

Art and Social Metamorphoses at Airports¹

Jörg Potthast

„Humans live their lives and build their institutions on solid grounds. However, in reflecting on their being on the move and their condition as a whole, they prefer using the metaphor of hazardous deep sea navigation.”²

Using Changi Airport, we are both standing on solid grounds and moving through edifices that have been built on what was previously open sea. While differing in tone and style, the preceding accounts report on potent observations. Reading the former, we are prepared to be drawn into metaphysical considerations; the second seems to introduce a more technical description of a major engineering project (turning 870 hectares of sea into land, etc.). The present contribution does not follow either of these paths. Nor does it develop on a criticism directed at either. Rather than debunking a category error in reflecting the human condition (mistaking our terrestrial existence for a nautical one) or denouncing the ecological consequences of large-scale infrastructures, it is exploring a line of inquiry connecting them both. Can airport terminals be traced back to ways of reflecting our “condition as a whole”? How does using land/sea infrastructures such as Changi Airport feed back into the arts of reflecting our “being on the move”? Following these questions, the present contribution will argue that airports have been hosting three basic processes of aesthetic transformation: *Shelters have been transformed into beaches, queueing into pilgrimage, and crowds into screen worlds.* Each of these processes can be found elsewhere (and will be, to some extent, traced back to the literature). If airports can be shown hosting these metamorphoses, reflecting on art at airports will help us to capture the qualities of these places. This is remarkable as airports have often been depicted as *non-places*, rejecting the very concept of “placeness”.³

Turning shelters into beaches

Art at airports? Aren't airports about sheltering travellers waiting for a connection? For providing some minimal material standard for surviving a stop-over? Alongside the temporarily homeless (long distance travellers; frequent flyers), airports have given, at times, shelter to the chronically homeless.⁴ Contemporary authors including Marc Augé, Manuel Castells and Richard Sennett have depicted the experience of airports in a different way. Rather than referring to homelessness as a material category, they have portrayed passengers populating terminals as “transcendentally homeless”.⁵ Strikingly, then, whether sheltering those far from home, the homeless or the transcendentally homeless, airport terminals are not like homes. They are anonymous spaces. This is why, beyond the material aspect of sheltering (heating, water supply, etc.) they may offer a hideout for homeless people seeking to stay unnoticed.

In their earlier days, airports were rudimentary facilities for refuelling aircraft. Whether receiving the military or postal air services, these sites were equipped like shelters. Entering the age of larger aircraft, landing strips had to be fortified; entering the age of long-haul flights, many of these infrastructures ran obsolete and fell into oblivion.⁶ Others, located in the proximity of urban agglomerations, took a different path, as part of a booming sector of *civilian* aviation. Within a few

decades, tents put next to landing strips have been transformed into huge terminal buildings;⁷ sites considered as remote from urban civilization have converged with the imagery of urban centres. Pointing to these changes, Nathalie Roseau has identified a new way of imagining cities *from above* as a driver of these changes. Subject to an enormous amount of artistic production, she argues, sites once merely in between (land and air) and barely equipped have been transformed into huge hybrids (called *aérocities*).⁸ Global airports-cum-cities have risen out of sheltered stop-over locations just as the seaside, a non-place without qualities or facilities and inhospitable, had turned into a “lure” and a destination for tourism in the 19th century.⁹

The aesthetic transformation involved in the unlikely process of converting shelters into beaches can then be captured as follows: Artistic phantasies and experimentations with a view from above have resulted in establishing a gaze from nowhere which, in turn, has had a large impact on the practices of planning cities and their infrastructures. In technically allowing for a view from above, aviation has had a major influence on the very idea of modern art.¹⁰ Many terminals have been designed as “naked airports”;¹¹ some of them count among the purest expressions of the modernist movement. Reflecting the condition of those homeless and vulnerable to the point of being “naked” has been constitutive of the modernist approach. Accepting this constitutional argument, one should not consider airport terminals to have become mere (passive) expressions of modern art. Even if celebrated as show-case examples of modern art, terminal buildings are not about offering an auratic add-on to our lives. Rather, looking at airports and their amazing transformations, one is to discern the holistic conception of modern art, applied to our “being on the move and [our] condition as a whole”. By implication, if the development of the modern arts and of airports have shown strong affinities and thus mutually re-enforcing each other, anything (not just landing strips and refuelling facilities) may be subject to the world-making forces of aesthetic transformation.

