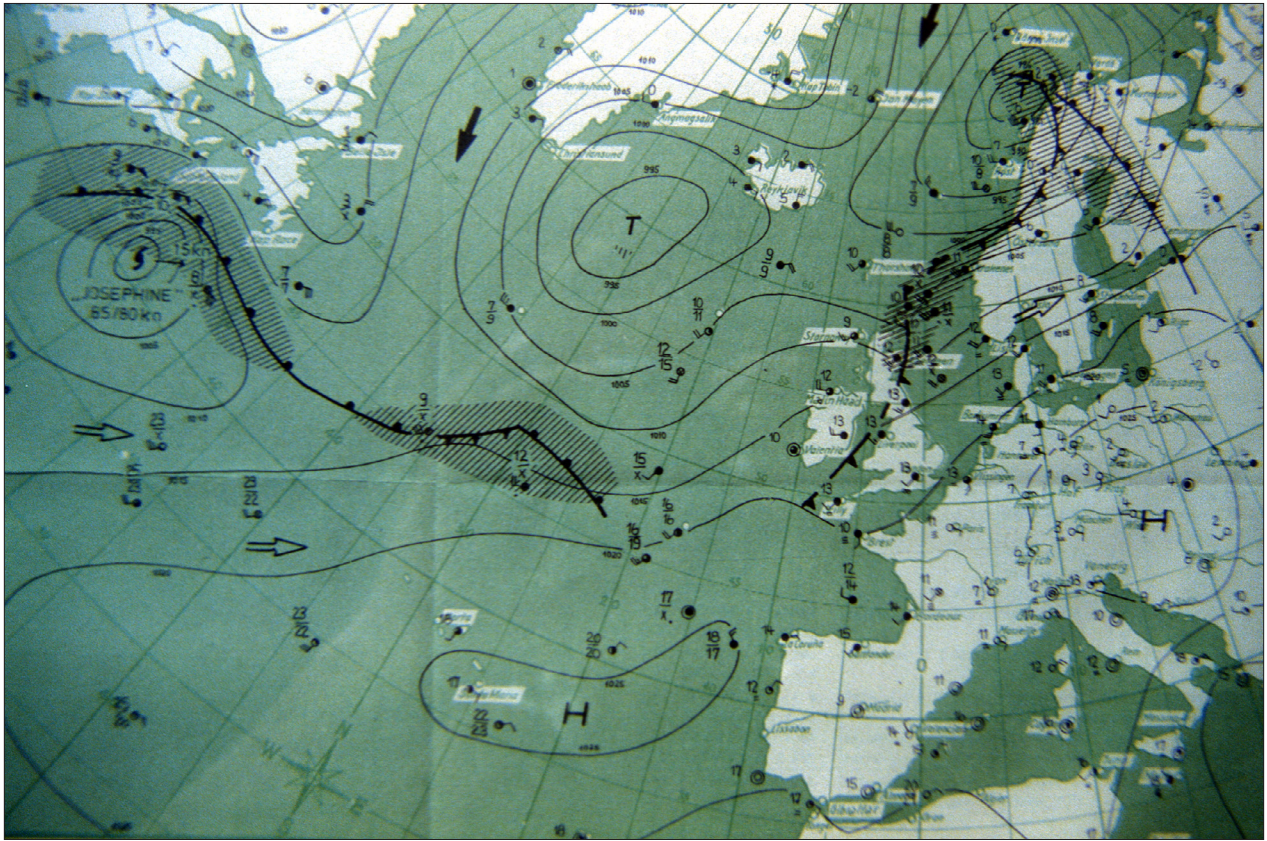


Niedersachsen, Germany

Symposium Nordseeküste





Das Thema: Wetter. The theme of the Symposium was the weather. The location was the German North Sea Coast in November. Crazy. Seductive, but completely crazy.

Very Near the Mouth of the Elbe River to be more precise. The idea of a Symposium is rather simple. Find a lot of money from some organization or government and then invite a group of artists to come to a place where they will do their own individual work, and spend a lot of time sharing ideas with other artists. These artists go back home enriched by the experience and by the contact with other artists. The host location or country keeps whatever the artist produced. The artist takes home some photographs.

This description is, indeed accurate. The problem is, it is **too** accurate.

Nine artists, five from West Germany, (It was still divided in 1984) the other four were from Nigeria, Yugoslavia, Korea and USA. There was a competition in order to be selected and with hundreds of applicants it was an honor to be one of those chosen.

The first step was to convince my family that it was a good idea for me to be gone a whole month. The second one was to get the University to grant me leave. OK on both accounts, but not without haggling and negotiation.

