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# Karl Prantl

## FROM PÖTTSCHING TO YORKSHIRE SCULPTURE PARK AND BACK, VIA SCHLOSS AMBRAS

**Landscape and boundary lines** are central themes in the development of Karl Prantl's work. At Pötttsching where he lives and works, his sculptures are laid out along the edges of a long thin field, emphasising the region's history of strip farming, and leading the eye towards the distant hills of the border between Austria and Hungary. All his life he has striven to break down barriers between different cultures and countries. This was particularly true during the fifties and early sixties when Prantl made contact with artists working in Eastern bloc countries, and established a series of stone carving symposia. This culminated in the development of the St Margarethen stone quarry Workshop in eastern Austria which acted as a catalyst for the organisation of many more symposia, often in troubled areas such as Berlin and the Israeli desert. Stone for Prantl provides the fabric of life. He would agree with the poet James H. White who wrote, "there are plenty of ruined buildings in the world but no ruined stones." Stone has an eternal quality. It comes from the earth and returns to the earth. Stones reveal traces of previous existences and contain their own history and many of the stones Prantl has used have at one time had a different purpose or function. He is prepared to travel from one end of the world to the other in his quest for the right stone and his studio and garden are littered with glittering prizes quarried from countries such as Brazil, Japan, Norway, Africa, India, Germany and, of course, Austria. Born into an agricultural family, Karl Prantl did not follow directly in the footsteps of his ancestors but chose instead to turn farming land into a kind of plantation for his sculpture. There is no grand design to the layout of his work around his studio in Pötttsching. Most of the sculptures are simply placed to

stand between trees, not interfering with the vistas, but rather appearing to be very much at home among the busy agricultural activities of nearby farms. Highly conscious of the rhythms and cycles of the seasons, Prantl has immense feeling for the natural world which is the key to his success as an artist. His philosophical understanding of the environment is based on a spiritual belief in humanity's potential for good and the importance of acknowledging and accepting responsibility for the traces left, as we pass through the spaces we fleetingly inhabit. At our first meeting in Pötttsching I explained my intention to try to organise an exhibition of his large stone carvings at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. This idea seemed rather unusual as normally Prantl would travel to different parts of the world to carve stones and generally his exhibitions included smaller works. On this occasion, however, stones from different parts of the world would be uprooted from their home in Pötttsching and displayed in an 18th Century landscape in Yorkshire. Never had so many of his works been moved for a single exhibition. He remarked, "we're all crazy, but let us drink to the success of the project". Yorkshire Sculpture Park is situated near to the birthplaces of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth and alongside the once mighty coalfields of West Yorkshire. What appealed to Prantl, along with the opportunity to exhibit in Yorkshire where areas of wild landscape had once inspired Moore and Hepworth, was the idea of a labyrinth of coal mines below the surface of the land, and the traces of their scars above. Organising the transport of the work required great skill, determination, patience, friendship and meticulous planning. Once the works arrived in Yorkshire, the puzzle of the siting of the stones became apparent

and was only to be solved by moving each sculpture endlessly to find its correct location. STONE FOR MEDITATION (blue Brazilian granite, 1986/88) was moved 24 times before these beautiful cool blue pieces of Brazilian stone were finally sited, forming a mysterious path into the shrubs.

This "earthbound" sculpture is made up of four large slabs of stone measuring approximately 15 x 220 x 150 cm and weighing over 750 kg. Although each slab retains its quarried shape the upper surfaces have been polished, enhancing the deep blue of the granite. At strategic points the edges have been carved and the surface interrupted by delicate carving, exploring traces of fossil forms from a different time and place. The stones may be displayed individually or as a group and the spaces between may be varied according to the location.

STONE FOR MEDITATION (blue Brazilian granite, 1986/88) is typical of much of Prantl's work; laborious to carve, frustratingly strenuous and slow to move, apparently impossible to find an advantageous site for. And then, suddenly, the right spot is found and everything changes as the stones become part of the landscape. The anxiety drains away and the sculpture looks as if it has always been part of this place.

Karl Prantl felt STONE FOR MEDITATION was one of his most difficult sculptures to site and thought the display of the sculpture in Yorkshire was the most successful to date. He enjoyed sitting at BRASILIANISCHER ROSENKRANZ to have his lunch while observing the way the sculpture reacted to the changing light conditions. Sometimes the three stones appeared like cold, hard, flat slabs of granite; occasionally they appeared to melt into a thin charcoal drawing line tracking the lie of the land, and often they took on the appearance of deep blue ponds, absorbing and reflecting nature.

