

Silvie Aigner:

On the position of stone sculpture in contemporary art¹

The Austrian context

The new departures brought by Modernism created a new direction for historically pedestal-based sculpture, allowing for a transformation of its purposes. From 1960 onwards, the term "sculpture" was used to summarise diverse positions which also included other media. While sculpture in America acquired new definitions since the 1950's, the initial development of modernism in Europe started out from the basic form of the figure, holding fast to historical materials such as stone and cast bronze. In spite of this, sculpture in stone emancipated itself from its decorative and representative roles.

In Austria, the journey towards contemporary sculpture and object-based artworks only began after 1945. In the 50's and 60's, Austrian sculptors such as Fritz Wotruba, Karl Hoflehner, Roland Goeschl and Karl Prantl, Walter Pichler, Cornelius Kolig, Bruno Gironcoli had set internationally recognised benchmarks for the further development of sculpture in Austria. Alongside sculpture, which was tied to its material and to the object, connections with architecture and crossovers with the processes of design or applied art were established. With the developing significance of avant-garde film-making and of "expanded cinema" in the late Fifties, the field of sculpture was broadened to encompass film, photography and performance art, and particularly so in Austria. These borderlines were fluid, sculptural objects becoming components in process-related works, which were also incorporated into the public domain. In this connection, Christa Steinle speaks of a "*post-medial mentality*" in Austria, which was not bound by any categorical definitions.² Such tendencies were already in evidence in the early twentieth century, in the Wiener Werkstätte and the Secession, with a characteristically Austrian interpenetration of the free and the applied arts, of architecture, design, stage sets, sculpture and painting. After 1945, sculpture - "*which ranged from furniture design to digital media*"³ - was taken up again most particularly in the work of Peter Weibel and Oswald Oberhuber. Through their teaching at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna they were also significant for the development of the entire subsequent generation. Even if at first the Masterclass centred around Fritz Wotruba defined modern sculpture after 1945 through the materials of stone and metal, contemporary art production in Austria radiated out from the movements of the late Sixties, and was shaped by crossovers between separate disciplines and art forms as well as by a strongly international orientation. Hans Kupelwieser, Erwin Wurm, Franz West, Brigitte Kowanz, the Carinthian artists Heimo Zobernig, Jochen Traar, Herwig Turk, Josef Dabernig and Meina Schellander (a member of Kunstwerk Krastal) are some of the best known representatives of a younger generation of artists, who not only use several media in their work, but who also redefined the field of sculpture. The medium of stone, following an avant garde which was internationally recognised, within the movements of the late Sixties and the resulting object-based art of subsequent decades, did not appear to have a chance to occupy a similar role in the art world as it had done up to the mid-Seventies. After Fritz Wotruba's death the Carinthian-born sculptor Bruno Gironcoli, who had not been classically trained in sculpture, took over his professorship and initiated a new era. After 1975, stone sculpture was relegated to a subordinate role in the Museum context, in the gallery business and at international art fairs and exhibitions.

However, at this point Austria initiated a complete reversal of the existing academic canons in the medium of stone sculpture. In 1959 the "Symposium of European Sculptors" was founded in St.

Margarethen by Karl Prantl, Dr. Friedrich Czagan, Peter Meister, Jacques Moeschal and Erich Reischke.⁴ The sculptor Karl Prantl then became the founding father of further symposia in Austria and abroad. At the end of the Fifties, working directly within nature facilitated *"a new relationship to materials"*,⁵ according to Karl Prantl. This idea turned into a movement, which spread swiftly throughout the world. The "Symposium of European Sculptors" was awarded the "German Critics' Prize" as early as 1963. Its explanatory statement emphasised the impulse radiating from St. Margarethen: *"the idea of creating free, sculptural works in the open air, and to fuse a modern sensibility towards forms with ancient tenets of craftsmanship, has been taken up all over the world, especially in Israel and Japan. The international impulse of the philosophy of the Symposium ranks among the most convincing proofs of unbroken creative power in the modern age."*⁶

Besides the founding of further symposia in Eastern Europe, such as Kostanjevica (where wood was used), in Portoroz, in Japan, Israel, Germany, USA, the Negev Desert and Romania, there were also direct successors in Austria such as Lindabrunn in Lower Austria and Krastal in Carinthia, whose founding can be traced back to Karl Prantl. In 1967 the sculptor Mathias Hietz initiated a Symposium in Lindabrunn in Lower Austria at the instigation of Karl Prantl. The same year saw sculptors working in the Krastal quarry for the first time.