There are many accounts, both fictional and more documented, that insist on a “new culture of air travel” as a matter of life itself.¹² In depicting “aerial life” as an extended continuum and in portraying people as moving fluidly through the endless loop of global airports and adjacent hotel, shopping and gastronomic facilities, however, they are suggestively lining up observations in support of a peculiar argument. What if we had always reflected on our terrestrial existence in terms of a nautical one? This question cannot be answered by simply extending the list of elements said to confirm the existence of a new culture. Can there be a more empirically grounded approach to the paradox explored in the introductory quote?¹³

Turning queueing into pilgrimage

Here is a more down-to-earth approach, followed by a more situated analysis. Open a handbook on airport terminal planning, and you will find tables on how to calculate and arrange spaces for queueing. According to these accounts, the construction of airport terminals has followed a standard calculation of what is considered the minimum comfort zone of a single passenger. This calculation may include a cultural factor (in some parts of the world, people lining up demand more space than elsewhere) or a status factor (customers of budget airlines are expected to endure less space). Notwithstanding these variations, however, the premises of these calculations prevail: Terminal spaces are subdivided into time-space cells containing individual passengers.

This reality is reflected by the ways in which people and their belongings are processed through airports. They are separated, again and again. Separated from their luggage, separated from each other, separated from pieces of cabin luggage, of shoes, cell phones and belts, following a script which has been imposed on airports on a global scale (and which, in response to terrorist attacks, has been refined repeatedly). As a result of this process, passengers happen to be “alone” (Marc Augé).

Are airport queues just like any other queue? Airports are subject to a second principle of zoning, strictly dividing up terminals into public zones (where departing and arriving passengers meet) and “clean” zones (where they are strictly separated).¹⁴ The departure zone is reached via the above-mentioned process termed “separation”. (Once passengers and their bags have boarded the same aircraft, they are said to be “reconciled”.) This principle of zoning has been reinforced for security reasons. As a result, and adding to other factors of a growing air transport sector, queues have grown longer. Can there be something extraordinary about buildings designed for the most ordinary activity of queueing? Even when reporting from their first flight, passengers have framed travelling by air as an ordinary experience.¹⁵ The experience of queueing may be thought of as particularly resistant to any form of “airmindedness”. We would hardly expect airline passengers to report on queueing as an illegitimate act of perilous navigation, transcending the limits of earthbound existence, providing allusions to a divine experience only to be reached through a well-rehearsed practice. Rather, we are inclined to think of passengers, even if moving through terminals supposed to create the sublime experience of modern architecture, as trapped within the purely functional calculation of minimal queueing cells. Has the modernist version of our dream of flying been killed by down-to-earth considerations of security and commercial exploitation?¹⁶ Isn’t queueing then the least likely form of social gathering to give rise to an aesthetic transformation? As a building type, airport terminals may wish to reflect the condition of being nowhere, the no-man’s land in between the dry terrain and the perilous sea. As part of the routine of planning, however, the design process of airport terminals is said to begin with a prosaic consideration of queueing.

Inside airport terminals, there are numerous queues. Observing passengers, one might suspect queues are inducing a utilitarian attitude. In a way, passengers pushing their way through the terminal seem to adopt and complete the condition of disenchantment described above. They are reaching levels of selfishness well-known as “tunnel vision”.¹⁷ They watch out for and will not miss any opportunity to queue-jump. Striving to reduce waiting time and chasing for a better position or a small (and often temporary) advantage, they may no longer consider those in wheelchairs, families with small children or fellow travellers disadvantaged for other reasons. And yet, reaching the edge of acting out a perfectly selfish calculation, passengers are faced with the flip side of tunnel vision, now experienced as a massive bodily malfunction. Moving through the process of separation, we may feel uncertain and displaced. We are not articulate enough to reflect on this situation in simple terms of a technical process. Separated from our bag, we may feel lost – rather than temporally processed on a different path. Violating the logic of a rationally calculating agent, we start mimicking patterns of behaviour observed just in front of us. *Someone is taking off her/his shoes? We will do the same.* Tunnel vision affects our basic sense of orientation. We might need signage even in airports we have often used. Has tunnel vision even turned to blindness? Aren’t we even closing our eyes when, separated from some of our clothes, we enter a liminal stage? At this point, queueing turns into pilgrimage.¹⁸ Having exposed bodily deficiency in many ways, the helping hands of a collective ritual intervene.

