

CUSTODY OF TRACES

by Johanna Adam, curator Bundeskunsthalle Bonn, 2025

A conceptual art project unfolding over twenty-five years comes into focus in retrospect as a sweeping vision. Continually varied and increasingly concentrated over time, it places the emphasis not on the individual work but on an underlying idea that defines a larger whole—one that extends far beyond the sum of its parts. With more than 400 works, Walter Storms Galerie presents the first comprehensive exhibition of Streetprints, Caro Jost's long-term project. The first work in the series was created in New York on September 18, 2000. Since then, Jost has gathered impressions of streets and public spaces around the world, collecting imprints from more than 900 sites in over 100 cities.

To define a point in space requires a coordinate system with three axes: height, width, and depth. If time is understood as a fourth dimension, every object is defined not only by its spatial volume but also by its temporal extension, its duration. The development of a human being from infancy to old age can thus be imagined as movement through four-dimensional space. A specific moment in life would then appear as a cross section of spacetime, a pause at a fixed point along the time axis. It is precisely this temporal coordinate, however, that eludes our control. While we can move freely along all spatial axes, time allows only one direction: irreversible, constant, without variation. Perhaps it is a fortunate coincidence that H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* appeared ten years before Einstein's theory of relativity, offering a literary anticipation of an idea that would later prove even more audacious than it already seemed.

Caro Jost's work centers on movement through space and time, and on the question of how such movement can be apprehended, fixed, and carried into memory. Her practice is grounded in a sustained engagement with investigative journalism and forensic methodology. At its core lies a search for traces: the documentation and visualization of time, space, and event. In a world in which both place and time are in constant flux, the broader, even universal dimension of her work becomes apparent. To pursue this, Jost has developed a highly individual process, one she applies in situ with remarkable speed and immediacy.

Her Streetprints capture impressions of a specific place at a particular moment in time. They recall the neutrality of crime-scene documentation or evidence gathering, while at the same time unfolding a quiet poetry: a brief pause within the continuous flow of time.

These urban imprints function as encoded portraits of an environment, offering no recognizable references to specific cities or familiar landmarks. Jost's works resist easy recognition, yet they remain rigorously concrete. They present real traces of streets, sidewalks, and public squares. They could have been taken anywhere, and yet they are as distinctive as fingerprints. Marks of use, the materials of urban space, and their transformations over time are inscribed in asphalt, paving stones, and concrete. Public spaces such as streets and squares are sites of democracy, from the Greek agora to present-day marketplaces, from street battles to sit-ins and adhesive protests. It is here that social processes unfold, and where negotiation, confrontation, and debate take place.

For democracies, public negotiation of the central questions of collective life is a basic condition. Germany's Basic Law guarantees freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, forming the basis of the right to protest and marking public space as a profoundly political arena. Caro Jost is keenly aware of this political dimension of the street. Alongside her artistic training, she studied law. Her work on Streetprints, spanning more than a quarter century and more than one hundred cities worldwide, demonstrates how public space can function as a site of democratic process, even within authoritarian systems. Wherever public space is not fully controlled, spaces of negotiation inevitably emerge. Everything that takes place there leaves traces. Jost captures these traces without bias, on equal terms. The street, one of the central sites of modern society since industrialization, lies at the heart of her artistic inquiry. Processes of urbanization since the nineteenth century and global metropolization since the twentieth century are reflected in the phenomenon of the street itself. When monumental architecture obscures our view of the street, we risk losing sight of the true lifelines of cities: streets, sidewalks, and public squares.

In contemporary urban planning, these spaces are once again coming into focus. Public space is gaining renewed importance as a site of social interaction. Future-oriented concepts such as sponge cities or car-free city centers are increasingly replacing the car-centric urban models of the postwar period. How, then, will these changes register in future Streetprints?

Caro Jost regularly returns to specific places, not to make them recognizable, but to use the pictorial surface as a space for reflection. Her work is conceptual in nature: she articulates a position, creates documents of time, and bears witness to it. Through her practice, she seeks to make the invisible visible, to question painting, and to carry it forward. In Jost's practice, time becomes a visual medium in its own right, on equal footing with line, color, plane, and volume. Across a range of series in which she continually varies her Streetprints, Jost experiments with new modes of expression. These can be understood as ways of speaking or thinking about a place. How does a place change in memory? How does it become emotionally inflected when bound to biographical events? Places grow more concrete and their contours sharpen the more we know about them. Who lived here? Who passed through this doorway? What was shouted in this square, or what was I thinking the last time I walked through it? Again and again, Jost adds elements to her Streetprints: objects, newspaper clippings, fragments of thought that inscribe themselves into the place. Some locations she revisits repeatedly, curious about what has changed and how that change registers in the imprint. This is the essence of the work: it must remain unfinished for as long as time itself does not come to an end, a search for traces not oriented toward finding.