

"I am told there are people who do not care for maps, and I find it hard to believe." <sup>1</sup>

Uwe Walther

*"Here be Dragons"*

In the Welsh language, there exists a single word "hiraeth", which manages to neatly summarise the many complex human emotions attached to our desire for rootedness, or the affliction of homesickness we feel for a specific place. Such feelings can be seen to perhaps lie at the heart of Uwe Walther's most recent body of work, "1:25,000", which fully develops a facet of his art which he experimented with in previous individual paintings. Originally arriving in Switzerland from East Germany where he grew up, Walther, a keen hiker, quickly discovered the beautifully detailed maps produced by the Federal office of Swiss topography, which are legendary among enthusiasts, deemed works of art in themselves through their level of detail in representations of settled areas, hydrography, vegetation, terrain as well as differentiated rail, road and route networks. For the artist looking into these maps, they represent both tangible and imagined realities; the ability to see an entire canton topographically folded onto one sheet and yet still requiring an unseen human element to make sense of the all lines and marks. As the U.S. historian Crane Brinton remarked, *"Neither the historian nor the cartographer can ever reproduce the reality they are trying to communicate to the reader of books or maps; they can but give a plan, a series of indications, of this reality."*<sup>2</sup> In some ways, Uwe picks up from this statement by intervening on these maps with his own imagined reality, supplanting a regimentally correct and quasi-sacred document with one in which placeless geography, confused perspectives and human trespassers interrupt the established order. However these are far from chaotic creations, and in some instances the artist's interventions seem to heighten the reality of the maps through subtle and colourful illustrative techniques. Paradoxically, they only become confusing when close inspection reveals familiar place-names and cartographic symbols that have been suddenly rendered abstract by the artist's intervention; one reality superseding another. These conflicting realities depicted by Uwe, ultimately illicit human empathy both on a simple level for those who share a fascination for maps, and on another for those who maybe recognise a strong sense of "hiraeth" contained within them. For a German living in Switzerland since 1991, Uwe Walther's map works can be seen perhaps as both a desire to bring himself closer to his adopted homeland, as well also pointing out the futility of ever really being able to fully comprehend one's fundamental place on the map.

"A map reminds us constantly of what is possible, of how much we have seen, and how much we still have to see."<sup>3</sup>

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1 Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island*

2 Crane Brinton (1898–1968), *The Shaping of Modern Thought*, ch. 1, (1963), 2nd ed

3 Mike Parker "Map Addict"