When opening our eyes again, we look at the motherly gestures of flight attendants (distributing bonbons; opening and closing curtains). Passengers boarding planes are newborn creatures. Some of them have considerably extended the experience of pilgrimage by practicing airport walks.¹⁹

Turning the necessity of getting from A to B into an aesthetic experience? Switching from a utilitarian queuing attitude (queues as an obstacle to an individual intention) to a sequenced experience of pilgrimage (resulting in a new collective)? If this transformation is taking place at airports, it is largely supported by the security apparatus. While there have been numerous changes with regard to the procedure of security over the last decades, these have followed an incremental logic.²⁰ Broadly put, they have been extended and therefore provided further support to the process of ritualistic transformation. By implication, however, security measures have resulted in creating even more rigid forms of tunnel vision, to the extent of being a threat to security themselves.²¹ In other words, the aesthetic transformation of unlikely pedestrian passages into pilgrimage is very ambiguous. Further extending the liminal stage of this *rite de passage* will be detrimental to civil attention. Thanks to our common sense (and following the initiative of passengers less affected by tunnel vision), security threats have been detected in the past. We should be able to rely on those strengths in the future, too.

Turning crowds into screen worlds

Airports are expanding. Some airports have become very large. Often, they are crowded. There may have been calculations on queueing times and passenger throughput per hour. Disruptions and peaks, however, quickly resulting in huge crowds, are not an exception. Often, facing the crowd with a heroic or blasé way of metropolitan strolling is not an option. Rather, the crowd is a threatening element. Just like car drivers, taking slight deviations from the rule as a matter of ultimately disrupting social order,²² we are ready to intervene even violently in the name of its defence.

Immersed in a mission of auto-defending social order, we are far from an instrumental attitude to queueing. Rather than seeking for a small advantage (as depicted in the previous section), we are concerned about the order of the queue itself, continually threatened by queue-jumpers. Once more, we reach a state of mind which is particularly far from the cliché of a receptive and contemplative aesthetic experience. Unable to switch to another focus of attention we are fixing the crowd, unlikely to engage in any other set of activities. Experiencing terminals as a crowd, we are caught by faceless and anonymous forces, drowned in a state of passivity. We are deprived of any form of agency, except one that could worsen this condition.²³

Regardless of its temporal extent, this experience is common to many public places, including, for example, elevators.²⁴ In order to cope with an unusual bodily proximity, those lining up in elevators are carefully minimizing their presence. For instance: if strangers, they are avoiding eye-contact. The small screen indicating the floor level is a welcome element in supporting this exercise. Staring at the shifting numbers, those temporarily congregating demonstrate to each other that there is only one thing they have in common: All of them would prefer to be elsewhere. Hence, beyond its functional dimension, even a small display is involved in creating a temporary community of fate.

This transient collective and its sense of gravity is no longer supported once people do not look at centralized and synchronized displays (like huge display panels in airport terminals) but



DISPLAY PANEL FOR DEPARTING FLIGHTS AT CHANGI AIRPORT SINGAPORE

are instead interfacing with inmobile devices. The use of smartphones does not result in a ritualistic and collective experience. Nor is it limited to supplying information. In providing screen-worlds, however, it assists in demonstrating absence. Why would this trigger an aesthetic transformation? Why qualify the practice of killing time in aesthetic categories? Is there something artistic about or even a new art of “doing civil inattention”? If so, what are the consequences? Will the central screen fall into oblivion, leaving space for art works?

