

HOLGER LIEBS TAKE OFF

in:

BETTINA POUSTTCHI - REALITY RESET

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“Take off” means “lift off” or “departure.” “Ready for take off” is the announcement that comes over the loudspeakers in the cabin when the plane on the tarmac is ready to depart. In a technical sense “take off” can also mean “remove” or “extract.” Bettina Pousttchi’s series *Take Off* does not so much visualize the activity on an airport’s runways as much as it withholds—with the help of digital screening and a horizontal veil, a “venetian blind”—more detailed information about the bustle at Tempelhof Airport, where the photographs in the series were taken. This removal of that which can be perceived by the senses gives the series its specific quality. Its lack of indexically decodable content is at the same time a surplus of atmospheric diffusion: we do not know exactly what is happening here. The black-and-white photographs recall images from surveillance cameras—as is particularly clear in one photograph of what is perhaps a passenger crossing the terminal, photographed from an upper corner of the room. Or they recall television images: a photograph of seemingly masked figures leaving an airplane evokes associations of a hijacking or the deployment of a SWAT team.

The wide, empty spaces of the monumental yet modern architecture of Ernst Sagebiel’s Tempelhof Airport (1935 onward) underscore the atmosphere of uncertainty and obscurity. Its massive pillars rise up into the black canopy; in front of it is a kind of grandstand, which is also empty: a site of an everyday occurrence or a crime or police action. But only when the whole series is seen together does it result in this figure/ground illusion of reception between identification of the place and ignorance of the events occurring there. A clock in the concourse indicating it is just before two; glass doors; two passengers—a police officer and a person under arrest?—passing through a security door; a watchtower or water tower

or the control tower; finally, a leading character: the airplane on the tarmac. A film in your head.

In the 1960s—when public places, despite their increasing modernist dissolution by ever greater permeability, were still understood to be forums for encounter—there were films in which elemental powers such as fate or chance brought individuals together at such airports and changed their lives. These were pathos-filled manifestations of faith in a present that could be shaped. Even in today’s movies final scenes often take place in departure halls, indicating a failure to appreciate that airports have long since become anonymous, architecturally generic, and diffuse zones of high security intended to make international travel as smooth and free of terrorism as possible.

Airports are no longer stages for public life; they are fireproof, washable cells for dispatching as many as possible of those who place themselves in the hands of unknown authorities. And fear always flies along. Tempelhof Airport was called the “mother of all airports” by the architect Sir Norman Foster. It is therefore exceedingly well suited to showing, as Bettina Pousttchi’s series *Take Off* does, the transformation of such buildings into an atmosphere of exposure and creeping infiltration of one’s own identity.