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THE CONTEMPORARY ART OF TRAVEL:
SITING PUBLIC SCULPTURE WITHIN THE CULTURE OF FLIGHT

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Contemporary Art of Travel:
Siting Public Sculpture within the Culture of Flight

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Dissertation Director:
Dr. Joan Marter

The Contemporary Art of Travel: Siting Public Sculpture within the Culture of Flight, situates the notable yet little known airport installations of Vito Acconci, Diller + Scofidio, Alice Aycock, and Keith Sonnier in their appropriate artistic, theoretical and social contexts. Provocative and cutting edge, these recent commissions are exemplary for the ways in which they explore the collisions and cross influences of fine art, architecture, technology, flight and travel with particular sensitivity to the qualities that make the airport a singular contemporary space. More than mere decoration or distraction, these site-responsive artworks are visual representations of exactly how this unique place (or non-place) and this unique culture might coincide in sculptural form.

Teeming with turbulent paradoxes, airports are uncanny, impersonal, in-between spaces; spaces in which travelers are forced to relinquish control of their autonomy, privacy, safety, sense of time, connections to the ground and links to the world outside. Unafraid of such air travel truths, the artists profiled in this dissertation use them as a

source of inspiration. Acconci, Diller + Scofidio, Aycock and Sonnier blend these qualities with their own signature, career long conceptual preoccupations; deliberately, ingeniously enmeshing their installations within the physical and psychological schema of this extraordinary site. Their works are an unflinching, if not disquieting, testament to all that is possible in this bizarrely charged space and unfortunately, what is all too often untapped and/or underappreciated. As a result, their collective study allows for an updated examination of the power of (non-)place and the emblematic journeys which begin and end at the airport, but it is also a means through which to penetrate the polemics of contemporary public art, to begin to redefine expectations for the genre, and to focus critical consideration where it is long overdue. After all, contemporary public art plays a vital role in shaping, defining and/or revitalizing our urban spaces, and art for the airport is no different. Jointly a non-place and a simulacrum of the traditional urban gathering place, the airport represents a unique, timely, important and heretofore unexplored category of art commissions for the public sector.

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Fired Up! Ready to Go!

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INTRODUCTION

It rightly has been suggested by historians Mark Bouman, David Brodherson, and Mark Gottdiener that the airport is a modern gateway; one whose social, historical, and cultural significance rivals that of the great nineteenth century railway stations and ports of call.¹ Symbols of technological advance and aeronautical acumen, well planned airports are the crucial foundation of any successful air transport system. Though their design is predicated on facilitating the arrival and departure of both planes and passengers, airports are not simply vectors of commercial aviation and their significance not limited to their immediate function. The physical and psychological spaces of the airport and the way in which the public negotiates these spaces reveal much about what it means to live, fly, and travel in the twenty-first century. Proof of this assertion can be found in the ways in which the airport has been appropriated as a metaphorical symbol for the feelings of disconnectedness, anxiety, and alienation that so often emerge in contemporary art, literature, theory, and popular film.

Deeply embedded within—if not indicative of—our socio cultural infrastructure, airports are undoubtedly one of the more unique public spaces of our time. Teeming with turbulent paradoxes, the airport is at once a space of crowds and isolation, rushing and waiting; simultaneously cavernous and claustrophobic, ambiguous and defined, organized and chaotic, safe and un-secure, hi-tech and trapped in the 1980s. At the airport, the dread of delay, the stress of the inconvenient security strip search and the sinking

¹ For discussions on the airport as gateway, see Mark J. Bouman, “Cities of the Plane: Airports in the Networked City” in *Building for Air Travel: Architecture and Design for Commercial Aviation*, ed. John Zukowsky (Munich and New York: The Art Institute of Chicago and Prestel-Verlag, 1996), 177-193; David Brodherson, “What Can’t Go Up Can’t Come Down: The History of American Airport Policy, Planning and Design” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1993); Mark Gottdiener, *Life in the Air: Surviving the New Culture of Air Travel* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

suspicion that something may go horribly awry - all compete with our suppressed excitement and the desire to be where we are trying to go already. While the incidences of air travel for an executive business flyer, a family on holiday, a college student, or a foreign national certainly vary; all unfold in a parallel, if not artificial time within the impersonal, in-between spaces of the airport. Indeed, the airport is a contemporary space like no other, for it is home to the very moment in which a traveler must prepare to relinquish total control of her schedule, her sense of time, her connection to the ground and her links to the world outside. In no other space must a person make ready to give up so much—privacy, autonomy, safety, and even certain technologies—so completely.