Once I arrived in Hamburg, I found my old friend Peter Ahrens and he offered to drive me to the symposium site. We were going to be based out of the coastal town of Cuxhaven. I took him up on the offer and we arrived in time for the orientation meeting between the organizers and the artists.

My German was rusty at best and Peter listened to all the proceedings for me so I would not miss anything. At the end he took me to the side and said, "If you want to get out of this at any time, you can come down to Hamburg and stay with me." I was confused and asked why he said that. He responded by saying, "These people don't know what they are doing and they have a budget for materials of about \$200 for each artist. So you get to stay in a motel for a month and have no money to work with. It sucks."



So, OK, I could go back to Hamburg, get on the plane and fly home, or I could stay and see if I could make something out of nothing.

The orientation process continued the next day when we took a trip on an icebreaker while it was refueling the buoys marking the ship channel. It turns out that this particular portion of the North Sea Coast is extremely shallow with shifting sand even though the nearby City of Hamburg is one of the busiest ports in the world, The adjacent portion of the North Sea is the largest ship graveyard in the world.

When we were on the icebreaker, the sea was very rough and we were getting pushed around a lot. The captain gave use each a packet to hang around our necks with a string. When I asked him what these were for he said it was florescent dye so if you fell overboard the packet would color the sea florescent green around you and the helicopter could come pick up the body. The sea is so cold here that you go into shock in three minutes. He said that in three minutes he couldn't even get his ship turned around.

I found where to buy the dye packets when we got back to shore.



The tide flat is sticky with mud and sand, but mostly mud. When the tide is out, you can walk to the island of Scharhorn that is twenty kilometers off shore and when the tide comes in you can take a ship back. Ships get stuck in the mud and then the tide comes in and floods them.

Because this area is at the mouth of the Elbe, It is really an estuary and consequently teeming with marine life. The German word for this kind of place is Watt. (Pronounced Vat.) It might be a gooey mud flat, but it is very much alive.

Learning about a place I have never seen before is always exciting for me so I did everything I could to learn the details of the place. What was the history? What had happened here? What was it like

during the other seasons? Who came here? Who stayed here?

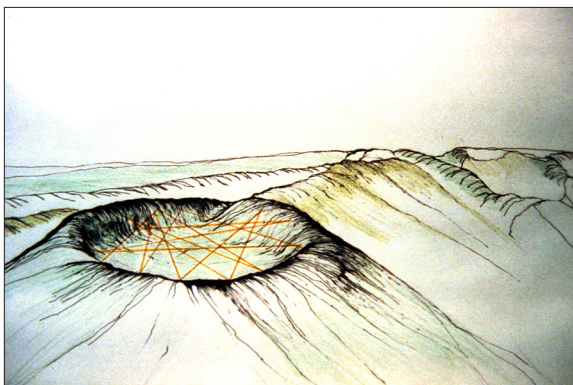
We were expected to be “Kunstler vor dem Deich” Artists in front of the Dike. Ah yes, these are Dike lands. The land in back of the Dike is just as flat as the land in front of the dike, but when the sea gets angry you need a dike ten meters high to keep it back.



I began to consider what kinds of works I could make and as I was walking in front of the dike I came upon a pile of nearly cubic stones and decided to get to work.

The weather was cold, but it was not as horrible as it would become so I decided that if the bad weather was not here yet, I would use the stones to make a place where I could stand and watch the weather change from a window. The German work for it is Wetterfenster.





Behind the dike, there are many bomb craters left over from World War II. Instead of rounded landforms covered with grass, I thought they needed to be made more visible and remembered the spiders in California who weave their webs across holes to act as traps for things both entering and leaving.



Between the dike and the sea are reclaimed lands used for grazing sheep and as a way to reinforce the dike. The tide comes in and sediment settles out of the still water and when the tide goes out it is channeled through lined troughs so the sediment stays where it is and gradually builds up the land. Grasses that can grow in salt water are planted and the sheep are happy. I am told that their milk is salty.

The drainage canals are lined with the stones I used to build the Weather Window. In fact, this region has no stone at all and these cubic stones are actually blast furnace slag molded into cubes. They only look like stones. The name of the canal is 'Priel' and if I was going to use cord to make bomb craters visible, I would do the same with a Priel. This spiderweb is a Kilometer in length.



