

# Rumbling Waters / Some thoughts on the art of Séverin Guelpa

by Dorothea Strauss, curator, 2023

If you think about Séverin Guelpa's various projects and his stance as an artist, then you also, by necessity, ponder the basic meaning of art in our world. How much value do we attach to art? What influence does it have in our lives?

I have seen time and again people's tendency to pigeonhole art in a nice-to-have/not-need-to-have way. So many of us experience art only in museums, galleries and other 'artsy' places. Artists are seldom called on to take part in discussions about political, economic, environmental or other great subjects involving the direction of society. We don't think art capable of affecting anything beyond the pigeonhole to which we have assigned it. Yet art can do much to help us create effective concepts for dealing with the challenges of the future, such as climate change. And this brings me to Séverin Guelpa's work. In his MATZA series he has applied himself to extremely distressing processes under way across the globe: melting glaciers, drought, contaminated soil and so on. I write "distressing processes", however what is truly distressing is our ongoing failure to be sufficiently upset by them, upset enough to do something about them. But that is another story.

Guelpa, who lives in Geneva, wants to do something, and this is made clear by the title MATZA. The term (from the Italian "mazza" meaning bat or club)<sup>1</sup> was used in the Swiss region of Valais in the 1600s and 1700s to denote a symbolic, club-like object used in uprisings. Guelpa's wife, Anja Wyden Guelpa, comes from Valais and not only gave her husband the idea of using MATZA as a title but helped him with much of the series.

Interestingly, the MATZA spirit is by no means dead in modern Valais. It lives on in a tradition of civil disobedience & protest against unpopular decisions. And what Guelpa wants to do here is raise awareness of flagrant environmental devastation. The MATZA projects, carried out in radically different parts of the world, are therefore based on networking and the participation Guelpa makes possible across professional boundaries. Their aim is to place the long-term consequences of our collective actions at the centre of things. Throughout this series Guelpa has therefore brought together a wide range of figures from the realms of art, research and practical action. The focus is not only on the devastation itself but also on thorough research, dialogue, growing awareness, and the concern that nothing is really changing. Guelpa is fascinated by the energizing effect of the dynamic complexity involved. In other words, he does not want reality to be flattened in order to achieve a wrongheaded simplification.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* provides an interesting description of this custom: <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/016548/2009-11-24/>

<sup>2</sup> One thinker interested in art and sustainability is Dr Sacha Kagan. A decade ago he wrote: "We must resist the temptation to simplify, to follow a holistic course and iron reality flat in order to capture an overall view, to reconcile irreconcilable opposites". I agree.

This is an artistically courageous approach, for — when all is said and done — Guelpa’s work cannot be exhibited merely in museums and art galleries. And what it has to say cannot be crammed into a twitter post. It is no simple matter to enable people to see and experience the work’s relevance. For that work has meanings, contains emotions felt by the people immediately affected by the events — all this does not fit neatly into the corner of some gallery. What we see is not an artwork in the classic sense. Rather, we become part of a complex, artistic process — if we allow ourselves to.

Then there is the multiple nature of those creating this art. While Guelpa has always been the initiator of MATZA projects, there is a consciously shared responsibility for each work, a joint acquisition of knowledge, an exchange of experience.

Hence the question: Is Guelpa an artist or an activist for sustainability? In the MATZA projects he is certainly both. And that is exactly what makes this art so exciting, for it requires finely tuned moderation between various points of view in the enquiry under way. The projects demand transformation, and this goes hand in hand with the transformative potential arising when art connects with things beyond the institutions of art. George Steinmann once said that art amounts to a vigilant eye on society. For the past four decades, Steinmann has stressed the shared responsibility of artists concerning climate change: “A paradigm change leading to a society prepared for the future is not possible without the knowledge that only art can give us.”<sup>3</sup>

For the artist Séverin Guelpa, art is a form of knowledge that should, in all circumstances, have a place in forums taking decisions about the future. Art in a vacuum holds no interest for Guelpa. Rather, he understands art as an environment in which new modes of action and other possibilities may be explored. His projects definitely do something — they take the pulse of time; they render urgency visible; they bring people together; they are a source of utility; they have no fear of multidimensionality; they are provocative, they drive us out of our comfort zone; they seize mistakes and transform them into means of progress; they question conventions; they provide an example of the fun that can be had by trying out new things.

Many artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries come to mind whose works challenged convention and confronted the problems of society. I am thinking of the symbolic power of Picasso’s *Guernica*, the socially critical posters of Barbara Kruger, the sculptures fashioned from rubble by the Lebanese artist Hayat Nazer, and a younger generation of Swiss artists such as Monica Ursina Jäger, Julian Charrière and Ester Vonplon, who like George Steinmann take a deep interest in climate change and sustainability. They all address explosive themes such as the consumer society, environmental awareness, war and the structures of power. In almost a decade of work on the MATZA series, Guelpa has gone a step further: he has

---

<sup>3</sup> George Steinmann in the catalogue made for the exhibition *Future Now*, held from 30 October to 11 December 2021 at Bern’s Stadtgalerie; page 205.

accepted the need to share his creative force with others as well, so that this force gains independence from him, so that it spreads beyond him.

Guelpa, therefore, has developed a complex approach to his work. What does the future hold? Will there be further MATZA projects? Without a doubt, for he is far too engaged to stop, far too intrigued by the positive energy invested in, and emerging from, his cooperation with others. His focus in recent months has nevertheless shifted somewhat. From the start MATZA was based on environmental concerns involving a host of different disciplines. Guelpa has viewed himself as go-between. Now he is changing his role as artist once again and is fixing his attention more closely on what happens if his work does not consist of the dynamic, participatory process itself, but rather becomes a strong reflection of his line of inquiry and his research.

This is illustrated by Guelpa's video *Rumbling Waters* dealing with the growing water shortage. It has a 10-minute slow-motion sequence in which the viewer watches three impressive amphoras being shot at. Slowly the amphoras fly apart and water bursts forth. Sometimes the light angle makes it look like blood. *Rumbling Waters* is an atmospherically magical and ambiguous work. The combination of the violence, the beauty of the clay vessels and the gushing water – moving with a near-unbearable lethargy – provides food for thought. This is not Guelpa wagging his finger at us. Rather, his work seems to ask how much time remains for us to take action against the destruction of our environment.

Sustainability, the resources available to us and our behaviour toward nature will remain a prominent feature of Guelpa's work. Even if a work like *Rumbling Waters* can make an excellent display in a conventional exhibition, part of its transformative power will inevitably dissipate unless it is placed in context. That is, when there is no setting to contextualize the work's urgency, the art languishes in a utopian Garden of Eden and nothing comes of it. And here we see the emergence of a realm of action important for the communication concepts of cultural institutions and companies with culture-related activity. This is important because it can be tied in with new dimensions only if it results in an ability to take action and the will to take action. What is revealed is a dilemma existing for any artistic approach that involves the future of our world. If the work is participatory in nature, if it is difficult to properly experience as a free-standing object in a gallery, then there is always the risk it will die an artistic death despite its beauty. Séverin Guelpa knows this, and will in future create new and innovative forms that provide a place for both the work itself and the responsive setting which it needs. MATZA will thus remain present as a structure designed to generate knowledge and at the same time the experience gathered will flow more strongly back into the art itself. Guelpa's aim is to achieve something tangible. He knows this is a balancing act, and he intends to pursue it.