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Rock Paper Scissors

Arolla

During a rather tense conversation in Arolla, a village with vertiginous alpine views, the kind some people call “majestic” or “august” or “straight out of a Stoffel”, the artist demanded a text on stone. Peter Stoffel and I were frequenting the highest camping ground in Europe, grilling Schublig sausages which, he assured me, he’d manufactured himself. Since I consider myself a vegan, more or less, and a man who likes his pitch-perfect, lukewarm shower in the morning, I’m not quite sure what I was doing there. I remember the august majesty of the surroundings contrasting weirdly with the soundtrack of Stoffel’s soliloquy, and the smoky, spicy taste of porky beef in my mouth. Last time I was serenaded by an artist, it was over cucumber martinis and honey-roasted almonds at the Four Seasons. You can say I’ve come a long way. What made the whole thing all the more trying is that I really don’t like painters very much. Painters are forever suspecting you of not liking painting, or not quite liking it enough, or, God forbid, liking the wrong kind of painting. Not only does it usually turn out that I like the wrong kind of painting, I cannot stand people who fret over what they like to begin with. Opinions are wildly overrated.

But as someone once said, being an artist is about making people do what you want them to do. And Stoffel is one of the better artists out there. So here I was, a vegan Warmduscher with a taste for John Armleder’s pour paintings from the early nineties, grilling Schublig in Arolla. The only saving grace, incidentally, was the stone thing. Stoffel’s insistence on rocks and boulders was weirdly reminiscent of the type of stuff I prefer to explore as a writer or curator. The stifling monogamies of institution, heritage, political ideology, theoretical patterns, aesthetic yardsticks and so on. Indeed, Stoffel, for his part, is an artist very much invested in structures. To the point where he will gladly build the required structures himself, from scratch if necessary, should he find them to be lacking around him. In other words, the fascination of stifling intellectual monogamies is not lost on him. If he weren’t a painter, we might even be friends.

Stone

So now the artist has declared that, when it comes to my catalogue contribution, the placeholder or body double for his oeuvre is to be a stone. He wanna rock. Literally. When it comes to the Stoffel cosmos at large, natural metaphors are many in number, but they rarely include stone. You have water, crystals, wind, ice, glaciers, valleys, even sausages and mountaintops, all rich in texture, symbolism, genealogy, lyrical connotation. A stone, meanwhile, suggests a forbidding degree zero of interpretative play. A stone is pretty much a stone, whichever way you look at it, smell it, throw it, chew it. Not exactly a polemical evergreen, like “abstraction” or “Palestine”, which can hurl you back and forth through intellectual history like some screaming pinball.

Given this logophobic, macho disposition, it’s surprising that a text should be necessary in the first place. Why, indeed, is there text in this book. Why that whole power lunch in Arolla. Why try and compete with the majestic hush of stone, and embarrass yourself with the pitter-patter of artspeak. Stoffel, however, likes to say that those who speak the least are always the ones with the highest opinions of themselves. Silence can make a weighty impression at first, and first impressions cut deep. But they do not cut deepest necessarily. Not within the proto-alpine time scales we’re talking here. When it comes to the stonescapes of a Stoffel, it’s the long haul, the second and third and fourth impression, or the thousandth, that counts.

Well, you might wonder, how is an essay to live up to these high expectations? Voilà la question qui tue. These days, a text has to work pretty hard to find good reasons to be invited to the dinner party.

Scissors

Maybe it's time to address that famous troika in the title of this essay. Not quite as famous as other trinities, Christian, Hegelian or otherwise, but prominent enough, and a very helpful triad here. We've already established that the stone is to be metaphor-in-chief. The master trope, the content, the work, the burning heliocentric heart around which we shall be turning.

As for paper, one might associate it with language, text, criticism, thus with this very essay in itself. But text rarely comes as print on paper nowadays. In point of fact, to writers of my generation, who came of age at the peak of poststructuralism, language is chiefly a matter of cutting, framing, interrupting, de- and re-categorizing. This, after all, is what language has been doing to art for a very long time, sometimes to wonderful effect, sometimes less so. Whether any of this changes when the work is petrified, so to speak, remains to be seen. (In principle, we all know scissors are helpless in the face of stone.)

If we leave the scissors to the writer, then the artist is stuck with paper. And the funny thing is: in real life, if you wrap paper around a stone, it's the stone that calls the shots. It's the stone that allows the paper to fly, far and wide, even to shatter windows and split heads if necessary.

And yet the paper artist will still triumph over the stony oeuvre, no matter how weighty.

Consider that if the paper artist were to wrap himself around a cucumber Martini, say, or a Schublig, the result would be rather unpredictable. Even if a stone, by contrast, is an airborne, powerful missile, the artist, precisely as he merges with the stone's shape, dissimulates it and hides it completely from view, thereby taking any credit for himself alone. By becoming one with the stone, the artist loses in autonomy what he gains in traction, scope and prominence.

In sum, if the artist trumps the work, and the work trumps the writer, then it's only the scissor of a writer that can cut the artist down to size.