Because of the universally discomfiting experiences sustained at the airport, the art commissioned for these facilities has the incomparable potential to convey a genuine understanding of ourselves, our aspirations, our vulnerabilities and our anxieties. To that end, *The Contemporary Art of Travel: Siting Public Sculpture within the Culture of Flight* situates the notable yet little known airport installations of Vito Acconci, Diller + Scofidio, Alice Aycock, and Keith Sonnier in their appropriate artistic, theoretical and social contexts. Commissioned over the past two decades, these works are culturally relevant and conceptually challenging models of public art. Provocative and cutting edge, these exemplary installations explore the collisions and cross influences of fine art, architecture, technology, flight and travel with particular sensitivity to those qualities which make the airport a singular contemporary public space.

While inspired by thematically pertinent, flight related imagery, most airport installations tend to neglect the more exciting, vanguard artistic possibilities built in to these strange and remarkable spaces. This rejection of the airport as a hotbed of

omnifarious stimuli is one of the many reasons why the artists profiled in this dissertation are worthy of study, for they provide a welcome exception to that rule. The individual commissions of Acconci, Diller + Scofidio, Aycock and Sonnier each engage their site on a level far beyond what more conventional artists would dare. Highlighting the various banalities, frustrations, fascinations and fears inherent in the travel by air experience, these works zero in on and legitimize the often surreal goings on within the airport, provide extensions of space rather than accessories for it, and enmesh themselves within the physical and philosophical schema of this extraordinary site. Because of their fidelity to the peculiarities of the airport, these works deserve to be celebrated as models of site-responsive public art within a genre that, lamentably, appears to encourage more clichéd, pedestrian installations. Even more to the point, their collective study allows for an updated examination of the power of (non-)place and the emblematic journeys which begin and end at the airport, but it is also a means through which to penetrate the polemics of contemporary public art, to begin to redefine expectations for the genre, and to focus critical consideration where it is long overdue.²

Labeling a public sculpture site specific or site responsive as I do throughout this dissertation is an assertion that necessitates definition.³ Once intimately tied to a concrete location, the term ‘site’ has received extensive attention in contemporary art historical scholarship for its application beyond physical territories to include those more

² “Non-place” is a term I borrow from Marc Augé. I became familiar with his *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London; New York: Verso, 1995), as a result of my research on Acconci and have adopted his language for my own purposes here. For more on my specific use of “non-place,” please see Chapter 1.

³ “Site responsive” is a term I borrow from Harriet Senie. For a discussion of the distinction between site specific and site responsive see Harriet Senie, “Responsible Criticism: Evaluating Public Art,” *Sculpture Magazine* 22, no.10 (Dec. 2003): 44-49.

conceptual, mutable, functional, unconventional, unbounded and/or unseen.⁴ Site itself has become nomadic; not a definitive space but rather a collection of images, experiences, and states of mind. To quote Miwon Kwon, site is no longer “a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions *through* spaces, that is, nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of an artist.”⁵ This updating of site’s explication is significant, for as Kwon goes on to observe, “the chance to conceive the site as something more than a place...is an important conceptual leap in redefining the public role of art and artists.”⁶ It is within this newly elucidated framework that we can begin to grapple with site as Acconci, Diller + Scofidio, Aycock and Sonnier do—as an alternative, fluid, or philosophical construct.

Enter the airport as non-place: or the antithesis of site as it has been defined traditionally. The airport is a space of limbo, a space of transport and transitions; a space which makes nomads of all who occupy it, if only for a time. It is a network of intermediate vectors but it is also “a creature of politics at both national and regional levels...a creature of capital.”⁷ And, because the airport is also a public space par excellence, it succumbs to art consultant Vivien Lovell’s assessment that such spaces are never bereft of value.⁸ Quoting Henri Lefebvre, Lovell observes how within contemporary society, “the section of space assigned to the architect...perhaps by developers, perhaps by government agencies – has nothing innocent about it: it answers

⁴ James Meyer, “The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site-Specificity,” in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 23-37; Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

⁵ Kwon, 29.

⁶ Kwon, 30.

⁷ Martin Collins, conversation with author, March 28, 2007.

