



HOLDING PATTERNS AND REST AREAS

SOPHIE BRODOVITCH ON *POSTE RESTANTE*
CURATED BY ERIC FREDERICKSEN

Installation view, *Poste Restante*, 2011. Table by Aaron Flint Jameson. Photo: Blaine Campbell

On May 2, 2011, a little grey piece of paper went through an arduous process in order to become an officially cast ballot when I voted in the 41st Canadian Federal Election at Florence Nightingale School, just off 12th Avenue in Vancouver, BC. The voting process is elaborate and rather convoluted, involving a series of questions, actions and exchanges in which papers are folded, circles marked, strips torn, and ballots cast. The dialogue between the Elections Officers and myself was minimal, but in that exchange, the ballot paper was constantly charged with responsibility, never in a neutral state.

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Mehran Karimi Nasser is an Iranian man who lived in the Charles De Gaulle airport for almost twenty years, from 1988 until 2006, when an illness required hospitalization. Due to his passport and documents being stolen, he was trapped in the airport, unable to enter any country in Europe and unable (or unwilling) to return to his country of birth without the papers necessary to confirm his citizenship. Trapped in a place between borders, Nasser remained in perpetual transit, waiting for his next flight for nearly two decades.

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A holding pattern is a predetermined procedure that absorbs delays by keeping airplanes within a specified airspace while waiting to land. Airplanes in holding patterns are “stacked” on top of one another in intervals of 1000 feet, each one lowering itself down as the plane below it exits the holding pattern and lands. Upon entry into a holding pattern, the airplane repeatedly travels the same path, spatially moving from one place to the next, without ever actually going anywhere.

Presenting the work of eleven artists and collaborators, *Poste Restante* claims to be an exhibition that “refuses to deliver.” Intended as a cheeky passage in the press release, this statement makes reference to how the works are exhibited, as they arrived via government post, with all accompanying documents (rumour has it that one of the packages was opened during the exhibition’s run, but as I understand it, most were not). My first response to the installation is that the artists were aware that the works would be shown as they were shipped, made evident by the carefully considered shapes and designs of the packages. This creates a sense that the contents of the packages are of little or no consequence—in fact, all the packages could be empty, for all any of us know—the only people who can truly identify what is contained in these packages are the artists themselves and perhaps the customs or mail official who may have x-rayed the items at some point in their journey.

Of course, it quickly becomes evident that the contents of the packages are largely irrelevant. What is interesting, however, is how the packing (and lack of unpacking) and continuous shipping process allows the exhibition to enter a kind of conceptual holding pattern, in which the material qualities of the work point to the state of the object as they transition from one place to the next. In this way, it might be worthwhile to consider that this exhibition perhaps does not really need to exist in the gallery space. Based on its premise and the actions taken to make it happen, the exhibition is at its most effective when the works are in transit, handled by those who are not necessarily made aware (or are completely unaware) of their significance and destination. Once in the gallery they begin to languish slightly, as the exhibition space takes on

the role of museum storage vault (or, exhibition space as resting area). When the exhibition is in a period of pause, that is to say when the works are being presented in a conventional gallery space, many of the questions raised by the initial curatorial concept and process are momentarily shelved, only to be triggered again when the works enter into the mail system and are sent onwards.

Réponse is the French word for response, and a response tends towards wanting to be an answer of some kind. So why discuss holding patterns, Mehran Karimi Nasser, and the casting of ballots together in response to this exhibition? Indeed, there is no direct link between these four items, but when reflecting on this exhibition, my mind returned repeatedly to these three anecdotes. Each of these stories speaks to the nature of transit and transitions, and how things change when holding patterns are not only made available, but insisted upon. Through the imposition of a curatorial structure such as the one developed for *Poste Restante*, transitions were used as a way to unravel some of the control maintained by the exhibiting institution and the curator. However, the reverse effect is that the curator’s role becomes emphasized over all else, almost at the expense of the work. And while the imposition of such particular parameters does raise questions about the materiality of the art object, ultimately what comes to light is the manner in which curatorial concepts can place work in a perpetual holding pattern.

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