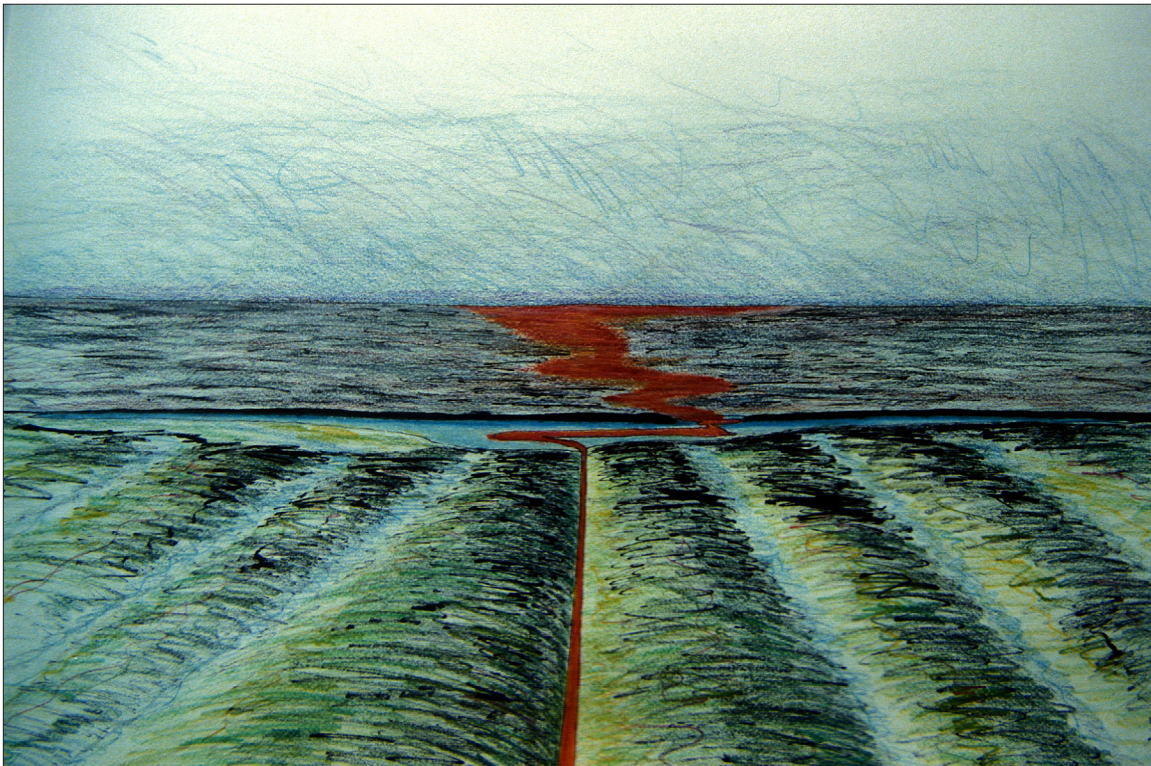
One of the intents of the organizers was to create performance works that would bring media attention and increase the public awareness of this unusual environment. As a result, many of the works we produced were about both 'The Weather' *and* the dike lands.

In addition to bomb craters behind the dike there was a group of very old trees circular in shape with a torus shaped earth form surrounding the trees. Local legend has it that it was a Viking fortress. It seemed like a good place to celebrate the arrival of the full moon and so with railroad flares in hand we lit the place up.






Some of the Priel channels carry storm water and waste water from the nearby towns. They also carry all the pollution that washes of the streets. Tire particles, petroleum products everything you can imagine and it all heads out to sea but not before polluting the estuary first.



I did the drawing before I discovered the dye only came in green. I wanted to point out the obvious. To show that all our stuff eventually ends up in the sea.





ALS DIE KUNST ÖLZEUG ANZOG . . .

. . . und der Künstler
in kontrapunktischem Rot
auf der fahlen Palette
der Landschaft »in Aktion«
trat, ging es um ein
Thema, von dem alle Welt
spricht: das Wetter.
Ein Tief der Meteorologie
und ein Hoch der Phantasie
trafen an der Nordsee-
küste aufeinander



AUF DER SPUR DES EWIGEN WASSERS

Gary Dwyer, ein Kalifornier, beschwört, wie er die Performance nennt, »die Erinnerung an den Sturm«. Das Wasser, das ewig kommt und geht, geistert ihm durch den Sinn; und eine Spur zurück ins Meer hat er mit Seewasserfärbern sichtbar gemacht. Die Beutel mit dem Farbpulver gehören ansonsten zur Ausrüstung von Rettungsinseln, um im Seenotfall mittels eines großen Farbflecks eine Markierung für die Suchflugzeuge auszulegen

In Germany, when you become eighteen, it is a big deal. In the U.S. it is sixteen. My eldest daughter, Heather, was turning sixteen while I was away in Germany and I thought I would do something for her birthday to give to her when I returned. The Latin name for Heather is Erica and a local shop had some Erica / Heather plants and I bought as many as I could.

