



October 2008. October 2008. We had set off to the pit before dawn, a twenty minutes' walk outside the city. The day broke. Light clouds were hovering above the sea and veiled the horizon. We would not be able to see the sunrise we had been looking forward to. That's at least what we thought. Suddenly there was a soft red light glimmering just to vanish again behind the thick grey mass. Soon after, it blazed up, more intense than before. From the sea arose a blazing fireball, swiftly, as if to reach its target of the day as quickly as possible.

The rising sun behind us, we approached the edge of the pit. Stefan had chosen the perfect moment. The giant shell of the pit was still among the shades, far below, surrounded by reeds, the dark lake lay asleep. Beaming, the young pine forest flanking the south of the pit eagerly received the light of the sun. In the enormous red wall lying and eroding behind the pit broke an incredible brightness that seemed to fluoresce right from the inside. A perfect miracle! When the early light of morning reached the pit, it seemed like the blossoming of a flower, a water lily of a hundred metres in diameter. Its bud burst open and started to fill the space. The ridges and gullies turned into petals. Had the countless forms and hues been music, they would have made the most beautiful symphony. What had started out in piano, now rose to a crescendo and unfolded in a divine orchestra. The reed belt began to move. Its leaves seemed to be waving to us in the soft breeze. The birds in the reeds welcomed the day. Some of them called two and three times. Others tried a complete melody. The dark lake turned into a glittering mirror, refusing to be outshone by the blaze of colours it was surrounded by. The heat raised sweet odours from the barren shrubs: thistles and thorns, thyme and sage. The world lay at our feet.

What now appears as a miracle of nature first came into existence in the 40ies, when people started to win bauxite in this area situated at 2 kilometres south of Otranto. Bauxite is used to synthesize aluminium. An enormous platform made the bottom of the pit accessible to heavy lorries. The bauxite-bearing, red ground was dug mechanically with conveyor belts sending it to the surface, where it was reduced to small pieces that could be strained out for chunks of 5 to 40 millimetres of concentrated bauxite. The rest of the red soil, which did not contain enough bauxite to make further processing profitable, was heaped at the verge of the pit. The extracted ore was transported to the port of Otranto where it was shipped to Meghara in Albania.

The mining stopped around 1980. Since then, the quarry has returned to its natural state. The railings and other installations have been removed. The spoil pile and the walls of the pit have eroded. The thick earth deposits have defied any kind of vegetation and have remained there up to the present day, as far as the rain has not washed them back into the depths of the pit. Deep schrunds hanging in the pit like scraps of cloth are evidence of this process. The bank of the lake is almost completely surrounded by reeds. The reflection in the lake basin is constantly changing in a very subtle manner. At times, the inverted image is a sharp reflection of the fantastic reality rising behind the lake. The sky below might be inferior to the one above in terms of size but not of beauty. At other times, the rippling surface dims the reflection to a deep black. Lizards, snakes and birds have settled in the pit. Above, the turf and a few pines have dared to advance as far as the scarp. Next to the powerful view of the red main glacier, there are many smaller glacier tongues that are separated from each other by ochre rock walls and steep cliffs with massy boulders in all colours. In some places, thin, mostly pale layers meander horizontally through the rock, cut off by perpendicular walls. The variations range from chalky white, over yellowish and brownish ochre, light and dark grey, to black patches. Here and there, some plants try to regain their territory. At first appearance, they do so with moderate success. Upon closer inspection, however, the dry ripples of thorns and thistles reveal the wild-growing relations of fennel, thyme, chicory and sage. From time to time there is a bird, the chirping of crickets, or, less often, the croaks of frogs. Then it is dead quiet. There is an atmosphere of devotion that won't go unnoticed.

In the early morning, they set out to the Cava di bauxite, as the people of Otranto call it, with sturdy shoes, dressed in long trousers to avoid the thorns and brambles. They

have rubbed plenty of sun blocker into their skin and they all wear sun hats. In their rucksacks, they carry their tools and big bottles of water. They know how hot it can get in the crucible, even in this time of the year.

Having reached the pit, their work begins. Some of the pigments, the red ones in particular and some of the grey and ochre ones are quite common and therefore easy to find. Other colours seem to be hiding. Merely looking for them will not do. It is vital to look closely, to be open and to read the structures. There they stand, the collectors, sometimes for several minutes, to have a close look, or perhaps because they still allow themselves to be overwhelmed as they did on the first day. The silence is absolute. Every now and then there is the sound of hammering and digging. A skylark is tweeting. A lizard is watching their human proceedings while a water snake is floating in concentrically growing circles.

Working at the site, it is necessary to choose the right tool according to the constitution of the rock. Cutlery will do for the easy cases. In the case of lumps containing fat, however, the layer of dust is removed with a peeling knife. Hard and chunky lumps need to be bared and chopped with a sledgehammer and a pickaxe or with a mason's hammer and a flat chisel. Soil scoops, rakes, and hoes are used to collect everything. People are digging, scraping, hammering, gouging, crushing, cutting, picking. Once cleaned, the yield is put in plastic sacks and tucked in rucksacks. This time-consuming task requires a lot of passion and commitment.

Castello. On the top floor of the Castello, there is a spacious studio with several work areas. The next step is to turn the rock samples into pigments. The hard lumps are ground with a metal mortar, a very heavy tool, whereas the smaller lumps can be smashed by use of a sledgehammer. People are scratching and scraping, pounding and battering, grating and riddling. The smell of soil. The friable mixture obtained from this procedure is poured into the porcelain mortar where it is crushed and ground. This continues until the crunch turns into a rubbing noise which eventually is hushed in a cloud of fine powder. In the meantime, various pigment riddles have been placed on a white paper underlay.

After having screened the chunky grains by means of a flour sifter (300 micrometres) and having ground them in a mortar, the powder is passed through the finest of the various sieves. The sieves are used for the calibration. Usually, that's 60, 80, 100 or 120 micrometres. Lifting the sieve after the work is done, one can see a fine moon of pigments on the underlay.

All that remains to be done is to collect the pigments by taking the two opposite sides of the paper underlay and let the pigments glide through a funnel into a plastic bag. Thus, one of over 30 shades is ready for processing.

Turning pigments into paint requires liquid. In most cases, that will be water and a binder. This, however, does not answer the question of how to mix oil paint or water-colours. Thomas und Stefan, the two experts in this field, appear like two cooks presenting their recipes. It is really only the result that makes a difference. Instead of scrambled eggs or cheese cake they make egg tempera or casein paint. This kind of information extends everyone's individual knowledge and makes us want to have a go.

Sibylle places a sheet of paper on her left palm and, with a fine brush in her right hand, starts to carefully apply layer after layer. «Wow! Beautiful», she exclaims when she sees the glaze taking on. The deep concentration in the studio, where many people are working at many tables in a virtually devout silence, is further increased by Sibylle's shout of joy.