

BARRY SCHWABSKY PARACHUTES

in:

BETTINA POUSTTCHI - REALITY RESET

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It is well known that the semantic content of a photograph is at best unstable or tenuous except where the reading of the image has been channeled through a textual supplement, commonly given in the form of a caption. Perhaps what is more astonishing is that we are so inexorably drawn to lend photographs this content, or to find it in them, at any cost. The reason, of course, is our seemingly inescapable belief that in the photograph we are encountering some tangible fragment of reality—albeit a reality whose skin, as it were, has been peeled off and laminated onto a flat surface.

The images in Bettina Pousttchi's photographic series *Parachutes*, 2006, do have some minimal denotative matter that can be identified incontrovertibly and at first glance. These are pictures of heavily clouded skies pocked by tiny, shadowy forms that can nonetheless readily be identified as airplanes, helicopters, or—in just one case, the first of the series—the parachutes that give the series its title. From the photographs themselves, we can know nothing about these dark shapes other than that we can name them thus.

But this quantum of clear information only serves to arouse one's anxious awareness of all the vast unknown that surrounds it, as the vast and brooding sky surrounds those tiny silhouettes of parachutes, of airplanes, of helicopters. Who? What? When? Where? Why?—All the basic questions remain unanswered, unaddressed. The images conjure a feeling of danger because the unknown always triggers the animal's self-preserving reaction of fear. Fear: a state of intensified perception, in which the eyes widen and the pupils dilate in order to allow more light into the eye.

Likewise, one's eyes might widen when looking at these photographs—as if apprehensively scanning these murky fields to find something to fix on that

would either justify or dissolve some fear. But the strange thing is that even when one learns, afterward, that these eerily beautiful, almost neutral yet still disquieting photographs are not evidence of war or invasion, and that they were shot in Berlin in 2006—a textual supplement given, in this case, through an interview with the artist—this sublime sense of apprehension is not defused.

The photograph is not, after all, tied to the reality of the conditions under which it was produced. It has been unmoored. Despite what we think, a *photograph* of a formation of helicopters taken in Berlin in 2006 is not necessarily an *image* of helicopters in Berlin. It might be an image of helicopters in Iraq that same year, or in Vietnam forty years earlier—as some viewers assumed, according to the artist. Correctly, she does not say they are wrong. The source of the image need not be its referent. To identify the subject of the image can be an uncomfortable burden. Is that responsibility what truly perturbs us as we gaze, with restless eyes, at these photographs?