

Biennale Gherdëina in South Tyrol The mountain islands will mourn us forever

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Date
23.05.2022

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**We can find something better than the Anthropocene everywhere:
The Gherdëina Biennale in the Dolomites poses the question of
the rights of mountains, animals and plants**

"The mountain is calling!" – In 1938, Luis Trenker became famous with this legendary film about the conquest of the Matterhorn. And anyone standing in Ortisei these days, the birthplace of the legendary filmmaker in the Val Gardena in South Tyrol, 40 kilometers from Bolzano, actually feels this call. The mighty dolomite monoliths with their sharply jagged ridges, eroded reefs of a prehistoric ocean, are reminiscent of lonely guardians of the earth's history, before whom people shrink to extras. In 2009, UNESCO declared large parts of the mountain range a World Heritage Site. This striking backdrop with its unique flora and fauna is the ideal place to ask questions about the rights of mountains, animals and plants. "Persones – Persons" is what the organizers of the Gherdëina Biennale called the latest edition of the tiny art show, which opened last weekend in St. Ulrich, which is called Ortisei in Italian and is located in the middle of the idyllic Val Gardena.

The Alpine biennial exhibition is one of the most recent offshoots of the now ubiquitous format. Founded in 2008, it emerged from an offshoot of Manifesta 7 in Trento. Gherdëina – its name sounds mysterious, but is only the Ladin name for the Val Gardena, where the Romansh dialect is spoken. Gallery owner Doris Ghetta, the founder and director of the Biennale, wanted to direct the "Manifesta effect" to her traditional homeland: "I wanted to get away from provincialism," the art lover explains her motivation. With the 8th edition of the Biennale, the Tyrolean art world has now also arrived in its leading discourse.

It is hardly surprising that the two curators Filipa Ramos and Lucia Pietroiusti, two young experts on the subject of art and ecology from London, have chosen an artist such as Etel Adnan, who died last autumn, as the patron of their show. Since her 1986 novel "Journey to Mount Tamalpais", a mountain that she began to treat like a personality during hundreds of visits during her time in California, the Beirut native has been regarded as a pioneer of the idea of the

posthuman, hymnically revered around the world. Two of her abstract landscape paintings in the Luis Trenker Hall of the St. Ulrich Cultural Center open the exhibition.

Connecting with the world from a plant perspective

Kyriaki Goni's work is absolutely contemporary. The advanced Athenian media artist has invented the narrative of a data garden with her work "The mountain islands will mourn us eternally", which she created especially for the Biennale: a techno-shamanistic community spread across the entire planet that stores its alternative knowledge in the DNA of plants. In a video, an oracle describes his knowledge of how the Dolomites used to be islands in an ocean, of the extinction of plants in the region caused by rising temperatures, and it promotes "cross-species solidarity". Goni has placed a wooden model of a hybrid plant, a mixture of a 260 million year old conifer, *Ortiseia leonardii* and *Saxifraga depressa*, under a glass dome, made in the tradition of the woodcarvers of the Val Gardena. Her multi-layered multimedia work is one of the absolute highlights of the Biennale.

But the Biennale derives its special quality from a direct dialogue with its grandiose context. The Argentinian artist Eduardo Navarro has placed his sculpture "Spathiphyllum Auris" in the middle of the picturesque Langental valley, next to which the Dolomites tower majestically. The upper part of the huge, green and white sculpture of a peace lily with golden pistils catches water for the birds. In the cave-like refuge on the ground, visitors can rest and connect with the world from a plant perspective.

In "Sentiero", a two-hour forest walk conceived by the artist Alex Cecchetti, "forest spirits" in robes printed with the colors of leaves lead visitors along secret paths through the mountains to make them more aware of the life of the animals and plants. "We are now walking on the path of the ants. Can you smell their vinegary scent?" one of the guides asks her guest, who is still a little slow-witted early in the morning, as they pass one of the hills covered with thousands of bustling hymenoptera.

Of course, the Biennale theme often veers along the border between mysticism and esotericism. The circular herb garden of the artist duo Saraj Shin and Ben Vickers, named after the language "Ignota" invented by Hildegard von Bingen, conjures up the healing powers of community and memory. Chiara Chamoni's six-armed clay sculpture "Sister" is like many of the works from Cecilia Alemani's "Milk of Dreams" Biennale in Venice: the ochre-colored creature formed from flower chains made of dolomite dust and pine ash in the rotting chamber of a castle ruin, oscillating between woman, deity, sorceress and mummy, is of compelling beauty.

The Gherdëina Biennale is not only proof of how biennials are increasingly reaching out into the natural world. It is also a wonderful example of the advantages of small biennials: concentrated, regionally focused. At the same time, it opens up the intellectual horizon to a larger context.

Gherdëina does not yet function like the well-oiled routine rituals of the global art world from Sao Paulo to Basel. It is supported by people who really want to achieve something with art. Their modest resources become a locational advantage: sometimes 24 works of art, such as those currently on display at the show, are more than 200 works in Venice.

At the same time, the Biennale acts as a catalyst for a change in awareness, precisely because it meets a public that is not yet as familiar with contemporary art as in the urban centers. The Tyrolean sculptor Lois Anvidalfarei caused a scandal at the first Gherdëina Biennale in 2008 when he distributed the biblical figures Cain and Abel as naked sculptures with oversized genitals in St. Ulrich. In Germany, this would not have bothered anyone twelve years ago, but in the small Tyrolean town it led to a culture war.

We can find something better than the Anthropocene everywhere!

But the rhinoceros-like, melancholic monster called Leonardo, which the artist Giles Round distilled from the mythical world of the Val Gardena, or the large porphyry sculpture that Anvidalfarei's colleague Thaddäus Salcher placed this

year in the picturesque pedestrian zone of the small tourist town, lined with boutiques, are more likely to provoke a smile today. With a minimalist intervention, he carved a face into it, which suddenly makes the massive mineral look like a face. It is works like these that have now given the Biennale, which was initially only focused on Tyrol, a reputation for unconventional positions and challenging themes.

Even if there are voices in the town that ask whether a community of 4,600 people can afford around 400,000 euros for an avant-garde festival every two years. Not all of the approximately one million tourists who come to the small valley every year can be easily counted as Biennale visitors. But Ortisei Mayor Tobia Moroder, a doctor of archaeology, author and one of the many descendants of the town's centuries-old family of artists and intellectuals, from which the disco demigod Giorgio Moroder also comes (13 of his platinum records, which he received for his soundtrack for the film "Flashdance", hang in the town's local history museum), reaffirmed his commitment to the show at the opening.

In Lina Lapelyte's time-lapse animation "they stole my soul", an army of 500 animal figures created by local woodcarvers flee the Val Gardena in search of a future beyond the one determined solely by humans. As if they wanted to demonstrate: we will find something better than the Anthropocene anywhere! For the art world, however, every two years it is now: Gherdëina is calling!