Otto Eder participated in the annual Krastal Symposium since 1967, and worked in the Europapark in Klagenfurt in 1968 and in 1969. Eder pushed for the founding of a sustainable and forward-thinking artists' collective in Krastal, and took over organisation of subsequent symposia together with Hans Muhr and Günther Kraus. In 1970 he founded the "Verein Begegnung in Kärnten" ("Association for Encounters in Carinthia"). From the beginning, the integration of sculpture into urban public space was important to Eder. He organised interdisciplinary forums for discussion with architects and saw a new chance for stone sculpture in the townscape. Similar endeavours were developed in St. Margarethen and Lindabrunn. Vienna's city centre was seen as a particularly rich vein of new possibilities. The building of the Underground had just created a pedestrian precinct in place of busy arterial roads. The sculptors based at St. Margarethen were intensively involved in the redesign of the Stephansplatz, and developed a range of models during the symposium in the mid-Seventies.⁷ Otto Eder also recognised possibilities to enliven the city's architecture with sculptures, and wanted to site sculptural works along the pedestrian walkways, as documented by a press release of the association from 1972: *"in view of the planning of a pedestrian area, we recognise a real chance at last, to refashion the centre of Vienna into a live city space through contemporary art"*⁸. However, the presence of stone sculpture in Vienna remained limited to the public parks, aside from a very few commissioned works, and the initial presentations of the Carinthian sculpture symposium were held in the newly built Europapark in Klagenfurt. It proved difficult to establish an anchor for the integration of stone sculpture into the town planning of the time. Also, these efforts to create new tasks for sculpture within urban space were characterised as running contrary to the founding idea of the symposium, as stated in a publication by Claudia Büttner: *"When the artist boldly left his studio, this also meant that he withdrew from the city, into the isolation of the quarry, of nature - and this was something that was abhorrent to the notions of the contemporary art of the time."*⁹ In actual fact, stone was then already considered a "traditional" material in the development of sculpture, and especially in urban environments it had to take a back seat behind installation works made from new, mostly industrially produced materials.

Was the founding idea really only a romantic notion of creating artworks together? Particularly in the formative years of Lindabrunn and the Symposium Krastal the spirit of the Seventies appears to have been evoked in the shape of shared living arrangements and artistic communities. Beyond this, the symposium also represented a rare chance to come into contact with international artists. While the painters of the post-war years went first to Paris and later to New York, this was simply

not possible for stone sculptors because of their dependence on sources for their material, even though a few artists studied with Ossip Zadkine in Paris, such as the sculptor Josef Pillhofer. The organisation of a symposium, however, facilitated the invitation of artists from other countries. Karl Prantl, for example, took pains to involve artists from Eastern Europe early on, in spite of or perhaps because of existing political boundaries.¹⁰ Likewise, around 1970 and later, there was always a presence of artists from Eastern Europe in Krastal, as well as artists from Japan, who mainly pushed for the development of site-specific sculpture. Mathias Hietz saw the reasons for the enthusiastic adoption of the symposium idea in the lack of real functions for sculpture within the architecture of the time, as well as in the possibility of working directly within a quarry. "The material could once again influence the form, the design of a piece. The sculptor developed a closer relationship to the stone", Hietz wrote in 1988.¹¹ Over and above this, Hietz emphasised the aspect of working together and the artistic exchange with international artists.¹² A new conceptual view of art has subsequently contributed to changes in the form and content of symposia, and to the founding of new symposia with differing focuses, different priorities and materials. One of the prime results was artworks with a strong relation to their site. As Jürgen Morschel wrote, the symposia were *"in their beginnings, at least, more of a new social idea than a new artistic idea"*. He adds the critical remark that *"official art history... took almost no notice"*¹³. The St. Margarethen symposia had already stopped by the mid-Seventies, mainly because the quarry was no longer used commercially. Lindabrunn was carried on as a stone sculpture symposium until the death of Mathias Hietz. The symposium's new management has since turned towards other materials, to activities and interventions in the landscape, aiming to be recognised by the art world once again.

