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Saint Helena—Arenenberg—Saint-Léonard

Due to its remote location and inaccessible coastline, the notorious island of Saint never had an indigenous population, and remained uninhabited until the sixteenth century. The Portuguese discovered it; later on, the English also laid claim to Saint Helena. Various armed altercations ensued, and eventually the island became an English possession. Large farms were created, and black African and Chinese laborers were brought in. Saint Helena's wealth grew—particularly because its protected geographic situation recommended it for the storage of large quantities of gold. In 1815, the British government selected Saint Helena as the place of exile for Napoleon, who was deported there in October of the same year, and resided at Longwood House until his death on May 5, 1821. But Napoleon Bonaparte, the French general, statesman, and, finally, self-appointed emperor under the title of Napoleon I, had seen many places before that. One of them is in the immediate vicinity of the place the artist Florian Germann calls home. Since the midfifteenth century, the residents of Schloss Arenenberg have enjoyed the gorgeous views from the chateau's perch high above the Untersee, the western branch of Lake Constance. Like a precious jewel, the magnificent grounds invite the visitor to explore the surrounding forests and embark on a tour of the multifaceted history of the region around the lake. The chateau must have fascinated Germann even in his teenage years: a relic of European history that attested to Bonaparte's charisma and intelligence, survived no more than a stone's throw from where he was born. This fascination, and the memory of growing up in close proximity to the castle, made a lasting impression on Germann, so much so that they led him, years later, to develop the cycle of works discussed in the present pages. Originally built as a country estate for a patrician family from Constance, the chateau entered the focus of world history in the nineteenth century, when it became a residence of the French imperial family. Hortense de Beauharnais, the adopted daughter and sister-in-law of Napoleon I, had the late Gothic chateau reconstructed in the Empire style, and redesigned the park on Arenenberg hill to resemble French models. She hosted social gatherings that emulated the famous salons of her time and drew eminent people to Lake Constance. Documents bearing names such as Dumas, Récamier, Chateaubriand, and those of the entire European high nobility fill the inventory of the chateau's archives. The interiors were decorated with wallpapers, furniture, sculptures, and pictures that commemorated Napoleon I. After Hortense died in 1837, her son Louis Napoléon sold the chateau, but bought it back in 1855—he was now the French emperor, calling himself Napoleon III. In 1906, Eugénie, the widow of Emperor Napoleon III, donated the property to the canton of Thurgau, which has since operated a Napoleon museum in the chateau—the Germanspeaking world's only museum, it should be noted, dedicated to Napoleonic history.¹ At the other end of Switzerland, geographically speaking, is the lac souterrain beneath the Alps of the Valais. This subterranean lake at Saint-Léonard was first explored by Jean-Jacques Pittard in 1943, and has been open to the public since 1949. At 300 meters (1000 feet) long, 20 meters (66 feet) wide, and 10 meters (33 feet) deep, it is Europe's largest navigable subterranean lake.² At first glance, it may seem as though this place, enshrouded in myth, has nothing to do with Napoleon. But as the artist notes, the subterranean grotto is home, among other species, to a kind of frog, said to be blind, whose vernacular name is "Napoleon frog": when the animal pulls its hind legs up close to its body, the resulting anatomical shape recalls Napoleon's headgear, the bicorn. This fact, the "song" of the Napoleon frogs, and the location of the grotto, as well as other cultural monuments and nature reserves associated

with Napoleon (Mount Rushmore National Memorial and Alabaster Caverns State Park, Woodward County, Oklahoma) will be explained in the following history surrounding the cycle of works Saint Helena. Austerlitz—Mount Rushmore—Woodward County The circumstances laid out by way of introduction above indicate the outlines of a description and interpretation of the wide-ranging and complex narrative at the heart of the cycle Saint Helena / Riches from the Depths of the Mountains. When first confronted with the installation, the beholder rambles and wanders through a field of historic events, mythological references, half-fictions, fantastic fairytale-like elements, and scientific fact. Germann himself has aptly described his technique as the “perambulation of an inward library that seeks to detect as yet uncombined possibilities.” The remark attests both to the artist’s youthful zest for exploration and research, and to the repertoire of knowledge and experience he has built up over the years. The beholder witnesses the transformation of a historic-epic plot as well as a dynamic work process. Germann, in other words, not only probes combinations between different historical circumstances, he also gives an equally significant if not greater role to the identification of materials to work with, and to transformations of energies and materials. The artist appropriates found objects and relics or meticulously made replicas, using them to interweave traditional stories, whose rearrangement in the work of art obscures them or charges them with new meaning. The title Germann has given to his exhibition emphasizes his fascination with natural resources, and hence with the riches that can be extracted in pure form from the depths of the mountains, such as iron, lead, copper, zinc, and sulfur, substances he has repeatedly used in his works. In the exhibition Saint Helena / Riches from the Depths of the Mountains, Germann brought the works he created over the course of 2010 together, in a provisional installation under the same title.