shields and tools, took the opportunity to catch her breath and devoted herself to the second task at hand, one which she took just as seriously, namely engaging with the public. For the curator of such a symposium, an ideal understanding of the artist and her role! At this point, however, it should also be noted that Nadja Iseli's work revealed itself only partially to the viewer here. The complex process of creating the six recumbent segments, the sketching and measuring, cutting, chiselling, roughing, grinding and subsequent polishing with water with all of the outer traces of her work, were only the logical and resolute resumption of the work she had carried out weeks and months in advance and in which participation now was only scarcely possible. Her concept, her intuitive inspiration must have occurred long before this racket and dust.

The person behind this artwork - Nadja Iseli - is a meticulous planner, but also an amiable and intense discoverer. The intensity with which she plied her craft during the symposium frequently brought to mind the precision of a Swiss watch, in which nothing seemed to be left to chance. Her purposefulness in time planning, in the individual stages of work and in the precise positioning of the work was impressive for all. This palpable concentration, her inner will, her physical execution of an idea, briefly interrupted on occasion for a cigarette, reveals only one part in understanding Nadja Iseli's work.

Another part is that which lies hidden somewhere below the surface. For a start, it can certainly be found in the stone itself. In the material. In all of the dialogues she has carried out with all kinds of stone and their colours, their degrees of hardness, their inlays and surfaces. As someone who also works with sculptures, I suspect some impulse which evades precise definition is at play here. Cryptic truths lie buried in the genesis of these materials, in the millions of years she seems to have apprehended. She speaks affectionately of basalt, diabase or granite as if they were close friends. Deferentially.

She recently wrote me: "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?"

Her personality itself provides further background information to understand her work. Her sculptures bear an impression of clarity, depth, simplicity, symbolic in nature, but also of inherent pleasure and symmetry. Precisely. Nadja Iseli.

As an artist with architecture-specific background knowledge, she understands overview and pure form, knows about the proper use of materials and proportions.

The artist's second visit to Bad Salzhausen served to search for material. She found what she was looking for in a stone quarry near Marburg. Hessian olivine diabase with a magnificent viridescent vein would convey the appearance of water and lend expression to its fathomless opaque depth. To my surprise, she had brought with her, in the ancient tradition of model builders, a true-to-scale maquette displaying the future artwork in nearly every detail and revealing the situation and proportions to the viewer. Her sculpture, which I thought would only take precise shape during the symposium, was already completed and therefore vivid for everyone.

For Armin Schultheiss as well. In the quarry operator from Gladenbach it seems she found a kindred spirit in matters of stone, a stone alchemist exactly the same as herself, someone who not only immediately understood her in her concrete ideas concerning stone, but ultimately found the suitable block for her as well.

This is where yet another of Nadja Iseli's capacities comes into effect, likely as not explaining my inquisitiveness when considering the person behind the artwork: Nadja is an extraordinary listener. Just as she listens carefully to how the stone speaks to her while she works, she is also extremely insightful, profoundly "understanding" in the best sense of the word, when communicating with others. The manner in which she engaged with her vis-à-vis during the symposium, but also in the friendly relationships thereafter, making it easy for them to literally "exchange" with her, was remarkable. The depth of her perception clarifies the use of simplicity above, meaning a greater awareness in everything she does. This is also the case in the reduction of her sculptural form, similarly an expression of her reduction to the essential, the cutting away to the innermost core, certainly drawn from her awareness of all the incidentals surrounding these truths.

"An die sechs Quellen" (At the source) ultimately found its installation site in the upper portion of

the spa park in Bad Salzhäusen punctually at the end of the symposium. On a small lawn situated below the classicistic park hall, surrounded by ancient trees, the sculpture can be properly viewed from all angles. The clearing offers ample light from above, so that the impression of water with manifold reflections of the waves on the polished surface can be duly appreciated. When walking around the sculpture in the park, it appears as if the stony water surface has been momentarily set in motion, for the waves suggest real water! This sensation is heightened by the sound coming from the fountain in the goldfish pond nearby, affording a direct, even optically replicable axis to the diabase sculpture.

Thus Nadja Iseli's work, permanently positioned just a few metres from its manual place of origin at the park hall, has become a contemplative site rendering visual one of the primal elements of being. Its mentally creative place of origin may be another, just the same.

Since my last visit to Nadja in Lucerne, I have often found myself intuiting the ripple of the waves on Lake Lucerne in the sculpture, sensing something of the magnanimity and sublimity of the mountain landscape in Switzerland. In my imagination, the expansive panorama and stony plasticity of Mt. Pilatus, the Rigi and Bürgenstock alongside the reflecting surface of the lake water does the compartmentalised narrowness of the local spa town exceptionally good!

Presumably, I am not the only one to perceive an intuitive bonding of two exceptional places formed by an artist who brought a symbiosis of space and time into being, a process in which she let all of us partake. Indeed, in their reduction, clarity, depth and beauty, the symbolic character of the six diabase segments does us good – a magnificent gift for Bad Salzhäusen.

Translated by Sharon Kroska