

Alfredo Barsuglia, Mariainsel (Island Maria), 2018

Imagined Island

Not Mary's Island and not Marian island. A Mother of God made of soil, sand, stones, a wooden platform and a few trees. Separated from the mainland, the little island alongside the pedestrian footbridge across the river Feistritz in Fürstenfeld is a world of its own.

That wasn't always the case. It officially became a place in the spring of 2018. Having grown and been used over the course of its first summer, the island now has history. Installed by artist Alfredo Barsuglia for the sixth *Water Biennial* in Fürstenfeld, it is dedicated directly and consistently to the demand to conceive water and art in conjunction as a fantastic way to hone perception in everyday life in the Styrian province.^[1]

The real-unreal island began with a venturesome reclamation of land: armed with a shovel, an excavator and a machete, Barsuglia carved it out of the land mass protruding into the picturesque bend of the river Feistritz where it is joined by the Hühnerbach; in the manner of a sculptor, he brought out what was already set out in the soil from the originally undetermined piece of land. With a sense of irony conscious of the genre, he christened the newly formed, roughly seven-metre-long canal sculpted through the land mass "Franz", the second most common first name in the region. The most common name in the region is Maria, for women that is, not for islands—there is only one of this name in the world, in Tasmania (Maria Island), and an atoll in the Pacific. Alfredo Barsuglia created this island with numerous local links by means of occupation and artistic appropriation. The rest formed as if naturally as a result of the rising and sinking water, use of the island by people and animals, and the slowly adapting vegetation.

By means of this act of artistic appropriation the *Mariainsel* evolved to be a place of the "other". A place which gives pause and defies simple passing; a heterotopia in which new laws apply as it is newly "invented and found". It was created in order to serve art for a certain time, without predefining the (restrictive) framework of a classical art institution: after six artistic interventions, carried out by six different curators invited by Barsuglia, the sculptural piece of land art—that can now only be reached by means of a daring leap across the water—has grown together organically with its surroundings and the lives of local people in Fürstenfeld over the summer months in 2018. As a living, growing image of the private network around the artist, it served the festival as a regular meeting place and was an ingenious instrument for creating internationality—in terms of both participants and visitors. Thanks to artists including Barbara Kapusta, Justin Lieberman, Cesare Pietroiusti, Julius Deutschbauer & Andrea Maurer, Marina Sula and Rotten Bliss (Jasmine Pender), but also curators including Anne Faucheret (Kunsthalle Vienna), Stephanie Weber (Lenbachhaus Munich), Kate Strain (Kunstverein Graz), Bettina Kogler (Tanzquartier Vienna), Severin Dünser (Belvedere 21) and Thomas Edlinger (Donaufestival Krems), the *Mariainsel* has in a short period become an installation in public (media) space that is known far and wide. Thanks to the network of address files of curators and artists, more people have probably heard of and seen images of Barsuglia's island than of any other *Water Biennial* project before it. Locally too, the installation turned out to be a regular meeting place for a wide art audience: it acted and became established as an urban sculpture, as a stage and scene, as a platform and rostrum, as a place of deconstruction and inspiration and as a hub of ideas transcending the individual art events.

Thanks to the extreme precision of the representation and duplication, by probing and working out cultural and natural manifestations, reality becomes oscillating hyperreality in Barsuglia's work. Overaffirming the visible awakens uncertainties. For each ascription, categorisation or applicable contextualisation there arises a productive

friction between different levels of reality. In fact, Barsuglia's approach, also in creating the *Mariaininsel*, is similar to the hologram of a possible reality which hints at further levels of reality—sculptural, semantic and urbanistic—at its edges and ramifications.

Islands generally have an inherent utopian undertone. Often used in literature, the names of islands are running-boards of the imagination. In Alfred Andersch's painful 1957 novel *Sansibar oder der letzte Grund* ("Zanzibar, or the last reason", published in English as *Flight to Afar*), for example, the title is to be understood literally and is in large part responsible for the success of the book, which is about a boy's day-dream of Zanzibar as the utopian place of a better future. The name *Mariaininsel* also plays a key role in the success of Barsuglia's project, a land mass that is meanwhile listed on Google Maps.^[2]

As Barsuglia notes on the *Mariaininsel* website (www.mariaininsel.at), "cultural events take place on islands not only in Fürstenfeld but also in larger cities, for example the *Donauinselfest* in Vienna, the *Sziget* in Budapest or *The Governors Ball Music Festival* in New York. The *Mariaininsel Culture and Arts Festival* might find its way into the Guinness Book of Records as the smallest festival island in the world" and, in the long term, possibly become established as a recurrent summer event.

Following the three-month festival summer, the *Mariaininsel* served as a retreat for ducks, children and courting couples. But the odd angler seeking shelter from the rain beneath the dense leafy canopy of the trees would also make use of the place. Even the fire brigade adopted the little island as their own as a matter of course, pitching a tent on the platform to keep an eye on their annual late summer festival with flat-bottomed Zille boats and competitions all around the Feistritz. "Association" derives from the Latin *associare*, which means "to unite, ally, link, network". Alfredo Barsuglia creates hyperreal networked, networking artworks. He imagines them between the levels of reality of culture. Like the *Mariaininsel*, they become images of themselves and can be viewed and approached from different perspectives.

- Katrin Bucher Trantow (Chief curator, Kunsthaus Graz)

[1] Cf. Statement on the *Water Biennial* by Günther Pedrotti and Franz Rauchenberger: <http://www.wasser-biennale.org/> [26/08/2020]

[2] www.google.at/maps/place/Mariaininsel/@47.0568331,16.0674735,17z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x476efb458c609041:0x6cee7de7fdcc04b!8m2!3d47.0568295!4d16.0696622!4m5!3m4!1s0x476efb458c609041:0x6cee7de7fdcc04b!8m2!3d-47.0568295!4d16.0696622 [26/08/2020].