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Franz John - Salt Axis

Sculpture-Biennial Münsterland, Germany (2005)

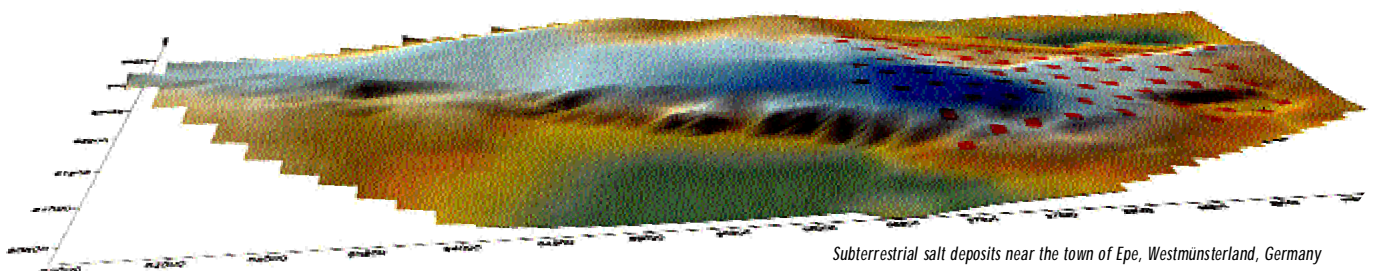
The subterrestrial salt deposits in western Münsterland stretch ca. 50 km along a north-south axis near the Dutch border. Near the town of Epe, they have a relative thickness of 400 meters; this sinks in the area of Ahaus/Vreden to ca. 100–200 meters, then returning then to a level of 400m near Bocholt. In geohistorical terms, these salt deposits can be traced back to a prehistoric sea that dried up 200 million years ago. My goal in this art project is to explore the extent of the salt deposits across all of western Münsterland, and in so doing also investigate the interwoven history of salt as a commodity. For the artistic interventions, eight sites will be chosen along a currently existing bike path connecting Gronau and Bocholt; these sites can thus be experienced using a means of transportation typical for the region. The bicyclist thus moves along a hidden salt path through the region, past brine salt pumps and pipelines, drilling stations, historical salt routes, and underground salt deposits. In this way, this „art road,“ in a sense a metaphorical *Salztangente*¹ is able to link the history of the region with the special topography of a both superterrestrial and subterrestrial landscape (tangere = Latin for „to touch“).



The basic idea is to introduce a new level of perception and meaning into the landscape, using rods or fields of rods along the salt deposits in the region to symbolize the „surface“ of the dried out ocean as a constant elevation (ca. 3 m over the average elevation of 45 meters above sea level). At the same time, the rods will be colored to correspond to the local subterrestrial salt deposits, thus providing a partial view of the earth's interior. The colors are taken from the grays and blues of a geological map showing the underground salt deposits of the region. The distance between the rods in the installation will correspond to the distance between the profile grids of modern geophone measurements that precede salt drilling.



Salt has played a perhaps indirect, but also very important role in Münsterland ever since the Middle Ages. This is attested to by route names like the Deventer Hellweg near Ahaus (hel, hell = Middle High German word for salt). Numerous names of localities in the northern part of the Borken District, especially near Rheine and Bad Bentheim (Salzbergen), still today attest to the former importance of salt as „white gold“ for the region – consider also the Gradierwerke (Salt Works) and the Sudhaus (Evaporation House) in Rheine. Timothy Sodmann (Landeskundl. Institut Vreden) names three overlapping cultural areas in the region that formed a unity in medieval times: these routes and pathways formed a kind of main east-west thoroughfare connecting Munster and what is now the Netherlands. These early salt and trade routes not only played an important role in trading, but also, as Gronau's town archivist Hanspeter Dickel put it, were a „decisive bearer of innovation“ for the region.



Subterrestrial salt deposits near the town of Epe, Westmünsterland, Germany

¹The German word *Tangente* refers not only to a tangent in the strict geometrical sense, but is also used to designate main thoroughfares: „an east-west *Tangente*“ or „axis“ through a city, for example.