



View of Tempelhof Airport from above, TCA Open House, May 1989. Photo: Wolfgang Chodan, Courtesy the artist.



Facade of Tempelhof Airport, 1938. Photo: Arthur Köster, Courtesy Bundesarchiv Berlin.

**Tempelhof:
Functionality in Painting, Functionality in Airspaces**

It would have been neat and tidy to give Vienna as a starting point for this writing considering it will be taking on a sense of journey. A better point of departure however might be painting, in particular Geometric Abstraction and how I have come to think of my paintings, paintings that respond to some idea of function. But to reassure those who have presumed this magazine's title should have some bearing on its contents, we hopefully won't spend too long in the sub-cultural bowels of Geometric Abstraction, my project here should succeed simply if the reader gains a greater understanding of Tempelhof International Airport, although I do hope to go further.

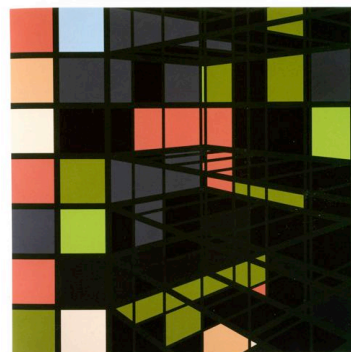
It occurred to me that it might be helpful to make some diagrammatic reference to the state of mind of the artist as they encounter things in the world. I would like it if you (the reader) might gain a sympathetic understanding as to why I came to think of Tempelhof as having a significant relationship to my own practice but also to art in a broader sense.

This diagram can be imagined as an eye, encountering the world, between which lie different filters of differing transparencies depending on their relevance to what is being seen. These filters include Geometric Abstraction, Conceptual Art, Minimalism, Kantian Aesthetics, Post-Modernist Painting, and Baudrillard's theory of Simulation / Pop Art. This can serve as a rough sketch of my mental orientation as I encountered Tempelhof, it was through these ideas that I viewed its physical being and its dominating historical presence.

I'd like to briefly mention Sara Morris' video *Capital* in this context. In this video Morris filmed various scenes in and around Washington D.C., capturing everyday people, transport, shops and the aesthetics of the American political machine as a way of explaining the systems through which she arrives at the abstract motifs for her paintings.¹ The significance here is that after experiencing the work of Morris, one sees her video *through* the filter of her painting, as I came to think of Tempelhof through some of the contextual filters of my own practice.



Sara Morris, *Capital*, 2000, 16mm transferred onto DVD. Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London



Sara Morris, *Watergate Complex (Capital)*, 2001, Household gloss paint on canvas, 214 x 214 cm. Private Collection. Coloane

This could help explain why I felt compelled to go to Berlin's Tempelhof. I felt that the airport, when viewed through a series of filters of contextual knowledge, seemed to have a certain resonance that demanded a sharper focus. My practice repeatedly internalises the outside world in metaphor, these metaphors then function to demonstrate the flow of the practice as a whole. In other words I saw something in the airport that could serve to partly explain the nature of my art practice.



Alex Lawler, *The Orgasmatron Painting*, (Exterior View), 2006, Acrylic on Wall, Room Installation.
Photo: Alex Lawler, Courtesy of the Artist



Alex Lawler, *The Orgasmatron Painting*, (Interior View), 2006, Acrylic on Wall, Room Installation.
Photo: Nicola Brunnhuber, Courtesy the Artist

I first encountered Tempelhof in David Pascoe's *Airspaces*ⁱⁱ, a book that investigates the evolution of the airport and the space immediately above it, suggesting its existence is a discrete, autonomous zone unlike other spaces. This book regards Tempelhof as having a particularly unique role in the development of airports, one that has been a flashpoint for some of the most fundamentally important political dramas of the 20th century.

The Airport

Tempelhof, one of the world's oldest airports and Europe's largest connected buildingⁱⁱⁱ, came into being between 1936 – 1941 and was designed and built by Prof. Ernst Sagebiel. Its design was part of Hitler's plans to redesign Berlin as Germania, centre of the Third Reich. Tempelhof, serving as the gateway to the new centre of Europe, would sit on the east of a major east-west axis which intersected the major north-south axis characterizing his design and providing a major boulevard for the new city.



