

CARO JOST

CUSTODY OF TRACES

by Johanna Adam, curator Bundeskunsthalle Bonn, 2025

A conceptual art project that has now spanned 25 years - varying and at the same time becoming increasingly condensed over time - reveals itself in retrospect as a grand vision. The focus here is not on the individual work, but rather on the idea that outlines a larger whole that goes far beyond the sum of its parts. With over 400 works, the Walter Storms Gallery is presenting the first comprehensive overview of Caro Jost's long-term project Streetprints. The first work in this series was created in New York on September 18, 2000. Since then, the artist has been collecting imprints of streets and squares worldwide – now from over 100 cities and 900 different squares and locations.

To identify a specific point in space, you need a coordinate system with three axes: height, width, and depth. If you define time as the fourth dimension, then every object is described not only by its spatial volume but also by its temporal extension—its duration. You can imagine the development of a human being from infancy to old age as a movement in four-dimensional space. A specific moment in life would then be a cross-section of this space-time - a standstill in a fixed point on the time axis.

However, it is precisely this time coordinate that eludes our control: while we can move freely along all spatial axes, time has only one direction – irreversible, constant, without possibility of variation. Perhaps we can consider it a fortunate coincidence that H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* appeared ten years before Einstein's theory of relativity – as a literary anticipation of an idea that would prove even bolder than it already seemed at the time. Caro Jost's work deals precisely with this movement in space and time - and the question of how we can capture, record, and make it rememberable. A solid knowledge of investigative journalism and forensic methodology forms the basis of her artistic work. At its core is the search for traces: the documentation and representation of time, space, and events. In a world where both place and time are constantly changing, the universal dimension of her work becomes evident. Caro Jost has developed a specific process that she applies in situ with remarkable skill and immediacy. Her street prints are impressions of a specific place at a specific point in time. They appear like factual crime scene documentation, securing traces – and at the same time unfold a quiet poetry, a pause in the flow of time.

These urban imprints are encrypted portraits of an environment, without any recognizable references to specific cities or well-known buildings. Her works refuse to be recognizable - and yet they are unconditionally concrete. They show real traces of streets, sidewalks, and squares. They could have been taken anywhere - and yet they are as distinctive as fingerprints.

The signs of use, the materials of urban space, and their time-related changes are inscribed in the asphalt, in the paving stones, in the concrete. Public spaces such as streets and squares are places of democracy – from the Greek agora to today's market-places, from street fights to sit-ins and glue-on protests. This is where social processes, negotiations, and debates take place. For democracies, it is essential that key issues of coexistence are debated publicly. The Basic Law guarantees freedom of assembly and freedom of expression—the foundation of the right to demonstrate, which marks public space as a deeply political place. Caro Jost is aware of this political dimension of the street. In addition to art, she also studied law. Her work on Streetprints—spanning more than a quarter of a century and over 100 cities worldwide—shows how universal public space can function as a place of democratic processes even within authoritarian structures. Where public space is not completely under authoritarian control, spaces for negotiation inevitably emerge. Everything that happens there also leaves its mark. The artist captures these traces - impartially, egalitarianly. The street, one of the central locations of modern society since industrialization, forms the center of her artistic exploration. Urbanization since the 19th century and global metropolization since the 20th century are reflected in the phenomenon of the street. When monumental architecture sometimes obstructs our view of the street, we lose sight of the true lifelines of cities: the streets, sidewalks, and squares. In contemporary urban planning, these spaces are once again moving to the center of attention: public space is gaining importance as a place of social interaction. Future concepts such as sponge cities or car-free city centers are increasingly replacing the car-friendly city of the post-war period. But how will these changes be reflected in future Streetprints?

Caro Jost regularly returns to certain places - not to create recognizability, but to use the picture plane as a space for reflection. Her works are conceptual art that demonstrate stance, create contemporary documents, and bear witness to their time. She wants to make the invisible visible, to question painting, and think beyond it. Time becomes an artistic medium for Caro Jost – on a par with line, color, surface, and volume. In various series, in which she repeatedly varies her street prints, she experiments with new forms of expression. These can be understood as analogies to speaking or thinking about a place: How does a place change in our memory? How does it shift emotionally when linked to biographical events?

Places become more defined and take on greater contours the more we know about them. Who lived here? Who used this doorway? What was proclaimed in this square - or what did I myself think when I last walked there? Caro Jost repeatedly adds additions to her Streetprints - objects, newspaper clippings, fragments of thoughts, which then become inscribed in the place, as it were. She visits some places several times, curious about what has changed—and how this change manifests itself in the Streetprint. For therein lies the essence of this work: it must remain unfinished - as long as time does not end. A search for traces that does not aim to find anything.