³ The show represents the culmination of months of research, the carving and sanding of a wood sculpture, cultivating Russian and French oysters, and the invitation to develop a so-called performance work for the exhibition Performative Attitudes at Kunsthaus Glarus.⁴ This invitation proved the initial stimulus that would lead to the creation of the Saint Helena cycle. The artist suspended a wrecked car in the Kunsthaus’s skylight hall, where it remained for several months as its sculptural appearance changed almost imperceptibly. What remained of it documents an action under the title Austerlitz, which took place before the show opened. The Battle of Austerlitz entered world history as Napoleon’s most significant military accomplishment. A year to the day after he crowned himself emperor of the French, on December 2, 1805, Napoleon I vanquished the Austrian and Russian troops at Prace heights between Brno and Austerlitz. For Germann’s work, ³—Galerie BolteLang, Zurich, August 28—October 2, 2010. ⁴—Featuring work by Nina Beier & Marie Lund, Stefan Burger, Nina Canell, Florian Germann, Navid Nuur, and others; Kunsthaus Glarus, February 7—May 2, 2010, curated by Alexandra Blättler and Sabine Rusterholz. P23370_Buch_IH.indd 74 17.04.12 11:48 Saint Helena 75 manpower, complemented by a Habegger hoist system, was used to lift the severed and gutted rear half of a Renault 21 up toward the glass ceiling, which had been reinforced with metal elements. By attaching an additional concrete weight, the car tail was unfolded in a matter of seconds; its shape, the gray-beige color, and the title Austerlitz now suggested an oyster—the German word is Auster—arrested in the act of opening up. For roughly three months, the relic referred to the action, which would survive in the form of a filmic documentation entitled Austerlitz I; the remaining material—with the exception of a blue bracket, which would be reused in Austerlitz II—was disposed of. So the first act was done; but more “bad boy’s tricks” would follow. Mentioning the Battle of Austerlitz emphasized the significance of Napoleon’s war strategy, which earned him admiration and fame. The highly detailed construction of the narrative in Germann’s Saint Helena is akin, in terms of intensity, intelligence, and elaborateness, to the emperor’s carefully thought out expeditions of

conquest. In the following, I will discuss the individual parts of the cycle in their factual or associative interrelation. As a prelude to the exhibition, a yellowed postcard showing John Gutzon de la Mothe Borglum at work, was mounted in the gallery's street-facing window. Born in Idaho in 1867, Borglum was an American sculptor. His chef d'oeuvre is the Mount Rushmore National Memorial in Keystone, South Dakota, which consists of four monumental portraits of the presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt, and is seen as a shrine to the saints of American democracy. The monument was dynamited, carved, and chiseled into the granite face of Mount Rushmore. Around four hundred laborers were involved in the work. The area was known for its large gold deposits, and was accordingly much coveted. An interesting fact that should be noted at this point is that Napoleon Bonaparte is said to have been among the mountain's previous owners—an important aspect of its history that aroused Germann's interest in taking its story further. But what must have positively fascinated him, as a trained sculptor and restorer, was the megalomania of the project. Besides Napoleon, then, we have in Borglum the second hero and protagonist—he, too, not untainted—of Germann's story. In his 2008 film *Crazy Horse*, Cyprien Gaillard examined the Mount Rushmore Memorial: he recorded work on the monument to the legendary Sioux leader, even grander in design, which is being dynamited into a cliff near Mount Rushmore. The sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski began work on the monument in 1948; it will be among the world's largest sculptures once it is completed, and must be read as a Native American response to Mount Rushmore. Every morning, Borglum stepped onto a wooden swing stage especially manufactured for the craftsmen, from which he did not rope down until the evening. Inspired by this procedure, Germann took up Borglum's position inside the gallery, on a scaffold suspended from the ceiling, during the opening, reenacting, we might say, the postcard in the display window; concealed from the audience, he created a clay relief showing an abstract Napoleon emblem. Leftover clay crumbling off during this procedure fell through a hole in the wall into the display window, where it formed a small heap beneath the postcard presented there, which in turn shows Borglum on a mountain slope. The relief and the scaffold remained in place for the entire duration of the exhibition as relics referring to the action. In addition to the projection of the documentary *Austerlitz I* from Glarus, the room contained three more