

# A stony path

## IN MEMORY OF THE SCULPTOR KARL PRANTL

During a discussion with Karl Prantl at the beginning of the 1990s, we talked about a place in southern Burgenland. There, in Rechnitz, in the course of one night towards the end of the war in 1945 about two hundred Jews were murdered. As forced labourers they were supposed to erect a fortified rampart. The murderers are unknown to this day. The location of the mass grave has never been found either. Karl Prantl wanted to erect a monument to the unknown murder victims. At that time only a few people knew about this event. As a result of a play by Elfriede Jelinek, in the following years it became better known.

In 1971, on the occasion of Albrecht Dürer's 500th birthday, in addition to many other events, a symposium for sculptors took place in Nuremberg. It was advertised publicly, and about seven hundred sculptors from all over the world applied. Karl Prantl was unable to make a selection. He would have let all of them attend. His idea was for them to work the stones on the "Great Road" in the Nazi party rally grounds. Finally a small selection of artists was made. Karl Prantl worked in the city and on the "Great Road". The 60,000 granite slabs of this parade road were all hewn by prisoners from the Nazi concentration camps. The road whose stones, really beautiful stones, come from various quarries, was conceived by Prantl as a memorial. In the stones, the witnesses to the horrors, Prantl saw not only the horrors but also great beauty. At that time he could not fathom this.<sup>i</sup>

Born in 1923, Karl Prantl was shaped by the Great War and the horrors of these years. He could not let go of the injustice and the murder of millions of people. His lifelong efforts to commemorate the victims came from this. For him, this commemoration took place in stone. The stones remain. They create a bridge to the people who cut them, to the suffering of these people, to the darkness of an atrocious

time. They also create a bridge to their place of origin and connect the present with the ancient, an origin in the depths of time before all history. For Karl Prantl the place of horror also became the place of manifest beauty. In his art Karl Prantl tenaciously approaches this apparently irreconcilable contradiction. He endured it and dealt with it. In this way a body of work came into being that is among the most important creations of European contemporary art.<sup>ii</sup>

### Encounters across all boundaries

Karl Prantl's oeuvre consists not only of the stones. A major part of his work lies also in a communal initiative, namely the sculptors' symposia. The underlying principle was to assemble sculptors where the materials for their art originated. They were to work at the site of the stones and in the open air, not in the closed atmosphere of a studio, not far away from nature. They should not work alone, each person separately in his own world following his own genius, but experience community as an important element when working with stone. Karl Prantl had this thought when working on a boundary that the provincial government of Burgenland had commissioned. In 1958, the year in which his daughter Katharina was born, this stone was made in the quarry in St. Margarethen in Burgenland. A year earlier, Karl Prantl and the artist Uta Peyrer had married. In 1960 their son Sebastian was born. The previous year Karl Prantl, together with Friedrich Czargan and Heinrich Deutsch, had organized the "1st Symposium of European Sculptors". Eleven sculptors from eight countries worked together for three months in the quarry in St. Margarethen. From the crest of the quarry hill the view extends far to the east, across Lake Neusiedl to Hungary. In the vast-

ness of this space the sculptors' symposium created a site of intense fellowship. Year after year, sculptors from all over the world met here. An important part of this community were sculptors from Japan and from the then communist countries of Eastern Europe. In tiny St. Margarethen something came into existence that anticipated future developments. An encounter took place here that transcended all divisive boundaries. Something emerged from this which radiated throughout the world. During the following years, the winter months were usually devoted to the preparation of the following symposia in St. Margarethen. In the summer months, Uta Peyrer and Karl Prantl together with Katharina and Sebastian, attended symposia in Austria and abroad. The idea of a sculptors' symposium proved to be very fruitful. In the decades after 1959 similar meetings took place all over the world. Friendships were forged that lasted a lifetime.

### **Stone – a being with skin and veins**

What does Karl Prantl's art consist of? Why is it so special? From 1946 on Karl Prantl studied painting under Albert Paris Gütersloh at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and completed his studies in 1952. As early as 1950 he began to work with wood and stone. The first works were suggestive of figures. Soon Prantl discovered elementary abstract shapes, which were to become distinctive in his work. Openings, hollows and swellings, together with geometric design and polishing, are the effects left on the material. Tree trunks are worked on, small works in bronze are created and then above all, the stones. Stone is the material with which Karl Prantl feels a deep affinity. For him it is alive, it is a being with skin and veins that can look at you, like the dark Norwegian Labrador, with many eyes.

Stone was not used by Prantl as the means to express his personal ideas, and he did not subject it to his notion of form. It was rather treated like a being whose distinctiveness and beauty was to be revealed with the aid of the sculptor. "Art is aid" is one of Karl Prantl's rare utterances regarding his own art. Aid for other people, of course, but also aid for the material, especially for the stone.

