

ARTNEWS

They Know Why You Fly: Martha Rosler on Her Airport Photographs

BY *Anne Doran* POSTED 08/15/17 1:00 PM



Martha Rosler, *Porto Airport, Porto*, from "In the Place of the Public: Airport Series," 2014.
©MARTHA ROSLER

Since the early 1970s, through her photomontages, photographs, videos, installations, and critical writings, Martha Rosler has explored what mass-media images and public spaces reveal about power and persuasion in late capitalist society. "In the Place of the Public: The Airport Series," her photographic exploration of the airport as postmodern space, dates from 1983 to the present. While Rosler has not changed the focus of the series, which remains on the airports' interior architecture, she has changed the photographs' accompanying text to reflect alterations in how airports are designed and utilized post-9/11. Earlier this year, she talked with ARTnews about the evolution of the series. —Anne Doran

I've never gone to an airport to take a picture. I take photos when I'm traveling, usually when I'm pushing a cart or dragging heavy luggage, and just before I get on a plane or just after getting off—all typically late at night, because I prefer to travel at off hours. I'm interested in delineating the physical space that a traveler inhabits. In the 1980s, when I first started flying for art-world business, which I'd never had the ability to do before—who could afford to fly?—I realized that airports were a world apart, where functionality intersected with dramatic elements. I became something of a phenomenological observer, if you will, looking at my own experience.



elsewhere and otherwise *white-noise hiss* *blind turns* *infinite deferral* *boulevard*

Martha Rosler, *Pearson Airport, Toronto*, from "In the Place of the Public: Airport Series," 2011.
©MARTHA ROSLER

I saw how the airport terminal was constructed to convey something visually about where we were and where we were going. We were not, experientially at least, somewhere fixed—we were “en route,” walking corridors with big light-box displays extolling the virtues of somewhere else. There was an effort to calm people, to pacify them, and to persuade them that all the disaccommodation they’d experienced was worth it, through spectacular images of other places.

For a long time, though, I sat on the photos I was taking. I couldn’t print them until I’d figured out what, exactly, I was doing—I wanted to know why I was taking those pictures. I have a lot of mental categories, but none of them applied. Yet I kept on photographing. For me, often, the synchronic leads and the diachronic follows. First I am that traveler; then I wonder, how did we think about space, about the landscape of transport, passage, and sociability, before this?

It took me maybe ten years to understand what I wanted to say, ten years before I recognized that airports function as a microcosm or model of the world as it is right now. Which we could conveniently call postmodern space—disconnected locations joined into networks by real though invisible and intermittent links. I realized I was photographing within a system organized around nexuses, and also around a certain kind of control—if you play by the rules, the things you’ll see! The places you’ll be! Now, when I say, “Look at that,” I’m asking you to notice how the place’s interior architectural features unwind into indistinct and reconfigurable exit points. And, more broadly, to see what these spatial arrangements suggest about our view of the “life world” we now inhabit.



or intestine? concentrated gazing containment and control trace odors of stress and

Martha Rosler, *Turkish Airlines*, from “In the Place of the Public: Airport Series,” 2012.
©MARTHA ROSLER

This blurring of place, space, and identity into something else—something centered on spectatorship, and distraction, and inevitably total surveillance—is not at all how we formerly thought about spatiality and passages across a landscape. That difference is signaled in my project by the lists of phrases accompanying the photographs, lists that themselves changed or intensified after 9/11.

For this project for *ARTnews*, I chose photos about the architecture, but also, some featuring human incident. In the photos here, we observe a woman with a baby strapped to her chest, standing underneath a routing board and between an iconic sculpture and her luggage. Or we are face-to-face with a stewardess demonstrating a piece of safety apparatus that suggests a mask or a veil. I’ve reintroduced the transients on the scene—people!—who didn’t figure as prominently at the beginning of the series.