The artist liked to take a siesta on STONE FOR MEDITATION (serpentine, 1993). This thin large stone, almost level with the ground he found very comfortable and from this horizontal position he would observe the layout of the exhibition, urging people to take their shoes and socks off and feel, through their feet, the dark coolness of the stone and the beautifully carved veins which the artist had coaxed from within the amazonite. On one memorable occasion I found him sitting on the edge of STONE FOR MEDITATION (Norwegian labrador, 1985/95) persuading members of the public to rest on

this very long horizontal stone, encouraging them to relax, feel the perfectly carved surface (which took ten years to complete) and enjoy the view of the landscape. These gentle encounters with the public often resulted in the normally reticent English wandering around the exhibition caressing sculptures and repeating the comments of the artist: "Stein, Gut, Ja".

Working with Karl Prantl in Yorkshire was a great experience as we rediscovered spaces and locations within the softness of the English landscape, the sculpture making us more aware of its own rocky foundations and undulations. The siting of the exhibition exploited the vistas, the gentle rolling slopes and the width of the parkland as it moved from the structural formality of the Camellia House to the broader open spaces of Lakeside.

After Yorkshire we travelled with Karl Prantl to site the sculptures at Schloß Ambras in Austria. The contrast with Yorkshire could not have been greater. Set above Innsbruck, the impressive castle and parkland, surrounded by the mountains of the Tyrol, seemed to be carved out of the mountain side and the air diffused with a sharper quality of light than in Yorkshire. At Schloß Ambras we decided to make a more formal arrangement, creating an imaginary grid system to plot the positions of the sculptures in relationship to each other. The aim was to tempt the public to participate in the exhibition by suggesting a presence at the entrance of the park but only gradually revealing the full impact and power of the sculptures as visitors moved further into the park. Certain markers were established through the siting of the four large Stones for Meditation (blue Brazilian granite, 1986/88) and the 920 cm long STONE FOR MEDITATION (Norwegian labrador, 1987/88) was laid between two trees forming an edge, like a powerful pencil line, to the exhibition. Sitting on this sculpture it was possible to see a remarkable range of Prantl's sculpture against the white forms of the castle and the craggy landscape beyond. Further on, the green-grey of STONE FOR MEDITATION (serpentine, 1987/88) set against the "Nordkette" echoed the veins of the mountains.

This was the first time sculpture had ever been sited in the park and an extraordinarily complex manoeuvre was required to transport and install the works at Schloß Am-

bras. Each day local people would observe with grave suspicion the struggle to find the right places for the sculptures. Our despair, as we searched for the right spot, was often matched by the disdain of the onlookers. Then slowly but surely as the exhibition started to take shape, the public response changed. They became more curious before reaching a stage of acceptance and eventual satisfaction as locations were found for each of the large sculptures.

Displayed on this scale and in such a setting Prantl's sculptures seemed very much at home in Austria. The works related to one another and to the immediate landscape but, like the surrounding mountains, had sufficient space to breathe the air of isolation. Like many sculptors, including Isamu Noguchi, Prantl prefers to work in granite. This compressed obdurate material is awkward to quarry, difficult to move and slow to carve but perfect for outdoor sculpture. The experience of working with granite, combined with his respect for eastern philosophy and art, has informed Karl Prantl's cultural attitude towards stone which in many ways

means he is closer to Japanese rather than European sensibilities.

Prantl's stone works range from austere minimal forms to those which are sumptuous and exuberant and the colour of the stone is invariably significant. His sculptures do not impose upon the landscape. They flirt with it until eventually a mutual interdependence is established and the interaction between art and nature heightens awareness of space, location and form. For Prantl tactility is essential to the works; he talks about people wanting to touch, feel, caress, hold, hug, sit and listen to his sculptures, preferably at different times of the day and season. Above all he wants people to slow down and spend time looking, as without contemplation we will not penetrate the true essence and spirituality of art and nature.

In Yorkshire and Innsbruck this large project demonstrated the importance and uniqueness of Karl Prantl's sculpture. Although he is essentially Austrian his sculpture knows no barriers. What is now required is a concentrated effort to find a permanent public site in Austria to honour the work of this important artist.