If following modernist (shelters to beaches) or quasi-religious (queueing to pilgrimage) concepts of aesthetic experience, the above questions are simply beside the point. On the contrary, the use of smartphones may be thought of as a form of what we recognise as (performative) street art. Like street art, this activity is perfectly adapted to local circumstances. Like this type of street art, incorporating the arbitrary composition of left-over urban spaces, facades or sidewalks, acts such as using smartphones are perfectly and often subversively integrated into the rhythms of large public transport infrastructure (whether airports or other sites). In other words, travellers in crowds using smartphones are following the example of street artists who have studied the rhythms of everyday urban life and space. To be sure, many conventional forms of street art tolerated elsewhere are prohibited at airport terminals. Buskers, for example, are banned from international airports,

to avoid inference with passenger announcements. Performing a mutation of street art, however, we are constantly constructing and deconstructing space and time's connection when it comes to flying. Take the example of a text message: "Oh my gosh: still sitting on the plane in Cologne. The captain has just explained that, with air traffic control in Paderborn being understaffed, we are going to depart much later. This is why we're getting close to the maximum working hours of the crew — that's if everything goes to plan. [...] Keep in touch. Fingers crossed. Don't feel like staying in Cologne."²⁵ Just as in the case of street art, we are rarely giving a closer look to these expressions from in between land and sea. Therefore, a piece of airport street art like "TSA, are you f...ing kidding me?"²⁶ is rather an exception. Uploaded on youtube.com in May 2016, this video, tracking down a labyrinthine queue at Chicago airport, has been viewed more than two million times.

The online upload's ad hoc production offers illustrations neither of queue-jumping nor of desperate attempts to maintain the order of queueing in the face of a dangerous crowd. Downsizing both aspects, it should not be taken as a realistic documentary either. Its artistic ingenuity lies in anticipating that it will be tolerated by the security authorities for travelling in the web. The issue of legitimate and illegitimate aesthetic transformations, however, is beyond the scope of the present contribution.²⁷ Having explored art "at" airports in different guises and as related to social metamorphoses of varying scale and impact, I leave this question to the artists.²⁸ I would be surprised to find more examples of airports *on sea* (while operating) converted into street art — and less surprised to hear about some terminal *on solid grounds* (no longer operating) converted into a museum of modern art.

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- 1 Apropos "A Million Times at Changi", a kinetic sculpture at Changi Airport Singapore by *Humans since 1982*. See <http://www.humanssince1982.com/>.
- 2 Hans Blumenberg (1997/1979): *Shipwreck With Spectator. Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*. Cambridge: MIT Press. (Author's translation from the German original, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer. Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, p. 9.)
- 3 Marc Augé (1995/1992): *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- 4 Kim Hopper (2003): *Reckoning with Homelessness*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, pp. 124ff.; *Terminal*, 2003. Directed by Steven Spielberg (USA, 129 mins.).
- 5 If not using this term coined in the 1920s by Georg Lukács and Siegfried Kracauer, their descriptions are resonating with it. See Georg Lukács (1971/1920): *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*. Cambridge: MIT Press; Siegfried Kracauer (1995/1922): Those Who Wait. In: Kracauer, Siegfried (ed.) *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Translated, Edited and with an Introduction by Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 129-142; Marc Augé (1995/1992): *Non-Places*; Manuel Castells (1996): *The Rise of Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture (Vol. I)*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 421; Richard Sennett (1998): *The Corrosion of Character. The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. New York: Norton.
- 6 Lars Denicke (2012): *Global/Airport. Zur Geopolitik des Luftverkehrs*. Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (PhD Thesis).
- 7 Ian Anderson (2014): *Heathrow. From Tents to Terminal 5*. Merrywalks: Amberley.
- 8 Nathalie Roseau (2012): *Aérocité: Quand l'avion fait la ville*. Marseille: Parenthèses.
- 9 Alain Corbin (1994/1988): *The Lure of the Sea. The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750-1840*. Berkeley: California UP.
- 10 Le Corbusier (1995/1924): Les avions. In: Le Corbusier (ed.) *Vers une architecture*. Paris: Flammarion, 81-100.
- 11 Alastair Gordon (2004): *Naked Airport. A Cultural History of the World's Most Revolutionary Structure*. Chicago: UP.
- 12 Mark Gottdiener (2001): *Life in the Air: Surviving the New Culture of Air Travel*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield; *Up in the Air*, 2009. Directed by George Clooney (USA, 109 mins.).
- 13 I have tried to do this before, in studying how the fluid of Network Societies is kept on terrestrial tracks by means of an "Ethnography of Breakdowns at Hub Airports". See Jörg Potthast (2007): *Die Bodenhaftung der Netzwerkgesellschaft. Eine Ethnografie von Pannen an Großflughäfen*. Bielefeld: transcript. For more recent accounts of airports as a workplace marked by tensions and contradictions, see Chiara Bassetti (2017): *Airport Security Contradictions: Interorganizational Entanglements and Changing Work Practices*. *Ethnography*, (first published February 28, 2017); Edward Schwarzschild (2017): My (Short) Life as an Airport Security Guard. *The Guardian*, June 29, 2017.
- 14 Jörg Potthast (2011): Sense and Security. A Comparative View on Recent Changes of Access Control at Airports. *Science, Technology & Innovation Studies* 7, 2, 87-106.
- 15 Including Theodor W. Adorno (2003/1954): „So ergeht es dem, der heute zum ersten Male fliegt“, *Frankfurter Rundschau* 11.9.03.
- 16 That's what Paul Andreu and Nathalie Roseau tell us about the history of the famous "Camembert" terminal. See Paul Andreu & Nathalie Roseau (2014): *Paris CDG-1*. Paris: Editions B2.

