

“Stones”

COMMENTS ON KARL PRANTL'S SCULPTURES

However little Karl Prantl sees the objective of his art as being fulfilled within the boundaries of his work, it is still important to take these works seriously, to pay attention to the experience they enable. This spelling out of the individual elements of his artistic technique soon flows into the phrasing of the “language” of these stones. What is articulated in a very sensual, although non-literary way, ought not to be subsumed only under the documentation of recent artistic trends or under the iconoclastic logic of developments in new art. If one learns to master the stones, even to live with them, the stones themselves will show the way from the “aesthetics” to the “ethics” of which Prantl speaks a great deal. His programme at the sculptors' symposia attempts to smooth out this transition in a different way.

Prantl's work is not beyond the “modern”. Making the boundaries between art and life passable, the attempt to “sit astride the fence between the two” or even to pull it down completely, is part of the artistic conception for many artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Constantin Brancusi and Ad Reinhardt. In his distinctive way, Prantl expresses this basic conflict – probably not only of recent art – in his artistic work. For this reason it is difficult to compare the schools or styles of modern sculpture. They can hardly be pigeonholed. Even a term like “abstract” sculpture, which would express Prantl's turing away from the human form, remains meaningless. The attempt to connect him to the so-called Viennese School of Sculpture (Wotruba in particular), or to the sculpture of the 70s with its minimalistic tendencies that border on object art is even more meaningless. The real artistic point of reference for Prantl, as it is for the major portion of more recent sculpture is in fact Brancusi. He became a father figure in the same way that Cezanne did in the world

of painting, who when seen from a variety of positions, leads to debate and serves as a reference point for a variety of positions. However, the attempt also fails here to construe Prantl as it were with Brancusi, because we are dealing with quite different concepts beyond their comparable round and soft treatments of form.

I.

The question of the artistic concept is naturally of great importance for non-representational sculptures such as Prantl's. His stones provide an authentic answer, although conversations with the artist – and whoever had the opportunity and the good luck to have such conversations will certainly confirm it – reveal a lot about the dynamics of this art in their own way. Of course the separation between what was intended and what he succeeded in doing, between the author's sphere of life and the sphere of influence of his art, started before the work on the stones. That is because artistic conception does not intend detached, general ideas or rules that apply to the works, but rather an individual solution that finds the artistic technique for a certain task accomplished on a stone. The interplay alone between the designed structural image and the experience it enables shows whether and wherein the work has a distinctive appearance. Of course, in order to be able to gain this experience and comprehend the feasible meaning, someone who has eyes to see and senses to understand is needed, someone who lends his eyes and his voice to the silent language of the stones. Names like “Invocation” or “Stone of Meditation” which Prantl gives to his sculptures show that they are only revealed when he works on them, that their objective is experience and life. It's important to remember this because it is exactly “abstract” artistic formulations

such as these that are often deemed to forego sensuality, individual idiosyncrasies and finally meaning. From the mid 1950s on, Prantl created sculptures whose genuine structure was first unfolded, then retained and developed further and further by him. These “structures” have something to do with the shape of the stone, as far as is allowed, and possibly the separation of oneself for a moment from the “material” that is taking shape. In a thought experiment of this nature it becomes clear that what counts as the very core of this art is the completely distinctive way in which the shape helps the stone to become visible and the way in which the stone suggests or at least accepts a certain form. The difficulties in understanding this art probably come from the fact, in particular, that the relationship of these moments is not obvious and therefore not really seen. The stones are reified, perceived as shaped things, not as the medium of knowledge. In order to characterize this relationship, it would be wrong to say that it is a question of showing or broaching the issue of the materiality of the stone by way of artistic intervention. Trends of exposing material in an artistic manner in this way in contemporary art may suggest such a presumption. What radically distinguishes Prantl from this is his totally different understanding of what is material in the sculpture – at least in his sculpture – that is to say, not a dead substance, which itself is passive and empty, waiting to be shaped or used. Prantl concedes that the stone has a “life” of its own, as does nature which created it as one of its products aeons ago. This thought remains alien to a civilization that is used to exploiting nature – an almost long-forgotten experience. This is Prantl’s thematic relationship to “material”. What this life consists of is made visible by the peculiarities of its shape. As any observer knows, it is the spare artistic measures that are easy to overlook. They are most apparent at the – what one could call – “corner solutions” of his works, i.e. the “edges” or “lines” where the surfaces meet one another, a front side, for example, changes into a side surface or this becomes a back surface – always in relation to a constant viewing angle. The artificial language of the description signals a problem – turns of phrase such as “edge”, “corner” or suchlike cannot describe what really happens in a seamless transition between the sides of, for example, a rectangular solid that does not lose its basic geometrical shape through this, but does lose clear contour lines that define it, so to speak, once and for all. The round contours open the

