

A Graveyard for Sculptures

Autor(en): **Ribaupierre, Claire de**

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Claire de Ribaupierre: A Graveyard for Sculptures

High up in the Alpine valley of Val d'Anniviers (canton of Valais), along a river that flows above the hamlet of Vissoie, there exists a graveyard for sculptures. It is a site one chances upon, an intimate and unpretentious space known only by word of mouth. Attracted by such a site, I found myself daydreaming as I followed the winding road that climbs up to the village of Grimentz. Will I find sculptures that have been set up in an old cemetery, I wondered.

It is not an easy place to find, and I was thankful to the forester who pointed out the road to get there. At the entrance, I was confronted by Denis Schneider's *La Libellule* (The Dragonfly), an enormous and strange two-part machine out of iron, topped by a huge insect. Somehow too big for the meadow, it looks as if it had just been hurriedly dropped there by a helicopter.

In the distance, I could catch a glimpse of an abandoned house surrounded by a large park of trees growing wild. Wild plum trees, mulberry bushes, and wild strawberry patches line the cow paths. To reach the residence, you have to cross a little forest strewn with moss-covered rocks and thistles. Fastened against the sides of the trees, Olivier Cortésy's *Greffes* (Grafts) – like gigantic wooden sheaths – mingle with the foliage and blur in with the tree barks. Behind the house, rusty *Monolithes* (Monoliths) by Aloïs Dubach – seven huge steel blocks – form a sanctuary overlooking the property; against the slope, there is a sculpture in concrete by Philippe Solmz. Below, Olivier Estoppey's three big white boats have run aground: the hulls of all three are worn, and two are split in the middle. Weary wrecks that, here in this garden, have come to the end of their long journey.

It is the architects Jean Kittel and Jacques Widmer who decided to turn this estate into a graveyard for artworks. The idea was to retrieve sculptures no longer on display and offer them a site for afterwards, like a second life or, more simply, a peaceful death. But the idea of a cemetery does not appeal to artists who have trouble kissing their works goodbye and accepting their death. Nonetheless, the first sculpture arrived in 1993.

Although the works have been retrieved, they are still the sculptors' property. The architects did not intend the site as an outdoor museum, which is why it is accessible but not mentioned on any road signs, thus preserving a certain intimacy.

My own impression is tinged with disappointment: I have the overwhelming impression that these sculptures were neither planned nor designed for this site. To me, it seems more like a storage place than a graveyard. None of the artists really appropriate the funerary space available to them. What sort of link with death do these sculptures have to offer? What do they commemorate? Do they indicate a disappearance? Two works do invite reflection on the notions of sacredness and loss: Estoppey's boats, with their deteriorated hulls, seem to have drowned on the slopes and thus bring to mind a past life, a funerary voyage. And the monoliths by Dubach are like stelae, evoking thoughts that dwell on duration, eternal rest, the sanctuary.

As for the rest, a moratorium comes more easily to mind than a graveyard. Otherwise, the artists would have to fully accept the idea of the death of their post-exhibit works, to allow for the effects of oblivion and deterioration, for the natural and self-paced death of their sculptures. Instead of resisting the funerary venue, they would have to take advantage of the unusual dialectic of a presence in the throes of disappearing. Today perhaps more than ever before, works are a matter of coming into existence, of transformation, rather than preservation. It would be more appropriate for artists to deliberately choose this site for what it is, for them to inspire reflection on the finite state – the “afterwards” of sculpture – by conceiving ephemeral instead of eternal works.

Nevertheless, when all is said and done, the sculpture graveyard, with its garden and abandoned house, exudes an

intimate and strange charm full of secrecy. Rather than sad, the atmosphere is peaceful, airy, even festive. It is an Alpine graveyard devoid of ghosts and shadows, where life is rooted in every plant, flower and wild fruit.