I've taken my share of pictures of the workers in the air travel system, especially the non-elite ones, though I rarely put them at center stage. I've spent time on long flights in the back with the cabin crew, chatting about their jobs, sometimes photographing them. It's impossible to be a traveler and not interact with cabin personnel, and, to a lesser degree, the people who work in the airport. They are often ignored by travelers. Invisible labor of all types is important to my work—it tends to be the low-paid labor of “others,” of immigrants, people of color, and women.



hustle there are only no fragments where there is no whole mergers and acquisitions

Martha Rosler, *Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam*, from “In the Place of the Public: Airport Series,” 2011.
©MARTHA ROSLER

Since I first started showing this series, there has been a spectacularization of the airport's interior architecture. Initially airports were glorified sheds, perhaps with corridors branching off. But now, aided by advances in CAD and high-tech materials, there's the opportunity for a bolder statement. For example, there is a lot more glass. Before, the space you were in was usually as mundane as an oversize office or hotel lobby; now, the space you are traversing may be reaching for a certain grandeur.

The great old railway terminals in Western and Central Europe were sheds as well but notably sported a lot of glass. However those 19th-century structures were built in downtown districts and were statements about state or civic power. Airport terminals are generally neither. Airports are often not even owned by companies based in that country—Heathrow, Europe’s busiest, for example, is owned by a consortium of companies led by the Spanish-based global conglomerate Ferrovial (which also built the Guggenheim Bilbao but also runs waste treatment facilities)—so they’re less about national or local identity and more about efficiency and returning a profit to stakeholders: Travelers in transit and capital flows.

In an effort to capture revenue and even to become “destinations,” airports have increasingly incorporated retail into their design. Some airports have casinos and supermarkets. When there’s shopping, you no longer need light boxes enticing you to visit the Andes.



convulsive anxieties specters of dread hospital regime escape fantasies walls

Martha Rosler, *Ataturk Airport, Istanbul*, from “In the Place of the Public: Airport Series,” 2011.
©MARTHA ROSLER

Architects, of course, don't usually appreciate the use of their spaces for anything other than civic purposes and scheduled endeavors. Eero Saarinen's TWA terminal at JFK was hailed as a statement about utopia and its relation to open skies, but shopping and utopia don't go together. Despite the longings of architects, on one side, and airport managers, on the other, airports are a kind of repressed institution—the kind we think about as little as possible. We situate them away from municipal centers in so-called waste spaces, leaving unacknowledged our fear of flying—our fear of death.

I came to realize the degree to which the airport's public spaces constitute routes through its much greater, largely invisible elements. Administrative, maintenance, security, cargo, and customs functions are carried out away from public scrutiny, while the traveler's endpoint—the plane itself—is often shrouded like a surgical patient by the jetway apparatus. And at many airports, hidden from public view, are holding areas for people suspected of criminal activity and for deportees, a matter of increasing importance and public attention.



behind walls I don't say map, I don't say territory every module repents of meaning

Martha Rosler, *Porto Airport, Porto*, from "In the Place of the Public: Airport Series," 2014.
©MARTHA ROSLER

The main entry points for migrants are not airports. However, they have been a visible point of focus for people protesting President Trump's travel ban, abruptly effecting the recent conversion of American airports' limited public space into a place of protest.

Over the years I have noticed how photo technology has intersected with the technologies of airport design. My earliest pictures of airports, photos of dimly lit corridors and indistinct atriums, were shot on film. But now the interior passages are more mall-like. And digital photography does very well with sleek, expansive, even cluttered environments. That's one of the things that cheered me up about switching to digital—I loved film and pushed against moving to digital photography for a long time, until I realized it was consonant with these bland, depersonalized, uniformly lit spaces: a perfect match.

—*Martha Rosler, as told to Anne Doran*

A version of this story originally appeared in the Summer 2017 issue of *ARTnews* on page 94 under the title "They Know Why You Fly."

Copyright 2017, Art Media ARTNEWS, llc. 110 Greene Street, 2nd Fl., New York, N.Y. 10012. All rights reserved.