

MARK GISBOURNE LANDING

in:

BETTINA POUSTTCHI - REALITY RESET

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The crowd barrier and the television screen have become representative vehicles for the contemporary age of persuasion and prohibition. One proffers a deliberate sense of physical restraint and containment, while the other indicates a hidden separation and the modern psychological coercions that flow from the role of the monitor.

Bettina Pousttchi has deliberately brought them together with contained coalescence in her sculpture/video work *Landing*, 2006. However, like today's mediated experiences in the modern world, the status of such utilitarian objects and familiar means can be read in two quite opposing directions. The barrier and the monitor might at the same time suggest—or at least can be made to suggest—the necessity of personal security and protection. This is part of the everyday social and political justification used by established power to constrain and organize modern populations in the world today. But it is precisely the ambiguous role and the structured status of social and cultural means of coercion that fascinate Pousttchi in this instance. Her work *Landing* operates at an interface of that which has become increasingly opaque in our world, and which she feels the need to expose and scrutinize. It is the in-between world of contemporary modes of social/cultural existence that Pousttchi frequently questions and challenges.

The sculptural and pyramid-like elements of the stacked crash barriers (one is tempted to say “clash” barriers) of *Landing* indicate hierarchy and closure. Installed in an art gallery space they simultaneously expose what they deny, namely freedom of access and uninhibited movement. The ten television monitors arrayed at different levels within the disposed barrier's structure show images of identically uniformed, anonymous figures. Conventionally, they are what we must suppose to be riot or crowd-control police, since the figures stand in poses of military “at ease” and in

marching formation. Deliberately decollated, we see only the group's indexical function in its role as a corps—heads and faces would suggest individuality. It is telling of the muscular anonymity adopted by forces of power and coercion, that they present themselves as a single body in which all aspects of an individual identity are removed. The presentation of the many (a homogeneous group) as a singular body (a force) is one of the primary characteristics of coercive power as it is currently practiced. And, in what we take to be the familiar and commonplace, there emerges a structure of signification embodied in a now axiomatic and pre-determined social and cultural sign.

In *Landing* Pousttchi exposes to view the automatist conventions of human conformity, on the one hand, while questioning the suppositions on which it is grounded, on the other. As in so many of her projects, we find the simple social and cultural practices and circumstances we take for granted, a liminal content which Pousttchi opens up and reveals anew to the viewer. *Landing* punctures the boundaries between contemporary mediation and social conformity, and we are compelled to confront the hard (barriers) and soft (television monitors) approaches to coercion in the modern world. Pousttchi reminds us powerfully in this work how the forces of physical and psychological coercion are intimately linked in the prohibition-based world of today