⁸ Lovell’s exact quote is, “no public space is value-free.” Vivien Lovell, foreword to *Public:Art:Space: A Decade of Public Art Commissions Agency, 1987-1997*, by Mel Gooding (London: Merrell Holberton, 1998), 11.

to particular tactics and strategies; it is, quite simply, the space of the dominant mode of production.”⁹ By extension then, art in airports (which similarly answers to particular tactics and strategies) is quite obviously a creature of capital and all the conscious and unconscious motivations, limitations, disappointments and prejudices that qualification implies.

There is a variety of artistic media—photography, mosaic, mural painting, relief sculpture—which all fall under the rubric of art commonly commissioned for airports. While public art comes in many forms, and carries with it many nuanced definitions, there is something about sculpture; something about its physical presence, tactility, weight, command of space, and overall kinship to the airplane, which makes it a particularly potent medium for this flight inspired venue.

As so thoughtfully observed by art historian Anne Collins Goodyear, sculpture offers a wonderfully rich, textured, and immediate form for expressing experiences of flight. After all, the influence of flight on twentieth century artists goes far beyond its associative imagery.¹⁰ Flight’s imprint is a pervasive cultural legacy, one that “inspired a new understanding of materials and mythologies—an appreciation for the meaning of weight and gravity and for the mystical and political dimensions of human flight that became a reality nearly a century ago.”¹¹ That new understanding finds a worthy compliment in sculpture - an artistic medium whose many virtues can be intermixed and mingled with those of flight. Because of this semblance, sculpture has the ability to

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Anne Collins Goodyear, “The Effect of Flight on Art in the Twentieth Century,” in *Reconsidering a Century of Flight*, eds. Roger Launius and Janet R. Daly Bednarek (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 225.

¹¹ Ibid., 237.

connect with, appropriate, and promote the legacy of flight in ways other media simply fall short. Given its natural idiosyncrasies, sculpture is also a most persuasive medium for the airport terminal; itself a building type that translates the purpose and spirit of its space in clear, sleek, strong architectural forms.

Without question, the most iconic example of that symbiosis is Eero Saarinen's 1962 TWA terminal. (Figs. Intro.1 & Intro.2) At the time of its unveiling, Saarinen's building was an utterly majestic, unprecedented sculptural and architectural marvel. If the airplane can be considered a work of ambitious, streamlined aviation engineering, Saarinen's terminal showed us the airport terminal can be too. To all who came in contact with it, this building looked as though it had its own soul; one that somehow captured the essence of flight and let it emanate through its curvaceous windows, walls, and compelling formal lines. It was art, it was flight, and it was the closest thing to a perfect synthesis of architecture, aviation and experience that America had ever seen. With this bold terminal, Saarinen threw down the design gauntlet forever transforming the language and aesthetic of airports for the jet age and beyond.

But even before Saarinen's terminal brought decades of uninspired airport design to a close, Pan American Airways head Juan Trippe had tirelessly promoted the exciting synergistic possibilities between an airport and the air travel experience. Trippe "believed that a terminal, more than being just a waiting room and a ticket counter, should set the stage for the adventure of flight."¹² Trippe's steadfast sentiment served Pan Am well and encouraged TWA and other airlines to follow suit. More importantly, today Trippe's prophetic ideal holds strong.

¹² Alastair Gordon, *Naked Airport: A Cultural History of the World's Most Revolutionary Structure* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 44.

As with architecture, the art commissioned for airports similarly “should set the stage for the adventure of flight,” but the stakes and implications of air transport are vastly different than they were in flight’s first fifty years. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, “the adventure of flight” means something altogether antithetical to what it did to those who first experienced it. As so wittily observed by author and *New York Times* contributor Walter Kirn,

For thousands of years human beings dreamed of flying, but it took us less than a century to get sick of it. The crowds. The delays. The seatmates. Something went wrong. How did the miracle become a hassle? How did a form of transportation that seemed to promise unprecedented freedom end up delivering, in such short order, a sense of debilitating entrapment?¹³

Kirn’s point is well taken. Today flying is far cheaper, far busier, far more quotidian, far more frequently used, far more cramped, far more stressful and far less elegant than it used to be. Similarly, the spaces which make contemporary flight possible are contested zones fraught with strange tensions, ersatz experiences, and complicated comings and goings. Indeed, because of the way it occupies, calls attention to, and/or interrupts these spaces, there is no better or more provocative medium through which to “set the stage for the adventure of flight” than sculpture, nor one more fitting for the airport and the intricate, choreographed movements of people and planes which take place there.