material up, make it ambiguous and effective. Above all, they form the decisive transition for the – three dimensional – sculpture from surface to volume. Only if we follow such a decisive change of direction does a body form out of the impression of a flat side. This is taken for granted in day-to-day perception and not considered to be worth looking at. Artistic means are needed to make the way in which volume comes into being and to what extent the quality of the respective sculpture is pre-structured by “hinges” or “corner solutions” as mentioned above visible again. If you follow the structure of the stones, then it is not only the “formal” that opens up in the structure, but the whole structure “comes into being” for the eye of the beholder. It is this secret we have to thank that sculptures such as these are not seen as finished things, predetermined intellectually or categorically, but as sensual happenings. Therefore whoever only sees the soft design of the material that has been revealed undercuts the composition of its artistic formulation. The design process does not submit to the material, nor should the material become the real content. What is meant is the silent dialogue of these moments in a different way in each sculpture.

What was tangible for the first time in the corner solutions is further determined in its own right. Among other things, the round transitions cause a higher integration of the side surfaces among one another, unlike clear geometric edges would do. The side surfaces are clearly more strongly linked because the effect of separation caused by an edge is no longer there. The surfaces at the corners appear to be at least blended into one another to the same degree as they differ from one another, unlike, for example in a stereometrically clearly defined rectangular stone. The higher integration of all the surfaces of a sculpture with one another causes the surface to become a kind of “skin on the stone”, which contracts but also relaxes – as folds – in later stones. This consistency of the sculptural surface does not just have consequences for the genesis of the sculptural volume but also for each new interpretation of the “material”, which is the issue as far as Prantl is concerned. As we do not see the surface as the mere end of the stone, the place where it was hewn out of the rock, but as a structure and order in its own right and with its own tension, it can also reveal its own sensual substratum by utilizing this characteristic. The boundaries of a block of stone, its stereometrical statistics, which define body

volume via height, length and breadth, are not identical to the designed sculptural surfaces.

In addition, the surfaces' own consistency is enhanced by careful polishing. The fine grain of the sand paper that gives a stone its final matte polish does not serve to close it off or to endear it in the hand of the beholder but, as is suggested by the metaphor of skin, also to make it permeable. By this process the surface of the sculpture itself becomes a carrier of light, it develops its own luminosity when, for example, we recognize that the density of the stone, i.e. the apparent ability of light to penetrate it, influences its own way of reflecting or distorting light. Another related factor is that, in works like this, we can observe that they do not – like other things – just stand in the light but develop their own “light aura” or “control of light”, and that they do not stand in the space but have their own three-dimensional space. On the whole it is certainly accurate to say of the genre of sculpture that the surfaces are not only borders between objects but are so to speak “dialectical” interfaces on which a relationship between inside and outside is dealt with, where in another way the inaccessible interior of the material signals its characteristics. What Prantl is trying to achieve is to make the matter of the stone so visible that it makes something of its own history and origin clear beyond our traditional assumptions that it consists of dead and thus willing material. The stone reveals its history in the light of artistic rather than geological conditions. It is therefore not a question of verifying scientific insights, e.g. the different eras of the history of the Earth by way of the stone. First of all the complex qualities of the stone can be experienced. Under the stretched surface it can be seen that it even has a history of its own, that it should be seen in the category of the living – in accordance with everything to do with history – and not in that of disposable dead material. The old expression “Natural History” which was still used by Alexander von Humboldt to characterize all natural processes also reveals something of this knowledge about history, even nature's history. An attained irreversibility, perhaps also a telos or inexhaustibility respectively become qualities of the matter, very much unlike the ahistorical classical physical hypotheses and the assumption of the entropy of all living energy. But if stones can be seen in the category of life, then it also makes sense to respect their own “logic” and the quite strange otherness that dwells in them. The process of comprehensively oc-

cupying oneself with the stone, the resistance with which each person who works with it is confronted, makes some of this inextricable otherness clear. Nevertheless in being handled it discards its complete “closure” and “reveals” itself with its own qualities. In this way one may speak of spiritualisation. Revealing this forgotten, repressed, complete differentness of the stones – seen from the perspective of the human world under conditions of technical civilization – and helping it achieve its own law is part of the profundity of this art.