A model of Hitler's Germania from 1941, Tempelhof is middle right. Photo: Elke Dittrich, Courtesy Landesarchiv Berlin.

Tempelhof serves a trace of this master-plan. The Platz in front of the main reception-hall, what is now the Platz der Luftbrücke, has a grand circular formation that was to be mirrored again a few kilometers to the east on the east-west axis. One of the twined office complexes to the south of the Platz and the obelisks memorializing the Napelonic wars were not completed, but one can still see how the Airport was intended to extend into Berlin's urban space.



A model of what is now the Platz der Luftbrücke, the Airport's main entrance in background, obelisks in foreground. Photo: Hans Steinmetz, Courtesy Archiv Berliner Flughäfen.

Tempelhof Airport has two distinct aesthetics. Firstly there is the exterior and *Abfertigungshalle*, the Main Reception area from which one enters the complex, and secondly the 170ft-cantilevered hangar from which all passengers depart (if one is traveling from Berlin, as I did). The interior of the hall takes full advantage of the building's scale and is a logical extension of the exterior, with *Muschelkalk* pillars and ceiling.



The view as one enters the Main Reception Hall. Photo: Alex Lawler, Courtesy the Artist.

Whilst the *Muschelkalk* structures are, in part, a stern refusal of radical modernism, the steel canopy of the aircraft hanger utterly exposes its means of construction. It too has a highly dramatic scale and internal volume, but aesthetically it is much more pragmatic. Whilst standing inside the hangar itself, one might lose all sense of the neo-classicist facade.

The curvature of this building is also radical, the series of connected hangars facing the airfield measures 1,152m. Its design was to provide multiple entry points for arrivals and departures but also to serve as political spectacle, here Sagebiel envisaged stands for 65,000 spectators during airshows and Nazi rallies.^{iv}



The view of hangars from roof, facing east.
Photo: Alex Lawler, Courtesy the Artist.

History

Tempelhof was designated as an airport in 1923, although Orville Wright had made a flight demonstration there as early as 1909^v. The existing Engle Brothers airfield construction, where Luftansa was founded, was ordered to be replaced by Sagebiel's new terminal in 1934. After construction began in 1936, shortages in labour and building materials slowed the completion of the airport, so much so that parts were still unfinished when war broke out. Tempelhof was also the site for the KZ Columbia, one of Germany's first concentration camps from 1934 to 1936^{vi}.

After the war the Soviets handed power of the Airport over to the Americans. Tempelhof then became the stage for a major confrontation between the Russians and Americans: the Luftbrücke. During the airlift which broke the stalemate over the fate of West Berlin (1948-1949) Tempelhof became world famous, the Allies landing cargo planes filled with supplies for West Germany at a rate of one plane every five minutes, around the clock^{vii}.

The Americans occupied Tempelhof until the 1990's. Commercial flights operated by American and British airliners began in 1946 and continued until the mid 70's when larger aircraft were moved to Tegel. With the end of the cold war non-allied air traffic was allowed through the airport, but the changes in aviation meant that an airport designed for aircraft of the 1930's in the centre of a huge metropolis couldn't expand and was therefore unsustainable.

Main Reception Area

My decision to fly home to Vienna from Berlin was to see something that had long since begun to decline. The airport had up until October 2006 been used by DBA, a carrier partnered with Air Berlin, with this service terminated, only small expensive business class carriers will remain in Tempelhof and their stay most likely will also be brief. So in mid-2006, I realised I had to act fast.

Upon arriving in Berlin, I took the U-Bahn to Platz der Luftbrücke and walked past the large office buildings ringing the Platz. I felt to be moving in slow motion as their sheer size deadens the pace of the pedestrian. I passed through the double doors to enter the Main Reception Area. At this point that I entered the Main Hall and saw the penultimate site of the Airport itself. One enters the space from the mezzanine level and the whole expanse of the hall can be seen from that instant.