To recognize the sculptural propensities that are most apparent and most pressing in the work of Acconci, Diller + Scofidio, Aycock and Sonnier, is to acknowledge that art for the airport is not a new phenomenon. It is hard to have a conversation about airport art without referencing its origins in the WPA murals of Arshile Gorky for Newark

¹³ Walter Kirn, “Flying Alone,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 23, 2006.

International Airport or those of James Brooks for the Marine Air Terminal at LaGuardia. (Figs. Intro.3 – Intro.5)

Installed in 1937, Arshile Gorky's ten-panel painted mural, *Evolution of Forms Under Aerodynamic Limitations*, is a series of hybrid abstractions; colorful symbolic couplings culled from machine and aviation technologies and Gorky's signature biomorphic forms. A suggestive expression of power, speed and innovation, the panels serve as Gorky's dynamic distillation of the impact of flight on the twentieth century. On the opposite end of the mural design spectrum, James Brooks' 1940 decoration of the Marine Air Terminal rotunda is decidedly more traditional in nature. Focusing on more literal—if not literary—imagery, Brooks' massive figural panorama *Flight* juxtaposes scenes from modern aviation history and mythical tales of flight. Together, these static, two dimensional mural icons (the latter of which is still in situ) provide an impressive historical precedent for art at the airport. Given the focus of this dissertation, however, the precedent of utmost relevance is the sculpture of Alexander Calder. (Figs. Intro.6 & Intro.7)

Originally located in the International Arrivals Hall of John F. Kennedy International Airport (when the airport was still known as Idlewild), Alexander Calder's impressive 1957 mobile hovered above both arriving passengers and those waiting to greet them.¹⁴ As one of the artist's monumental public pieces, the kinetic mobile is an example of the kind of work thought appropriate for an airport terminal. At the time of the commission, Calder already had completed a number of well received mobiles for public places, many of which were designed by the same architectural firm (Skidmore,

¹⁴ The sculpture has been relocated to the Departures Hall of Terminal 4 at JFK. Theoretically susceptible to forces of gravity and air currents, Calder's kinetic work only implies movement; unfortunately the sheer size and weight of it impede motion.

Owings and Merrill) responsible for this 1950s facility. It is only natural that Calder, an artist with whom the architects were familiar and whose mobiles fittingly conjure fantasies of flight, would be asked to create something for this highly visible area of the airport. However, despite its ingenuity and mass appeal, Calder's mobile just as easily could have been for any other interior; nothing about it is unique to the airport environment.

In fact, Calder's mobile set the tone for the kinds of public artworks the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (the airport's governing body at the time) saw fit to purchase to beautify the airport's halls, walls and seating areas. For the most part, these works were chosen without consideration for their airport site, or themes of flight, a tendency that remained in place for decades.¹⁵ Writing of the Port Authority collection in 1985, Sam Hunter notes:

A tour of the lively collection in the International Arrivals Building is very much like the experience of circulating through a comprehensive, intelligently selected contemporary museum survey of the art of the seventies. The works on view exhibit and articulate most of the influential styles that made history in that decade, from the latter-day followers of Abstract Expressionism to Pop art and varieties of realism.¹⁶

While the works in the collection occupy an important place in the post-abstract expressionist history of art, their artistic significance has nothing to do with their placement in the airport.

The case of JFK is fairly unique, but only in so far as the art procured for terminal display could have been selected for any number of corporations or private collections. Today, the artwork passengers see in airports is usually the product of nationally

¹⁵ Since their original installation, many Port Authority commissions were removed due to terminal renovations and relocated to PANYNJ headquarters and other affiliated offices.

¹⁶ Sam Hunter, *Art for the Public: The Collection of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey* (New York: The Authority, 1985), 47.

advertised competitions, specially selected and created for a particular airport site, and funded by “percent for art” legislation. That is, laws implemented on the state level that require a certain percentage of a municipal building project’s budget be set aside for public art. Across the board, most airport art programs seek out design proposals that demonstrate sensitivity to flight related subject matter, aviation history, or travel. Others look to artists who find inspiration in the city itself, championing local culture and tourism while paying tribute to the identifying characteristics, attractions, and urban vibe that make their city like no other.

Rare is the artist who takes on the “airportness” of this singular space, the palpable psychological, conceptual, and temporal significances of this site, or the often jarring, non-idyllic realities of contemporary air travel.¹⁷ Acconci, Diller + Scofidio, Aycock, and Sonnier rise to this challenge and do so with both artistry and ease. Their works are an unflinching, if not disquieting testament to the one-of-a-kind pulse of the airport and a suggestive starting point for evaluating what’s working and what’s not within the world of contemporary public art.

