

## Dani Karavan (Tel Aviv, Israel, 1930)

Dani Karavan is known for his outstanding site-specific public art interventions in the natural and urban landscape. Thanks to his cultural origins and tradition, he has been particularly sensitive to projects relating to memory and exile. In his works he unites nature, landscape, art, memory, history and humanism.

Karavan has an extraordinary ability to bring to life the natural and urban spaces in which he works, and an exceptional capacity for engaging with the elements they offer. His work can be seen as an ongoing exploration of the power of landscape and of the possibilities embodied in the environment. By using elements of the landscape itself, such as sunlight, wind, vegetation, water and sand, he transforms the memory of a place into a work of art and creates unforgettable experiences that encompass all the senses.

Karavan's father, Abraham, was the chief gardener and landscape architect of the city of Tel Aviv. In his youth, Karavan studied painting with leading painters. In 1956 he travelled to Florence to study Fresco. There the foundations for his interdisciplinary practice were laid. Upon his return to Israel he created theatre and dance set-designs, including the Martha Graham Dance Company in New York.

His first large-scale environmental sculpture, the *Negev Monument* (Be'er Sheva, Israel, 1963-1968), earned him international recognition. As a result, he was invited to take part in the Venice Biennale in 1976 and in documenta 6 in 1977. Since then he dedicated his life to the creation of 'places' - large-scale environmental sculptures that are designed specifically for each site and prompt visitors to become a part of them.

In the last 50 years, Karavan has created over 70 'places' in Israel, Europe, Asia, and the United States. Among them: *Ma'alot* (Cologne, Germany, 1979-1986), *Way of Human Rights* (Nuremberg, Germany, 1989-1993), *Morou Art Forest* (Nara Prefecture, Japan, 1998-2006); *Sinti and Roma Memorial* (Berlin, Germany, 2000-2012), *Culture Square* (Tel-Aviv, Israel, 2005-2013) and the *Axe Majeur*, a 3 km urban sculptural axis in Cergy-Pontoise, north of Paris, on which he has been working since 1980.

Karavan was awarded many international prizes including the Israel National Prize for Art (Israel, 1977), UNESCO's Artist for Peace (1996), the Orden Pour le Mérite (Germany, 1997), the Praemium Imperiale (Japan, 1998), Goethe Medal (Germany 1999), the Légion d'honneur (France, 2014) and Catalonia National Awards of Culture (Spain, 2016).

[www.danikaravan.com](http://www.danikaravan.com)



Dani Karavan, 2019 / © Tamar Karavan

*Passages*, by the Israeli artist Dani Karavan, is a memorial in honour of the philosopher Walter Benjamin to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. Located near Portbou cemetery, where Walter Benjamin is buried, *Passages*, is composed of elements of historical, cultural, environmental and symbolic significance.

The memorial is an initiative of the AsKi association in Bonn and was supported by some German Federal States and the Generalitat of Catalonia, the Catalan government. Richard von Weizsäcker (1920-2015), the President of the Federal Republic of Germany at the time, was personally interested in the project and even visited Portbou.

Walter Benjamin, born in 15 July 1892 into a wealthy Jewish family in Berlin, committed suicide on 26 September 1940 in Portbou, having arrived there a day earlier by foot from France. He had a visa, issued in Marseille, which was supposed to grant him safe passage through Spain to Portugal and from there on to the USA. Nazi Germany had stripped him of his German citizenship in February 1939 and France refused to grant him a residence permit, although he had settled in Paris in 1933. As a result, he did not have the necessary documents to leave France, thus forcing him, together with other refugees, to attempt the clandestine crossing of the Pyrenees Mountains by foot. This was particularly difficult for Benjamin because of his bad heart condition.

Wanted by the Gestapo, Benjamin's suicide can be attributed to him knowing that the Spanish authorities intended to send them back to France, and the fate that this inevitably entailed. Indeed, the previous year he had been interned for three months in the camp at Nevers.

The Memorial is a sculptural installation thoroughly integrated into the landscape. Karavan's extraordinary sensitivity enables him to give the natural and urban spaces in which he works a life of their own. He knows how to capture their intrinsic historicity and set the elements in play so that historicity can flourish. Rather than the work incorporating the landscape, the landscape becomes the catalyst that activates the work. In Karavan's intervention the cliffs of the Costa Brava and such archetypal natural Mediterranean elements as olive trees, stone and wind weave a story about their past as a place of exile and at the same time enact an exercise in contemporary memory.