This is the Moment when painting seemed to become present. The hall, containing a newspaper shop, ticketing outlets, check-in counters, baggage carousels, airport café, passport control and a waiting area are all laid out in front of you. I came to think of this, the crux of Tempelhof passenger experience (paralleled with the sight of the Airport as one touches down into Tempelhof, seeing the great expanse of the hangars) as being a circular visual experience: like viewing a painting. Everything is laid out in front of the viewer,

from the moment one's gaze hits the canvas, everything is revealed, the longer one holds their gaze the more one travels within that same view.

Traveling through contemporary or 'functional' Airports (of which I would name Frankfurt Airport as being typical), is entirely different. One's visual experience is dependant on one's passage through the space as one navigates from check-in, to departure lounge and toward boarding the aircraft. I would put forward that traveling through these airports is more like experiencing video art, its visuality is continually in flux. That which hits the eye is dependant on a point in time and this initial exposure does not constitute a universal beginning from person to person.

Passing through a 'functioning' airport is a subjective and extremely detached experience. One has little idea of where the real event of the Airport lies, one keeps their eyes open, trying to get a glimpse of how the space is really operating. Quite often upon finding a window, one cannot, without further research, be sure which view they are looking at in relation to the airport as a whole.

Tempelhof Today

It seemed to me Tempelhof has a heightened sense of unreality about it, its condition is such that although when you are inside it, Tempelhof seems the most archetypal of all airports, it also seems it has never *entirely* been there. Its real significance has never been present during its existence.

During its construction Tempelhof was part of the future, the utopic German Reich at the heart of a new Europe. During the American occupation Tempelhof was an unreal spectacle, the hysteria of the Luftbrücke was a gamble that played off brilliantly well, yet it was a tense operation that was impossible to maintain indefinitely. I would put forward that even then, the real function, or presence of Tempelhof had not yet been played out, that its 'real place' was both behind (with the distopic dreams of Hitler's Germania) and ahead (the struggle to return the airport to the people of Berlin).

Any research into Tempelhof quickly leads one to Sir Norman Foster's quote of Tempelhof being the "mother of all airports."^{viii} Tempelhof's real presence today is buried somewhere with memories of Casablanca, its referers are tangled and stretch to everywhere. Today when walking through the airport, that there is something so classic about it in an immediate sense that it is more part of the past than of the present. Yet its uncanny likeness to an 'idea' of an airport it has more realness than any other airport in the world.

Like all good things we love, it must be said that 'Tempelhof' does not exist, and all its life it never has existed.

Toward Take-off

Once inside the airport I set out to walk around a little. Unlike regular airports, in Tempelhof an unmarked door is not only unguarded, but leads to empty corridors, leading to more doors, to stairs and to whole floors of empty rooms. This labyrinth also continues underground, as discovered the Soviets in 1945, when whole floors of accommodation were unveiled as well as a secret aircraft factory with half finished Focke-Wulf fighters and storage bunkers filled with thousands of reels of Nazi films^x.

Tempelhof was built with the ambition of service until 2000 but also as a symbol of Nazi power, so it is oversized to say the least. The office space connecting the 15 towers behind the runway has been occupied from time to time, but with only half a million visitors per year and an underfunded Berlin state government, these rooms now remain empty, containing only broken-down old office furniture.



Inside the Airport's offices. Photo: Alex Lawler, Courtesy the Artist.

So I explored the expanse inside the Airport, photographing the spaces and searching for a way onto the viewing platform once intended to hold 65,000 people. Eventually I found a set of stairs that seemed to lead up further than others I had seen before.

The stairs lead to a door left open, then onto a smaller set of stairs and from there, out into the open huge expanse of the roof. I was then on large balcony area quite close to the centre of the complex, facing the runway. The Tempelhof design is such that the whole complex, when viewed from above, appears as a giant eagle poised to land. I could now see the eagle's wings stretched out to my left and right. The space in front of the hangars, intended for waiting planes was mostly empty, a few jets however, dwarfed by the space around them, screamed into the sky.