In the Nineties, the Krastal symposia attempted a new integration of sculpture into public spaces. Symposia were carried out in conjunction with the town councils of Villach, Klagenfurt and Völkermarkt. They acted as partners for financing the event, and also provided presentation sites for large scale sculptures. They did not, however, as Eder had demanded, demonstrate the necessity for stone sculpture in the realms of architecture and urban planning. The presentation of the works was most often temporary, with a fluid transition from symposia to sculpture exhibition. Particularly, the involvement of the public in the creative processes link these symposia to the earlier ones: Jürgen Morschel remarks in his 1979 essay on "art under new conditions", that *"it may actually be a mistake to believe that you can share in art, purely by sharing in its products: to have a share in it is only possible through the participation in the creation of art. And in a symposium the creation of art is made manifest - that is its significant novelty"*¹⁴.

This year's symposium¹⁵, through the presence of many representatives of international stone sculpture symposia at Krastal, documents the fact that the current generation of sculptors is still or once again preoccupied with stone and regards it as an adequate medium for the expression of their artistic intentions. However, the following question still arises: where is stone sculpture, outwith the symposia - apart from its "protected enclosures" such as sculpture walkways, sculpture parks or museum gardens. In Vienna, for example, we are experiencing a total ignorance of sculpture within the reconstruction of the Museum Quarter. While the museum of the 20th Century had a small sculpture garden, the new MUMOK (Museum of Modern Art) and Museum Quarter did not even consider the presentation of sculpture in its planning. In the Museum's programme, exhibitions by (for example) Gerwald Rockenschaub, Heimo Zobernig, Erwin Wurm present sculpture within the international context. Large-scale exhibitions, which gain substantial reviews in international art magazines. A perception or rather presence of new tendencies in stone sculpture, however, is unfortunately still not on the agenda. Similar conditions apply to the Secession. The Wiener Secession, which exhibited sculpture as early as 1900 and showed important proponents of the time such as Auguste Rodin, Maillol, Max Klinger and others, had also given space to stone sculpture after 1945, at least until the 1980's, including sculptures by Otto Eder or works from the Lindabrunn and Krastal symposia.

Since painting as an equally "traditional" medium experiences a regular rediscovery every decade or so, the return of sculpture has also been written into being by the art journals. But while painting is now experiencing a similar boom as in the Eighties, and not only in Austria (to be seen for example in this year's contribution to the Venice Biennale by Herbert Brandl), the same does not apply to sculpture in any comparable measure. Although the Fifties saw stone sculptors representing Austria at the Biennale, such as Leinfellner, Wotruba, in 1950 and 1952, or in 1956 Joannis Avramidis, Wander Bertoni, Rudolf Hoflehner, Josef Pillhofer and Heinz Leinfellner, in the Sixties Alfred Hrdlicka, Rudolf Kedl, who later (in 1976) exhibited again with Rudolf Hoflehner, Wolfgang Walkensteiner and Reimo Wukounig, the presence of stone sculpture in the Austrian Pavilion declined. Works in stone by Karl Prantl were only shown again in 1986. And even in the designated sculpture exhibitions such as Skulptura in Münster, which was founded in 1977 and has taken place every ten years since then, are dominated by works from an expanded context of sculpture.

In 2005, the Essl Collection showed its first exclusively sculptural exhibition under the title "Figur/Skulptur". In the catalogue, curator Andreas Hoffer described the intensified preoccupation with figuration on the one hand, and the significance of new materials and media for contemporary sculpture. In fact, the exhibition showed works in new materials as well as traditional ones such as wood and stone. Stone sculpture was represented in the exhibition by Marc Quinn. The collection has only very few stone sculptures, by artists such as Karl Prantl, Max Gangl, Michael Kos, as well as a marble bench by Jenny Holzer. The approaches of the students of Wotruba are represented overall by bronze sculptures. In an interview, Andreas Hoffer pointed out that the collection always purchases works in correspondence to the art market, where stone sculpture just does not play a role. This raises the question whether a more extensive knowledge of current art production in stone, on the part of the collectors, would not raise the level of demand. Hoffer saw the reason for the collectors' purchasing orientation in the fact that innovative developments are not manifested in stone - something which should not be accepted without opposition, and could perhaps be examined in the discussion at the end of the symposium. The Viennese Galleries and art dealers do indeed deal with works in stone, albeit outwith the public eye. On the whole, this concerns sales of sculpture by established artists, which are produced in limited edition bronze casts. Galleries with gardens do indeed show contemporary stone sculptures, as for example the Galerie Brunnhofer in Linz, Galerie Mauroner in Salzburg, Galerie Walker at Schloss Ebenau. However, due to their size and weight they are almost never taken along to the international art fairs. Berthold Ecker, of the Culture Department of the City of Vienna, on the occasion of the opening of the new museum complex spoke spontaneously about the difficulties of handling and siting stone sculpture within the framework of exhibitions. The buying policies of the Culture Department do not explicitly exclude the acquisition of stone sculpture. But here, too, stone is usually considered too traditional a material by the members of the selection committee.