Signs and marks are frequently inscribed on the surfaces of the stones. These are not to be interpreted as additional levels of representation but as elements that give their own density and tension an additional clarity. They are concave or convex flattened domes, concentric circles, meanders, lines and similar forms. They appear to derive from a compositional draft of the artist when, for example, they are repeated in a serial sequence or if they mark the centre of a surface. They are partly formed directly out of structures of the matter and appear to be the elucidation of form trends, which the matter already had. This oscillation in reading the marks and signs, whether they originate so to speak in the logic of the stone itself or in the logic of an artistic calculation, is typical of Prantl's work. In them and by means of them the stone becomes very clear about itself, expresses itself. But at the same time they let themselves be read as identification points for the observers. So, if in a picture of concentric circles the old topos of consciousness appears, or if recurring elements serve as markers, they are those “invocations” of a word with which Prantl occasionally gave the stone a name related to the way in which it was worked.

II.

From these observations it becomes clear that Prantl's art includes a new “aesthetics”, i.e. enabling new (but perhaps quite old or forgotten or even overlooked) knowledge. If the sculptures spiritualise the stone in the sense that it discloses its own history, then this also includes a new understanding of the artist. In a widespread view, radicalized by the aesthetics of artistic genius and afterwards made quite popular, the artist represents the topos of the perfection of a creator. The autonomy in which he creates, as if he were creating out of his own unfathomable natural bond, also enables him to make everything that is suitable into

the willing substratum of his creation. First of all he lends the material a higher form of life, which it does not have itself. This principle, which, in a vulgarized form, still dominates the understanding of art and artists today, is broken within Prantl's works. Artist and matter behave like an open system of exchange or dialogue involving two partners who have grown towards one another.

Whoever engages with Prantl's stones knows that this dialogue is worth it. They report of areas and distances that remain closed to human history. Our historical awareness excludes natural history. Only what can be read as a sign of human activity is historical and as far as we have also learned to backtrace the signs of the oldest artefacts or as far as we can backdate the oldest relicts of hominids – what applies with regard to history is that only what has been made by humankind is part of history. You can measure historical time periods generously, not argue about a couple of thousand years here or there; compared with the history of nature, from which we derive – just a moment in time. Not only “Urmensch und Spätkultur” (prehistoric man and late civilization) – to use Arnold Gehlen's terminology – converge in Prantl's conception of stones but even “Urzeit und Gegenwart” (prehistoric times and the present) (K. Lüthi). Beyond the boundaries of historical awareness the reflex of a prehistory of nature answers. We shall never become familiar with it, but to remember it will be a memorable yet suppressed part of our culture and of our humanity. What appears familiar to us about this prehistory has been told by the Greeks in the myth of the demiurges. The demiurge is not the creator of nature, like the Christian God, he is the builder in the sense of an artist, who gives nature a helping hand to the best of his ability, like a

doctor does not make health but helps it to come into being. The demiurge guarantees the inner rationality of nature when he builds and continues to build it according to proportion, number and law. The myth of the divine demiurge makes the self-limitation of the human desire for subjugation vis-à-vis nature visible. Whatever already has a high degree of order or of perfection itself will not degenerate into an arbitrary and dead substratum for human actions. Prantl has discovered that this spirit of nature – in one of its oldest manifestations: stones – can be brought to mind in an artistic manner, even if it does not have a place in science or in religion or has not won back a place again. Prantl's art is similar to the story of the demiurge in nature, which is told anew in each of his works. He is closer to this myth than to the ancient story of Daedalus, the cunning artist and scientist, who was able to be such a momentous role model when he acted against order, law and the forces of nature in order to outwit them in his artifacts. The language of the stones is a kind of understanding between what the structure of the matter allows to be read and what characteristics the artist suggests. While nature has infinite periods of time in order to formulate all its outward forms and shapes, the artist reveals this infinity in his work in a shortened procedure. In this lies, stone by stone, the hidden power of nature, which otherwise would remain unremembered and without a concrete sign. It must have consequences for our relationship with ourselves and with our environment and history.

The nearness between the remotest history of nature and the moment of our existence, that moment in which we take one of the stones seriously as the point of identification of our sensual experience is the underlying equation that can be experienced from Prantl's sculptures.