groups of works. Ten silver gelatin prints on brass panels entitled *Dante's Inferno* depict motifs that have been found in the alabaster caverns in Woodward County, Oklahoma. This system of gyp- P23370_Buch_IH.indd 75 17.04.12 11:48 76 sum caves, which stretches over 1200 meters (.75 miles), contains a variety of alabaster formations in different colors. More than two hundred million years ago, a large inland sea covered the era, and its evaporation left large deposits containing gypsum. With the title of this work, Germann opens the referential horizon toward Dante's *Divine Comedy*, alluding in particular to the idea of hell (the German words for "hell" and "cave" are very similar). The motifs and aesthetic of the brass panels suggest an association with Gustave Doré's 1861 illustrations of the *Divine Comedy* and in particular with his engravings depicting scenes from the *Inferno*. In terms of spatial arrangement, the works *Untitled (Austerlitz II)* and *Untitled (Napoleon's Wife)* were displayed on the same table with *Dante's Inferno*. As mentioned above, Germann had spent considerable time growing French and Russian oysters in order to demonstrate an attempted union between oysters of different origin in the context of the exhibition. He once again alludes to Napoleon's invasion of Russia—but now also picks up again on the theme of alabaster, introduced in *Dante's Inferno*. The experiment, in which the blue bracket from *Austerlitz I* is used to bring two different species of oyster together in a nylon container, is meant to show how the alabaster-like calcium deposits the oyster produces will over time cover everything, transforming the material and,

with it, the object itself. *Untitled (Napoleon's Wife)* unites three silicone casts on nylon pedestals of objects Germann found at Schloss Arenenberg: a cannon barrel, a Rifle ball bag, and a corn cob (suggestive of a piece of ammunition) from the chateau's large gardens. The materiality and shapes of these objects, in combination with our awareness of Napoleon's numerous love affairs, transmit quite explicit sexual connotations. Cannon barrel, ball bag, and ammunition are also further references to the armaments and war industries associated with Napoleon. An anecdote that is relevant in this context is that Napoleon had his soldiers plunder the Russians' cannons after the Battle of Austerlitz and bring them to a foundry in France, where they were smelted down for the victory column he subsequently erected on Paris's Place Vendôme. The artist's interest in a similar process of transformation of material is clearly manifest in the component work *Untitled (Napoleon's Wife)*. Directly related to the alabaster caverns is the work *Ansage (aus den Tiefen der Berge)* (Announcement [from the depths of the mountains]), which consists of an old industrial refrigerator, inside which an audio device plays a recording of the Napoleon frog's courtship croaking, recorded by the artist in the cave at Saint-Léonard. *Napoleon's Head / Athanor* is a wooden corpus that, at first glance, suggests an immense musical instrument; looked at from a specific angle, it represents another formal allusion to Napoleon's bicorn. The casting mold on its inside—with so-called casting channels and a small vein allowing air to escape—lends concrete meaning to the work's second title in particular: we are looking at a furnace designed for alchemical procedures. Important processes in alchemy rely on warming or heating. Art terms such as "distillation," "sublimation" and "digestion" describe the three main processes in the maturation of a newly created material that are effected by the so-called philosophical furnace. The mold in this particular instance is shaped to produce spherical objects in two sizes—the dimensions of cannonballs for two historic standard cannon barrels. With the diversity of materials employed and the importance given to process, Germann's art clearly stands in the Beuysian tradition, with its private mythologies and cult of genius. An understanding of this multifaceted complexity can be secured almost only by considering the work in its entirety; a dissecting analysis is less helpful. One might compare the experience to that of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which leaves the reader, even years later, with a sense of having looked truth directly in the eye, if only for a few seconds. Everyone remembers the scene with the madeleine—a small and inconspicuous scene in this masterwork of world literature. The sudden scintilla of a brief revelation of world history is at the root of our experience of Saint Helena as well, even as the work makes no claim to permit, let alone invite, an interpretation that makes sense of every single one of its components. Does the cycle discussed in the preceding pages complete *Saint Helena / Riches from the Depths of the Mountains*? It depends on whether Germann, not content with tracing the history of Napoleon in metaphorical terms, will realize his plan to produce a dedicated handwritten rewriting of Napoleon's life. For this purpose, Germann chemically reproduced the ink used for what is probably the most famous biography of Napoleon and the one that epitomized his glorification, penned in 1827 by Jacques de Norvins (1769–1854), Baron Marquet de Montbreton, Napoleon's magistrate, companion, and biographer, who wrote: "L'examen de la vie de Napoléon, me disais-je, laisse dominer trois grands caractères: l'excès du génie, l'excès de la fortune et l'excès du malheur." 5