Two German Airforce men stood ahead of me with large cameras, looking over the runway. I was greeted with curiosity and some minutes passed before they asked me how it was that I had found them. It seemed that they weren't really supposed to be there either. We decided to keep each other's secrets and talked about the airport for a while. They pointed out to me the air corridors over Germany and told me where each of the planes were headed as they passed 9kms above us.

Airplanes

In making this journey to Tempelhof I wanted to witness the unreality of this icon of airports, but it came about through an identification with the aircraft itself, which I'll briefly explain as it seems to me a fitting exit.

I would put forward that there is inevitably a critical anxiety at the site of a painting's function. Function in terms of the relationship of meaning and reception taking place between the artist and the viewer: of an artwork 'making sense', but also in the proliferation of painting in general.

This critical site of anxiety is, for a painter, perhaps most lingering of modernist ghosts. It concerns the practicality in continuing to create hypothetically solvable problems through which paintings serves as metaphoric tool, simulating the coming to terms with the world surrounding the painter.

An aircraft, however, is not primarily a speculative article, it can simply be. I came to think of planes as standing in for painting



Alex Lawler, *Sitting & Thinking about Planes & Painting* (with) *The Sai Baba Painting*, 2006, Mixed Media, Room Installation. Photo: Gregor Titze, Courtesy the Artist.



Alex Lawler, *Sitting & Thinking about Planes & Painting* (detail), 2006, Flocati Rug, Table, In-flight Magazines, Airline Teaspoons, Model Airplanes, Room Installation. Photo: Gregor Titze, Courtesy the Artist.

The aircraft, the mass-produced metallic canvas, visually indifferent to place and culture as it flies about, has many attributes to stir the envy of the painted canvas. Crucially, it is primarily invested with an economic rather than a symbolic value. That is to say that its existence as painted form hinges not on its aesthetic and conceptual values but rather its existence as functional article. Its role is to transport people and is judged by speed and economy.

A painted plane is shown everywhere, at night its tail is lit, it is an identical part of a series of reproductions. Its colours are exhibited for their brand-association value, but through the filter of the painter's mind it also advertises the proliferation of Geometric Painting itself. The colours we see on the tails of planes partly owe their existence to the genealogy of Geometric Painting. Through this filter we can see Geometric Painting leading its clandestine existence, living out the modernist dream of perpetual movement.



Dba fokker 100 leaving Tempelhof Airport, Photo: Frank Kühne, Courtesy the Artist.

I returned to the airport early in the morning a few days later, having had little sleep, giving the day an unreal, hazed quality. I waited, watching the runway, ticket in hand. At the sign from the attendant we were allowed to board. I walked for the first time through the enormous hangar. I approached the Fokker 100, a dba flight DI 7065, a now terminated service, found my seat and settled down with some in-flight reading material. I looked back to hangars and soon drifted away from the world.

Alex Lawler, January 2007, Vienna

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- ⁱ Caroline Douglas, Catalogue printed for the Exhibition **Supernova**, British council, London, 2005, Page 44.
- ⁱⁱ David Pascoe, **Airspaces** "Theatres of War", Reaktion Books, London, 2004
- ⁱⁱⁱ **Air Service Berlin**, <http://www.air-service-berlin.de/?page=106-57-0-1-2-2-3&lang=2>
- ^{iv} David Pascoe, **Airspaces** "Theatres of War", Reaktion Books, London, 2004. Page 159.
- ^v Wikipedia contributors, "Tempelhof International Airport," **Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia**, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Tempelhof_International_Airport&oldid=103446388 (accessed February 5, 2007).
- ^{vi} David Pascoe, **Airspaces** "Theatres of War", Reaktion Books, London, 2004. Page 177.
- ^{vii} Ibid. Page 162.
- ^{viii} Elke Dittrich, **Der Flughafen Tempelhof: in Entwurfszeichnungen und Modellen 1935 – 1944**, , Lukas Verlag für Kunst- und Geistesgeschichte, Berlin, 2005. Page 4.
- ^{ix} Elke Dittrich. Page 161.