- 17 Christopher Ross (2001): *Tunnel Visions*. London: Fourth Estate.
- 18 Arnold van Gennep (2011/1960): *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: UP.
- 19 Following the example of François Maspéro & Anaik Frantz (1990): *Les passagers du Roissy-Express*. Paris: Seuil; Will Self (2012): *Walking to Hollywood: Memories of Before the Fall*. New York: Grove Press; Iain Sinclair (2003): *London Orbital*. London: Penguin.
- 20 Thomas A. Birkland (2004): Learning and Policy Improvement after Disaster. The Case of Aviation Security. *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, 3, 341-364.
- 21 Harvey Molotch (2012): *Against Security: How we go wrong at Airports, Subways, and other Sites of Ambiguous Danger*. Princeton: UP.
- 22 Jack Katz (1999): Pissed Off in L.A. In: Katz, Jack (ed.) *How Emotions Work*. Chicago: UP, 18-86.
- 23 Similar to inmates of mental hospitals. See Erving Goffman (1961): *Asylums*. New York: Doubleday Anchor.
- 24 Stefan Hirschauer (2005): On Doing Being a Stranger. The Practical Constitution of Civil Inattention. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 35, 1, 41-67.
- 25 Quoted in Larissa Schindler (2016): Ereignisverknüpfungen. Über Fliegen und Ethnografie. In: Schäfer, Hilmar (ed.) *Praxistheorie. Ein Forschungsprogramm*. Bielefeld: transcript, 265-282, p. 265 (Author's translation).
- 26 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byUVR04CMBU&feature=youtu.be>, when retrieved October 13, 2017, this film has been viewed 2.428.100 times.
- 27 Critically reflecting on covert military uses of Leipzig airport in terms of a social metamorphosis, an artistic contribution, co-produced by a sociologist, was not allowed for exhibition at this airport in 2008. See www.veratollmann.net/?p=159 (accessed October 19, 2017).
- 28 Including those working for advertising airports and their equipment. See Jörg Potthast (2017): Dienstbarkeitsarchitekturen im Widerstreit: Zur politischen Soziologie internationaler Flughäfen. In: Krajewski, Markus; Jasmin Meerhoff & Stephan Trüby (eds.) *Dienstbarkeitsarchitekturen. Zwischen Service-Korridor und Ambient Intelligence*. Tübingen: Wasmuth, 186-222.

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