Since Prantl perceived stone to be alive, he was able to bring it into close and intimate proximity to human life. This begins with the fact that, according to his own wishes, the stones were to be touched. Again and again stones were created with a special dedication, to the

composers Josef Matthias Hauer and Friedrich Cerha. In Vermont a "Stone for Nikolaus Kopernikus" came into being in 1970/71; in 1962 a "Stone for the Glory of God" was formed in the Negev desert. Karl Prantl was held in high regard by Anna and Gerhard Lenz. He created a "Chapel" for them near their house near Söll in Tyrol. Many stone sculptures "On Meditation" were created. Again and again hollows or round openings are termed "Invocations". "Three Invocations" or "Five Invocations". The catalogue of an earlier exhibition (December 1965 – January 1966) of stones at the Vienna Galerie im Griechenbeisl gives an indication of the importance of this somewhat mysterious name. On the left-hand side of the double page in the middle of the thin booklet are five grey circles arranged below one another. On the right-hand side opposite each of the circles is an invocation – JESUS YOUR LEFT HAND / JESUS YOUR RIGHT HAND / JESUS YOUR LEFT FOOT / JESUS YOUR RIGHT FOOT / JESUS YOUR HEART. It is a litany to the wounds of Jesus.

### **Places where the present is steeped in the past**

Having grown up in a Roman Catholic environment, Karl Prantl had a profound faith. He spoke about his devoutness just as little as he spoke about his art. In later years he avoided direct links such as those in the catalogue from the mid-60s. What remained was a deep attachment to the Church and to his faith. He lived this relationship in his own way, not like a traditional member of the congregation. For its part The Church remained as reserved as possible when confronted with his art. Karl Prantl was commissioned to design churches on three occasions. In 1967 he created the altar, the tabernacle, the ambo, the Stations of the Cross and the baptismal font for the Church of the Holy Cross at Langholzfeld near Linz. In the same year he created the altar, the tabernacle stele and the baptismal font for the parish church in Wernstein, Upper Austria. The altar at Langholzfeld remained unconsecrated and was cloaked in plaster-of-Paris soon after its completion. The stone was not exposed until 1995. In Austria, the veiling and concealing of unpopular works of art in Churches is traditional. Works by Max Weiler and Herbert Boeckl endured a similar fate to that of the altar at Langholzfeld. When the veil is removed after several decades, all controversy has died down and the works are well preserved. The third altar was created in 1993 for the

Leechkirche in Graz. It found a good place within the Catholic Higher Education Association. Even if it is a bone of contention for some priests and members of the congregation, it is appreciated and honoured by most of them. Karl Prantl has created the Stations of the Cross on several occasions. One set, dating from 1979, is in the Frenswegen monastery. Another one is embedded in the floor on the north side of the Church of St. Lorenz in Nuremberg. This consists of fourteen stone slabs from the "Great Road" in the Nazi party rally grounds. The city of Nuremberg left a series of these stone slabs to Karl Prantl. Three further slabs are embedded in the pavement next to the Akademisches Gymnasium in Vienna. The slabs are part of a memorial to Jewish teachers and pupils who had to leave the Akademisches Gymnasium in 1938. Karl Prantl provided the three stones. As artist and sculptor he remained in the background. The stones point to a way of thinking that was at home in the bigger picture and that knew how to shape places where the present is steeped in the past.

I shall never forget Good Friday 1991 when fourteen of Karl Prantl's stones were laid out on the south side of St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna. In the icy weather, the artist walked barefoot across the stones. When he got to the end he turned to the right where a statue of Jesus pointing to his wounds stands in a corner next to the Singer Gate. Karl Prantl turned towards it and called out loudly, "Forgive us our sins!" The way in which faith, art, an awareness of history, and responsibility form a unity in him was expressed in through this.

### **Art as a sign of something else**

Karl Prantl liked to take a back seat. He did not attach importance to himself, and that is unusual behavior, and not only among artists. Whoever was acquainted with him was immediately introduced to other people. Whoever met him got caught up in extensive requests. In all of this, art was a guide and comfort. It was not in the foreground. It remained a sign pointing to something else. This sign can be found in the fields in Pöttsching in Burgenland. There, in his home village, Karl Prantl and Uta Peyrer collected the stones that had come into being at symposia in several countries. Stones created in recent years and major works from earlier years have been set up there. In the midst of the fields a great heritage has been preserved.

The importance of the sculptors' symposia on the hill in St. Margarethen in Burgenland is becoming less and less clear. It has been documented in a book edited by Katharina Prantl, "Gehen über den Hügel von St. Margarethen von Stein zu Stein".<sup>iii</sup> Much of what was thought and begun in the 60s and 70s survives as a fragment, overshadowed by other interests. In spite of this, the reconciling power of communal action still radiates today. The stones have remained as signs. They are witnesses of an attitude that looked for a new beginning after the catastrophes of the 20th century. Not by forgetting and suppressing the past, as was so often the case, but by preserving memories, by renouncing retribution and asking for forgiveness.

