

## EKKELAND GÖTZE: TERRAGRAPHY

"We have forgotten what memory is, and can mean; and we make matters worse by repressing the fact of our own oblivion."<sup>1</sup>

In 1989, Ekkeland Götze invented terragraphy, a technically exacting graphic process of printing pure earth on prepared paper. While formally minimalist in structure, these images are in fact imbued with a deeply felt investigation of the nature of place and the power of memory. For the past eight years, Götze, who was born in Dresden and now lives and works in Munich, has travelled extensively, selecting sites and collecting soil samples because, as he has noted, "The element

EARTH relates directly to the dimension TIME". In works such as *Die Alpen*, 1998, *Terra di Siena*, 1990, or *London*, 1994, Götze has sampled the earth of both urban and rural locales in order to codify the physical and spiritual characteristics that help construct a sense of place. Götze's Terragraphies occupy the territory between brute reality and lyrical abstraction, between the public arena and the private space of individuality. Like the American conceptual artist Robert Smithson's *Non-Sites*, Götze's art addresses themes of displacement, entropy, and most importantly, the integration of art into everyday life. Grounded in the lexicons of conceptual art and monochrome painting, his evocative, naturalistic color studies seem both idealistic and subtly spiritual. By couching his philosophical concerns within the formal confines of a blank sheet of paper, Götze imbues his images with a metaphysical sensibility; by structuring his content through an abstract gesture, he elevates our experience from one connected to a specifically planar visual image into a metaphor with universal resonance.

Perhaps Götze's most subtle and powerful Terragraphy is the series *Berliner Mauer TODESSTREIFEN*, published in 1992. The concept of this work is profoundly simple: for several days in March 1990, the artist visited the space between the inner and outer barricades of the Berlin Wall, the space known as the "Death Strip" because so many would-be escapees were killed in this zone while trying to reach the West. Like an archeologist, Götze plotted the death sites of 29 people along 161 km length of the wall, excavating a soil sample from each site. "The organic structure of the EARTH provides an objective and unique method to define a concrete point in a concrete time" he writes. To further the archeological metaphor, the 29 pages of *Berliner Mauer TODESSTREIFEN*, which are housed in a wooden crate constructed of remnants of Soviet army ammunition cases when not on exhibit, are accompanied by photodocumentation, a map pinpointing the excavation sites, soil analysis, and the names of each victim. But these tangible accoutrements do not override the subtle sense of spirituality that pervades the artist's content.

Where does the meaning reside in this work? Götze presents his planar representations as memorials that mediate and envelop: the quotidian blots of earth, staining his pristine, white paper, become analogous to the bloodstains of those who struggled, risked their lives, and died. Grounded in the tendentious history of the cold war, the tangible archeological character of this artwork interweaves memory and imagination into a hypothetical site, a landscape of the mind that merges individual lives and deaths into a collective consciousness. In fact, *Berliner Mauer TODESSTREIFEN* encompasses two very distinct actions and two very different times: the initial death of the escapees-deaths that in fact took place over the course of several years, largely anonymously and under cover of darkness, and fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of Germany - a highly public event that, even as it eliminated the need for escape, obscured the individual courage of those who had risked it. Thus, this work resonates with a doubly profound sense of loss and recovery that echoes from one image to the next, since each earth-stained sheet commemorates the fleeting nature of individual lives and deaths under the larger forces of social upheaval. Like a tone poem or a *memento mori*, Götze's printed sheets are evocative studies in emotion couched in the concrete language of the earth.

Terrie Sultan  
Curator of Contemporary Art  
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

<sup>1</sup> Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Case Study*, quoted in *Images of Memory: On Remembering and Representation*, Susanne Kuchler and Walter Melion, eds. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991),