To conclude, a few brief words about the masterclasses at the Art Academy and the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. The Academy is currently running three sculpture courses, in conceptual sculpture, object sculpture and textual sculpture, which are run by the Carinthian Heimo Zobernig. At the Applied Arts University, the professor for sculpture is Erwin Wurm. None of these artists has anything in common with the interpretation of conventional sculpture as it is usually seen at the Symposium Krastal. In spite of similarities in several conceptual processes, these artists show a completely different approach to material. Markus Hofer, lecturer on the sculpture course run by Erwin Wurm, describes the sculpture classes as follows: *"fundamentally, what is taught is art and not specifically sculpture, everything should remain open and the student not be forced into any one direction. Materials and techniques remain in the background. The student has freedom of*

choice in the implementation of his or her idea. Stone does not play any part in this because it is too expensive". In spite of this, Markus Hofer is observing a changing trend, the students being increasingly keen to learn craftsmanship and technique. However, working in stone is still more of an exception. To most of the young generation, the medium of stone still stands for a conservative attitude within sculpture. Experimenting with stone, to discover the range of what this "traditional" material can achieve on the basis of solid training in technique, was characteristic for the Avant Garde after 1945, contributing to the international recognition it achieved. Or as Max Seibald put it for the book commemorating forty years of the Krastal Symposium:

"Stone is dominant in and of itself. Therefore, it must be considered how its physical properties can be used in the realisation of an idea. It is a challenge to step out of line and define a 'new' position".¹⁶

¹ Extract from the keynote by Silvie Aigner at the Worldpool Congress, 10th August 2007

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² Christa Steinle Editorial in dies. (Ed.) Hans Kupelwieser, Postmediale Skulpturen, exhibition catalogue. Neue Galerie Graz 2004, p. 7

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Quoted from Ute Prantl-Peyrer in: Wolfgang Hartmann, Das Bildhauersymposium, in: Wolfgang Hartmann / Werner Pokorny (Ed.), Das Bildhauersymposium, Stuttgart 1988, p.36.

⁵ Wolfgang Hartmann, Das Bildhauersymposium, in: Hartmann / Pokorny 1988, p. 10.

⁶ Hans Rochelt (Ed.), Skulpturen auf dem Symposionsgelände, Vienna, S. 1. quoted from Hartmann/Pokorny 1988, p. 8.

⁷ Symposium Europäischer Bildhauer (Ed.), Wegmarkierungen, p. 67f.

⁸ founding memorandum, Verein Begegnung in Kärnten, press release, Krastal 2.9.1972, Archive of the culture department of Carinthia.

⁹ Claudia Büttner, Art Goes Public, Munich 1997, p. 30.

¹⁰ Conversation with Katharina Prantl, Bildhauerateliers im Prater, Vienna, October 2006.

¹¹ Mathias Hietz, Symposium Lindabrunn, in: Hartmann / Pokorny 1988, p. 44.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Jürgen Morschel, Kunst unter neuen Voraussetzungen, Anmerkungen zur zwanzigjährigen Geschichte des Bildhauersymposiums, in:

Das Kunstwerk, No. 32/5, 1979, p. 32.

¹⁴ Jürgen Morschel, Kunst unter neuen Voraussetzungen, in: Das Kunstwerk No. 32/5, 1979, p. 4.

¹⁵ i.e. 2007

¹⁶ Max Seibald - Künstler Antworten III, in: Kunstwerk Krastal (Ed): Kunst im Steinbruch - 40 Jahre Krastal, Klagenfurt 2008, p. 99