



Hubert Kostner wrapped 10,000 metres of brightly-coloured climbing ropes around a boulder in the Sassolungo cirque.

Soft as stone

Up until mid-summer, hikers on the Sassopiatto cirque will meet with a stone wrapped in brightly-coloured climbing ropes. What lies behind this work of art, created by Castelrotto artist Hubert Kostner?

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When Austrian Alpine mountaineer Paul Grohmann, accompanied by two mountain guides from Val Gardena, made the first ascent of the Sassolungo on 13 August 1992, it was nothing short of sensational. Prior to this conquest, the imposing landmark which dominates the landscape of the Seiser Alm to the east, in concert with the Sassopiatto, had been considered “unconquerable” due to the length of its uphill ascent and perilous rockslides. In 2019, the 150th jubilee of this milestone in Alpine history in the Dolomites was commemora-

ted with an array of events. Transart, the contemporary art festival which has been held annually for the past 20 years made its own contribution to the celebrations and paid homage to the Sassopiatto with a piece of performance art created for this very unusual resonance chamber by composer Eduard Demetz and dancer Anastasia Kostner.

The project also included a contribution from the field of visual arts which can be seen at the scene of the performance - and not just for one day, but for »



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the whole year - in the form of a work by visual artist Hubert Kostner. Entitled Sasmujel ("Soft stone" in Ladino), it is the realisation of a long-nurtured dream. In symbolic language, Kostner has expressed the essence of being "bound" to the mountains by trussing a boulder in no less than 10,000 metres of brightly-coloured climbing ropes, giving the rough rock a new surface and, with it, a soft, transmuted exterior. The ropes were procured in part through a fundraiser, and in part were donated by sponsors. So, what does it mean? "Climbers are often reproached for doing something absurd, senseless. Wrapping a stone may seem to be pointless, but art exists purely in order to create new shapes and images. Even though they may appear absurd, they are never pointless. The ropes are the key to creating a new object. At the same time, this work represents a mutual enmeshment: The mountain holds me, and I hold it. And, of course, the rope represents the existential relationship between climbers." The roughly 5-metre high, 4-metre wide rock looked something like a Toblerone bar before Kostner's transformation, and its metamorphosis into a coloured ball on a hiking trail - which was particularly busy that summer - did not go unnoticed. The Sasmujel was soon to become a popular photo and selfie opportunity, although not necessarily recognised or explored as a work of art. This brought unanticipated complications, and a "Climbing on the artwork is prohibited" sign had to be erected.

The high-Alpine stage setting is also a special experience

for the artist himself: "We artists usually work in protected areas like museums or galleries. Up here at 2,600 metres above sea level, everything is completely different. Aesthetic decisions are dictated by practical necessities, the weather plays a decisive role; you are, quite simply, subject to the laws of nature. But, more than anything else, it is an enormous honour for me to be able to install this work into this space where nature alone, not culture, prevails. In relation to the immensity of the grey rock arena my work is miniscule and, effectively, insignificant. Because this stone is nothing up there. Small, fragile, vulnerable - just like human beings when they are in this environment. In my 20 years as an artist, I have never had the opportunity to create art in a more beautiful or more compelling location."

The winter months blanketed the Sasmujel in a thick layer of snow, which was already lying in the cirque of the Sassolungo in November. As spring moves forwards, the brightly coloured rock will be one of the first splashes of colour when the snow melts. How it will look and whether or not it will need freshening up remains to be seen. The project has been documented in a book and in film. This coming summer, Hubert Kostner and an assistant will spend a few days on-site to liberate the Sasmujel from its ropes. When the jubilee year of the first ascent of the Sassolungo comes to an end, all traces of the action should disappear: "Captivation and liberation - and so the circle ends." «

This summer, the "Sasmujel" will be liberated from its bonds - and afterwards, nothing will remain of this work of art.