When you turn sixteen you begin the process of leaving home. I think it has something to do with automobiles and drivers's licenses. When I came out of the florist's shop, the Heather plants had already started to leave. They were going down the sidewalk. Soon they crossed the street, blocking traffic as they went. They were heading for the beach, but they stopped to admire the view from a bench. (A couple of the stragglers couldn't fit on the bench and had to stand.)

Eventually, they made their way to the water and headed out to sea on their own life journey. Isn't that what all teenagers eventually do?





Often the old systems last the longest. The land in front of the dike is covered with water half the time, but the other time it is an enormous flat expanse of mud hard enough so you can walk on it and lots of people do. But without land marks it is very easy to get disoriented, so they have developed a complex method for marking important routes to fishing channels, or the best route to Scharhorn Island.

Someone long ago discovered that if you marked the route with iron poles they would rust away and if you tried to do it with wooden posts, the storm tides would rip them out, but if you bundled a bunch of Birch branches together and stuck them a meter down in the mud, when the tide came in, and even the storms, the branches would bend rather than break and surprisingly last ten years before they needed to be replaced.

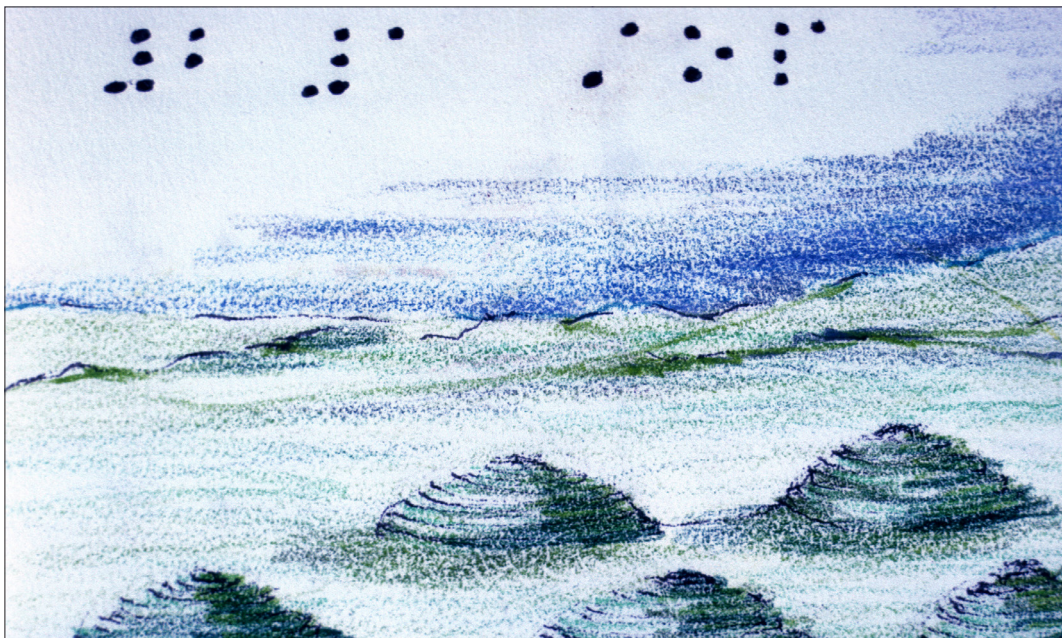
So here we are again at the juncture between thing and place. A lot of people who come to this region come as tourists. Simply walk and enjoying the views. Passive, aimless recreation. They think they are just walking in the mud on the shoreline. They are, indeed, doing that, but they are also walking on an estuary and that estuary is home to literally billions of specialized worms called Pierworms. These worms build innumerable small mounds of mud as they digest even smaller creatures (Phytoplankton). So this estuary is the beginning of the food chain, the beginning of life.

The tourists come and they see only mud and sea, so they are blind to what is really here. I thought about the bumps made by the worms and it reminded me of Braille.

If I was going to help the tourists learn where they are I need an unusual way to speak to them. I found a German word that I thought could help: **Schatzen**

Schatzen is a verb and means to respect, to honor. I chose a portion of the Watt used as a promenade by residents and tourists alike and made a series of large mounds to spell out the word **Schatzen** in Braille. In each mound I set a bundle of Birch branches so the mounds would be more noticeable and last through the tides and storms.

I found a blind man in Cuxhaven and asked him to walk through the project to see if he could read the word. He walked among the mounds touching the branches as he passed and when he got to the end he said, "**Schatzen.**" I told him I was amazed. He said, "You should be amazed because, in some ways, *we are all blind.*"







Schatzen from above, on top of the dike with the tide in.



As the Symposium came to an end, the first snow drifted into Schatzen.



Schatzen illuminated with flashlights. The long streaks of yellow light are ships on the way to Hamburg.



*I'm looking bloated, but really only exhaling, cold and tired.
It is time to go home*