

I first encountered the elderly little man with the dragging foot, lazy eye, and high voice while visiting the »Art Praxis« in Soest center city in the mid-1990s, following the invitation of Susanne Lüftner, director of the supported studio. I do not have a precise memory of the first encounter, but it is likely that Karl Burkhard started by posing one of his typically inquisitive questions to determine whether the new acquaintance was unthreatening. The period under National Socialism had influenced him. During those years his parents constantly impressed upon him not to act unusual or even disturbingly. Disfavor or chance passers-by could have been deathly dangerous for little Karl, who was physically conspicuous and did not correspond mentally to the other children of his age group. What is more, the Nazis had been unusually quick in establishing a majority in his childhood hometown of Hemer – which happens to also be the town where Hans Prinzhorn (1886–1933), founder of the art collection of the same name, grew up. But his parents did not want to leave the child at home – and couldn't have either. Karl Burkhard constantly had to explore, discover the function of things, touch them and pick them up. And he was a passionate collector, first and foremost sticks, stems, and ribbons with which he marked off areas. These idiosyncrasies kept him alive well into old age.

Burkhard's connection to his parents was close, most of all with his mother. He slept in her bed far into adulthood. Only after her death, in the late 1980s, did he come into an institution. His high voice consciously imitated hers. He was also able to speak with a deep, masculine voice when asked. But he felt more comfortable in her register.

His father had taught him to draw, which he loved. He used a magnifying glass due to his poor eyesight. Karl Burkhard had a high level of perception and must have from early on been capable of reproducing things shown to him or seen by him. His sure reproduction of buildings and entire streets from his youth is evidence for an exceptional eidetic disposition. He outlined all objects with a steady, fine line, an elongated them so that they made a thoroughly delicate or fragile impression. This stylistic idiosyncrasy was likely an expression of the conviction that life is generally unsafe and dangerous; in fact, the thematic focus of Burkhard's drawings were often something threatening: he sketched dangerous animals, the visible expressions of maladies of the exterior and interior of humans, overwhelming natural events, or natural catastrophes. In addition, mechanical details as well as numerals played an important role, although he implemented numbers in a rather visual, nearly ornamental way, because he was neither able to write nor calculate.

Burkhard repeatedly drew countries and entire sections of the earth, reporting detailed knowledge about the respective geography, flora and fauna, constantly talking while drawing as a matter of principle. In fact, what he put to paper in astonishingly sure-handed compositions was only part of a complex communication. Chatting, he shifted from one area to the next, and simultaneously created on paper surreal mixtures of maps, animals, human organs, numbers and details from mechanisms. Strangely, all of his geographical views were upside down, in other words, pointing from north to south, not the other way round as usual. This could have resulted from his father sitting across from him at the table when teaching him all this knowledge.

The first encounter was followed by more, including with accompaniment by students from the Art History Department at Frankfurt University, who were equally enthused by Burkhard and his art. The result was his participation in a group exhibition »The Uncertain Order of Things,« [Die ungewisse Ordnung der Dinge] with several representatives of Outsider Art in Germany, which took place in the Neue Kunstverein Aschaffenburg in 1999 – unfortunately without catalog.

Most of all, I have a vivid recollection of the opening of an exhibition in the Galerie Schnitt in Cologne in 1998, where Burkhard's drawings were displayed next to those from two other artists. His works filled an entire room. The show was well-attended. Burkhard went around with a large, colorful windmill that Susanne Lüftner had given him for the occasion. A crank handle on the large window to the street captivated his attention. He was unable to hold back and operated it. This revealed that the exterior roller blinds went from the bottom to the top, not the other way around, as we all had expected – some things are only discovered through experiment. Burkhard walked around again while I was holding my speech. Suddenly he stood next to me, took my hand, and loudly exclaimed: »Those are my pictures!« He had come out of his world and into ours.