The title *Passages*, chosen by Karavan, refers not only to Benjamin's fateful passage from France to Portbou, but also to his unfinished last work, *Das Passagen-Werk* or *The Arcades Project*. This major project, on which Benjamin began working in 1927, is a collection of writings on the life of 19th-century Paris and its arcades and reflections on the contemporary urban experience. It was his work on this project that kept Benjamin from leaving Paris and Europe until the Nazis had entered the French capital.

In creating his memorial, Karavan adopted an approach akin to Benjamin's own, connecting the traces of past pain, memory and exile with the possibility of a new and better future. In fact, the memorial incorporates some of Benjamin's most influential ideas about the philosophy of history, the necessity of experience, the concept of boundaries, the landscape as aura and the vital role of memory.

The memorial was unveiled on 15 May 1994 in the presence of a number of notables, such as Lisa Fittko, who helped many refugees, including Benjamin himself, to escape Nazi France, by leading them over the Pyrenees Mountains by foot. The memorial pays tribute to all those who flee into exile in pursuit of freedom.

In 2018 the government of the Generalitat declared the Memorial a cultural heritage of national interest, in the 'historic site' category, for its commemoration of men and women who fought for democracy and freedom, and as a landmark in the history of human rights in Catalan, European and world history.

Seen from above, the memorial is perfectly integrated into its physical setting - a landscape of oxidized granite, a bare, arid terrain of hard grey-brown rocks. Viewed from within, the work offers the visitor a unique experience: an itinerary made of several 'passages'. Instead of imposing a single itinerary, the artist has chosen to give the visitors absolute freedom to pass through and construct their own experience.



Walter Benjamin, 1928  
Akademie der Künste, Berlin - Walter Benjamin Archiv / Public domain



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# PASSAGES

## HOMAGE TO WALTER BENJAMIN

### PORTBOU



## First passage Swirling water

Eighty-seven steps inside a steeply sloping Corten Iron corridor dug into the rock, lead the visitor down from the little square at the entrance of the cemetery towards the sea below. While walking down the steep stairs, the visitors discover the view of the sea and the hills beyond. A whirlpool in the sea below, churning in constant motion around the rocks, reminds us of the power of nature and alludes to the tragic dimension of Walter Benjamin's life. It looks close but is inaccessible.

As Karavan describes it: *“from above, on the rocks, I look at the sea. The water swirls noisily, it suddenly foams white, rushes down, then everything is calm. The sea does not move. Then again: swirl, foam, roar, calm. Here nature tells the tragedy of this man. Nobody could present it better. All that remains to be done is to bring the pilgrim to see what nature says”.*

A thick glass panel at the end of the tunnel closes off the way and stops the visitors from going further. Etched into the glass is a quotation from Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', completed in 1940: 'It is a more arduous task to honour the memory of anonymous beings than that of famous persons. The construction of history is consecrated to the memory of those who have no name.'

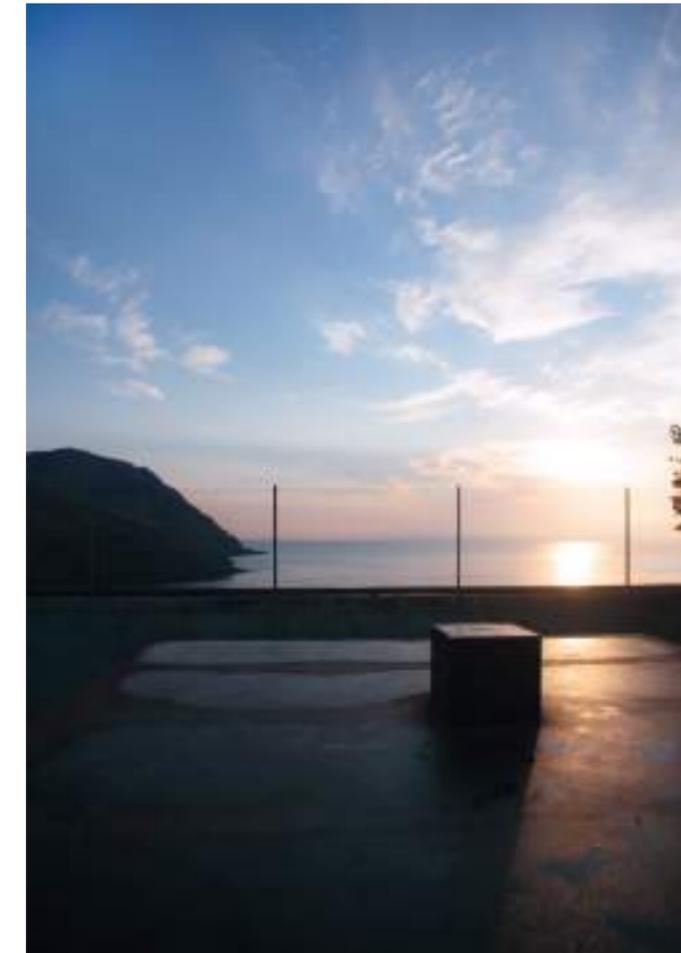
Every year on September 26, the date of Benjamin's death, his name passes into shadow. On a nearby cliff visitors can see the so-called 'Germans' shack', a World War II German military post for coastal surveillance dating from 1942.