With the idea of the symposium Karl Prantl's art rose above what is generally accepted to be the activity of an artist. It left the studio, it abandoned the fixation on a creative personality. The gesture of genius is just as alien to this art as is the idea that one is different from the rest of the world due to one's own creations. Karl Prantl's art consists of humbly turning to the material, to stone, in setting simple signs, in community with others, in extraordinary historical vigilance, in the awareness of guilt and in the search for reconciliation, in resistance against a great deal that characterizes art and the art world in Austria.

### **Humbly turning to the material**

Karl Prantl was never one of those artists who were praised again and again by the media as being one of the great titans in Austrian art. No-one who knows anything about life in Austria will be surprised by this. This man was too critical and offered too much resistance. However, more than many artists who are now in the limelight, he is amongst those whose work is of importance for 21st century Europe. Where does this importance lie? On the one hand in the fact that Karl Prantl's art was not exhausted by creating objects. On the contrary, an important part of this art was present in life and in cultivating a community with others. Turning to others, turning to victims, turning to the forgotten is central to Karl Prantl's art. He accomplished this turning through the way he worked in stone, through the way he was interested in others and helped them, through the way he put up resistance within the art world and in cultural practice. The importance of Karl Prantl's art lies also in the way it turns towards the "artless". That may

appear paradoxical, but broad international change was accomplished and shaped by Karl Prantl in an unmistakably personal manner. The notion of art that was still valid in the 20th century and was oriented to masterpieces and the concept of genius is interrogated by this. Art that has turned into artlessness wins back what has gone missing from the art of masterpieces and of geniuses. It denies itself art that can be misunderstood as an object of value, as a piece of jewellery, or as a decoration. It creates anew a relationship with the commonplace and helps to discover beauty and magic where they are usually overlooked or not even thought to exist. After the destruction of the 20th century, and after the end of the grand utopias, this art helps to mark a new beginning. Karl Prantl's stones are exemplary in this respect.

### Leaving the house to meet somebody

On the morning of the 8th of October, 2010, Karl Prantl passed away outside the door of his house. He had left the house to meet somebody. He went his own way all his life. Years ago Anne Fried, a Jewish friend, wrote to me about her thoughts on Paul Celan's "Gespräch im Gebirg" (Conversation in the Mountains).<sup>iv</sup> Paul Celan begins this short text as follows, "One evening the sun, and not only the sun, had set, the Jew stepping out of his little house, the Jew and the son of a Jew, and with him his name, the unpronounceable one, went and came, trundled back, listened, passed leaning on a stick, came over stones, can you hear me, you hear me, it's me, me, me and him that you hear, you think you can hear, me and the other one," – Anne Fried wrote to me about this, "Out of the little house ... came not the "Jude (Jew)", as would be in written German, but the "Jud", the Yiddish Yid ... A Jew is never alone. He always has his entire people with him and represents them, called to a nomadic life and to survive. The Jew is inextricably bound to his God ... this Jew came on a stick, on the walking stick of the eternal Jew and his way led over the innumerable stones on Jewish graves and the pebbles blown by the wind that visitors had left on the graves in order to show that they have been there, as they commemorate and wander on ... The wanderer hears and the voice knows that he can hear, knows in the depth of his heart that the hearer and the speaker are one." Anne Fried's thoughts and Paul Celan's text came to me when I was thinking about Karl

Prantl. With his art he created places of memory and the opportunity for a new beginning. He knew about the guilt vis-à-vis the Jews and God and asked for forgiveness. He himself took on something of the stature of the wanderer about whom Anne Fried writes, "His way led over the innumerable stones on Jewish graves and the pebbles blown by the wind ..." He himself left stones behind. "The wanderer hears and the voice knows that he can hear, knows in the depth of his heart that the hearer and the speaker are one." That is what we hope for you, dear Karl Prantl.

<sup>i</sup> Cf. contribution by Lucius Grisebach in: Karl Prantl, Kreuzweg und Steine zur Meditation, catalogue of the exhibition in Graz as part of the European Month of Culture in 1993

<sup>ii</sup> There is as yet no comprehensive monograph about Karl Prantl. A selection of major publications: St. Margarethen Bildhauersymposion (1966), published by Symposion Europäischer Bildhauer in connection with Christa Hauer-Fruhmann (Galerie im Griechenbeisl) Karl Prantl, Plastiken 1950–1972 (Innsbruck 1973), edited and introduced by Peter Weiermair Karl Prantl, Plastiken 1950–1982, catalogue on the exhibition in the Frankfurter Kunstverein (Frankfurt 1981) Friederike Mayröcker, aus einem Stein entsprungen: aus einem Verwandtschaftshimmel: zu Karl Prantl's Arbeiten in Stein (St. Gallen 1989) Karl Prantl, Kameny / Steine, catalogue of the exhibition in the Czech Museum for Fine Arts (Prague 2001)

<sup>iii</sup> Gehen über den Hügel von St. Margarethen von Stein zu Stein (Wien 2004), edited by Katharina Prantl for "Symposion Europäischer Bildhauer"

<sup>iv</sup> Full text in German in *entschluss* Heft 3/1994, 27–29