Paper

In order to snip away at the artist, we first need to peel him off that stone. Alas, after centuries of clinging, it is, at this stage, quite a tedious and gummy affair. You can peel off a sliver of artist, but another tidbit will stick to the stone like glue. The more of the stone we see, however, the more we realise that it's more than we've suspected. The reputation of the broody, strong, silent type only refers to the specifically catachrestic quality of stone. (A catachresis is a metaphor that passes for pure language; compare "the foot of the mountain" or "a broken heart", where the metaphorical roles of "foot" and "heart" go unnoticed.) It's the very suggestion of literal, extra-linguistic, non-negotiable umph that is the metaphorical quality here. So although stones do dissolve into language just like anything else under the sun, it's the distinctive, hermeneutic thump, the sound of stone as it whacks you on the cranium, that is interesting here. To proclaim the stone a topographic *primus inter pares* is a gesture that creates a distinctive atmosphere in the room. Not a hostile one necessarily, but perhaps a bit like inviting a vegan Warmduscher to a Schublig in Arolla.

The etymological root, the kernel of our kernel, is equally helpful. "Stone" stems from the Sanskrit, where *stayaate* is "to curdle" or "to harden". One is struck, however, by the insistence of etymonline.com that "stone in the sense of 'testicle' is from late Old English". Should you look up "Peter", you're informed that, beyond the many semantic entanglements with stone, "Peter as slang for 'penis' is attested from 1902". Judging by the artist persona in question – big, hairy, hefty, loud, broad-shouldered, strong-armed, thick-skinned and thick-headed – we see that stone and paper have merged even more thoroughly than anyone might have suspected. You might argue, of course, that things are rarely as monolithic as that, and you can easily point to the undeniable diversity among Stoffel's work. Some is insistently austere, some

loudly kaleidoscopic. Some is made with felt-tip pens, some with Polaroids. Some suggests big broad tennis forehand volleys across gargantuan wall-to-wall surfaces, some relies on patient trembles of a wrist within a miniature scaffold. The references, meanwhile, range from canonical mathematicians to the postimpressionist avantgarde, from folkloric medleys to agricultural techniques, from mountain geology to fictional seashores. And that's only the paintings. Much of Stoffel's work – sculptural, architectural, infrastructural, procedural in character – is not painterly at all.

But a common ground, a signature style, is palpable. A Stoffel show is an arena of overbearing meticulousness, of manufactural skill, of patient studio stamina and proud self-discipline, of that classic oscillation between sweeping vertigo and arcane detail, kinetic panorama and brushstroke staccato. A place where the chromatic tapestries of crystalline valleys and frosty peaks evoke a dash of faux-naïve, patriotic flavour. Not in terms of flags a-waving. But in terms of being sehr teutonisch. You have the Swiss-German vernacular, you have the geographic leitmotifs, you have the metaphysical romanticism of landscape, you even have that self-deprecating, Kippenbergian mannishness, that gentle machismo of earthy humour and industrious wanderlust.

Though Stoffel has long been based by the Lac Léman, his relationship to the conceptual ironies of peinture contemporaine à la genevoise remains polemical and complex. To be clear, I'm not suggesting Stoffel is residing in Genevan exile, like some kind of Lenin. The adventurism of his landscapes does not stem from a rootless bohemianism, a wandering troubadour type thing. On the contrary. As mentioned above, Stoffel is a practitioner invested in structures, and the visual content of the work – layered, composite and tectonic – is only one of the multiple levels at stake.

Over the last two decades, we've seen Stoffel build one structural assemblage after another: from an underground exhibition space to a mountaintop biennale, from a housing cooperative to an artist bar, from a referral agency for immigrant labour to a sausage factory. Sometimes in collaboration with myself or his wife or with shifty, unreliable individuals with francophone accents. All of which betrays a preoccupation with infrastructural usefulness as well as the formal-architectural erotica of scale and solidity, balance and symmetry.

In the current, nervous context of online ephemera, poor pixelations and instantaneous circulation, the durability of structures in stone, or stones on canvas, rings true. It feels genuine and soothing. Such, indeed, is the epistemic thump of the leitmotif in question. And it brings me to a second thing a text can do, aside from bullying the artist. A text can allow for a testimony, however twirling or tedious, that addresses subsequent generations of viewers. In other words, aside from being a smug liability, snipping away at artist and oeuvre, the text can strive to be a bedrock, a reliability in its own right. Solo shows come and go, but catalogues reside deep in the cold, dark bowels of climate-controlled, expensively guarded institutions. Down here, the Hausgeist is a geological, archival, post-human kind of creature. The day when our own existing environment has evaporated, it's the text, with all its frames and names and de- and re-categorizations, that will add context, traction, meat to the bone, weight to the stone.

Coda: Waterways

It's always polite, if not always very interesting necessarily, to grant the artist the last word. In this case, I believe you'll all be reassured by what he has to say. The following stems from the said conversation in Arolla, much of which I am reconstructing from painful, hazy memory.

Why painting?

Painting is an array of byzantine connections between time, space, colour and form, a search for a pathway between two embittered families, the figurative and the abstract, two old clans that have long stopped talking to each other. I embark on this journey in the hope of reaching my own personal Pacific, and it is an abstruse, weird journey, to say the least, beset with

icebergs, floating debris, tight tight waterways, patchy maps, inadequate theories, confusing patterns that force you to turn back in the midst of thick fog, again and again. And suddenly these bursts of light appear from above, only to make everything vanish in a flashing bright moment of utter blindness, and suddenly you're clueless for days, weeks, months on end. Do I forge ahead, you ask, or save my energy for better days?

Do you drink when you paint?

Never. And I need a steady rhythm of 9 am to 5 pm. People set their watches when they see me on my way to the studio.

So you are a geek in Kippenbergian clothing. A closet disciplinarian. Maybe. Or a shepherd of rational thought, rather. From among my flock, very few sheep will survive the glaciers and craters, the waterfalls and windstorms. But those who do, well, they are changed beyond recognition forever.