## Third passage The olive tree

The path leads the visitors to an old olive tree, native to the place, fighting for its life against the white wall of the cemetery – *“among the stones and rocks, in the dry dusty soil, scorched by the sun and dried out by the wind, a little old olive tree that fights for its life”.* Karavan has often used the olive trees in his works as a symbol of peace, hope and reconciliation, but also of resilience in the face of adversity.

At the foot of the tree, Karavan created a small iron platform with a few steps. Here, the landscape is discovered again - the Pyrenees, the Mediterranean and, in the distance, the old border crossing. This part of the Memorial evokes Karavan's work *'Olive trees should be our borders'* which was part of his installation *Environment for Peace* in the Israeli Pavilion at the 1976 Venice Biennale.



## Fourth passage The fence

The narrow path continues up the hill, behind the chapel and along the cemetery wall to a small clearing on which Karavan created a square iron platform, four metres by four metres, with an iron cube in its centre, which is an invitation to pause, rest and meditate. This space is dedicated to perception and reflection. Visitors can sit here, listen to the wind, the birds, the trains and the breaking waves.

The esplanade is open to the sea, the mountains and the sky. However, a barbed wire fence, reminding those used at the concentration camps, stands between the visitors and the horizon. It is part of the old cemetery fence, which Karavan found and left untouched. Freedom and hope are so close, and yet so far – *“a long way away, framed by the high dark mountains of the Pyrenees, the blue sea, the clear sky, freedom”.*

## Fifth passage The symbolic tomb

During the Spanish Civil War, a new block of niches was built in the cemetery's courtyard between the Catholic and non-Catholic sections, in order to accommodate the increase in deaths during the war years. Walter Benjamin, probably out of confusion as to his identity, was buried on 28 September 1940 in the Catholic section of Portbou cemetery. The lease for his burial niche (today number 563, and number 1 of the new block constructed during the Civil War) was paid with the money found among his belongings. As the lease was not renewed, five years later, in 1945, his remains were moved to the common grave. This procedure was strictly legal and is fully documented.

'Passages' ends inside the cemetery, at a symbolic tomb. Inscribed on a plaque on a monolith stone is a quote from the Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' - *'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'*. Opposite, in the shadow of centuries-old cypress trees, on an iron monolith, inscribed in several languages, are Benjamin's farewell words to Henny Gurland and Theodor W. Adorno: *'In a situation with no way out, I have no choice but to make an end of it. It is in a small village in the Pyrenees where no one knows me that my life will come to a close. I ask you to pass on my regards to my friend Adorno and explain to him the situation in which I find myself. There is not enough time remaining for me to write all the letters I should wish to write'*.



## Second passage The stone wall

Climbing back up the stairs out of the tunnel, the sight of a patch of blue sky suggests freedom. An iron track reminiscent of rails, leads to a wall of stones embedded in the hillside – a dead-end, similar to the one Benjamin encountered in Portbou. Rather than extending the Memorial into the pleasant landscape overlooking the sea, Karavan chose to lead the visitors to a steep and rocky natural path climbing up the hill, in which they can experience the difficulty encountered by the thinker on his flight into exile

The path leads to the other elements of the memorial on the way to the back entrance of the cemetery.