This dissertation heeds the call of New York art consultant Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz who believes we have “a public mission” to ensure only the very best artists are charged with creating works for our public spaces.¹⁸ To that end, I have selected for my study four vastly different contemporary artists whom I count among the most innovative. Fascinatingly, while much has been written on the overall careers of these artists, little critical attention has been paid to their installations of public art. The commissions I examine may have been created under the rubric of public sculpture, but

¹⁷ I borrow the term ‘airportness’ from Gordon, 171.

¹⁸ Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz, phone conversation with author, November 10, 2006.

they are no less important than their museum or gallery destined counterparts. While part of a unique genre, these works are also part of their creators' oeuvres and deserve to be evaluated, contextualized and interpreted as such.

Heightening the attention paid to good public art is predicated upon an ability to acknowledge and address the correlation between its "stepchild" status in the contemporary art world and the absence of substantive, well-preserved archival materials on certain public commissions. Because of the lack of scholarly criticism within the genre, much of my research has involved collecting a diverse grouping of primary source materials. Unfortunately, in most cases there exists no body of literature on the history of recent airport commissions; no documentation of the kinds of proposals their fellow artists submitted; no record of the criteria for these submissions, the philosophy behind the competition, or justification for why the winning artists were selected, etc. In those rare cases in which paper trails did exist, they were often destroyed shortly after the works they chronicle were installed; a disappointing reality that adds to the difficulty inherent in tracing the life of permanent public art.

Given this void in documentation, I began to piece together the history of my chosen commissions by interviewing the artists themselves, attending public art lectures, and mining exhibition catalogues, monographs and previously published interviews for information. In those instances in which savvy public art consultants played an integral role in bringing these commissions to fruition, my task was made slightly easier.

Through my conversations with artists and consultants, I came to realize that if we can start to preserve, disseminate and analyze this information, we may be on the verge of a

new era in art historical scholarship; one that recognizes the social and cultural relevance of contemporary public art and begins to restore public art's critical reputation.

The fine artists profiled in this dissertation come from very different creative lineages, but they are all critically recognized art world figures. Their public art dalliances (which, for some, represent only a brief moment) all include installations for airports, making these commissions of particular art historical interest. To demonstrate how these works are indicative of some of the most forward-thinking, positively genre-defying of those created for airports, it is imperative they be understood in the context of an artistic oeuvre. As a result, each of the four chapters in this dissertation focuses on an individual artist.

Each of the four chapters is organized around a single sculpture, using that work as a point of departure to discuss how these artists engage their own thematic trajectories as well as the culture and consequences of contemporary air travel. Naturally, each chapter handles that engagement somewhat differently as appropriate; some sections stress an artist's early conceptual work whereas others place more focus on contemporaneous site responsive commissions and the accompanying journalism.

Chapter one begins with Vito Acconci's *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion* at Philadelphia International Airport. With this seemingly innocuous corner piece, Acconci creates an ersatz duplicate of the ticketing lobby's architecture, tapping into feelings of disorientation, jet lag, and the sentiments of the traveler who often can feel as though she's waiting, coming, and going all at the same time. Chapter two tackles the 2001 *Travelogues* of Diller + Scofidio in the International Arrivals terminal of John F. Kennedy International Airport. One of only a few commissioned artworks by this now

exclusively architectural team, the densely themed *Travelogues* questions identity stereotypes of the tourist and traveler, mediated twenty-first century relationships between man and machine, and slippages of time and place. Chapter three introduces Alice Aycock's *Star Sifter* in John F. Kennedy International Airport's Terminal One. Aycock's installation is that of a prolific, seasoned public artist who seems most at home in this most unorthodox setting. Her work conjures connections between dreams, science, technology and fantastic voyages of air and space flight. And finally, bathing passengers in an otherworldly glow of light and color, the neon installations of Keith Sonnier are known for blurring the boundaries between architecture, atmosphere and personal space. In chapter four, his 2006 *Double Monopole*—an unprecedented outdoor installation for Kansas City International Airport—evidences Sonnier's long-awaited experimentation with water and opens doors for discussions of the airport as civic gateway, local landmark, and purveyor of first impressions.

When examined together, these works reveal facets of a signature twenty-first century travel experience. After all, contemporary public art plays a vital role in shaping, defining and/or revitalizing our urban spaces, and art for the airport is no different. Jointly a non-place and a simulacrum of the traditional urban gathering place the airport is representative of a unique, timely, important and heretofore unexplored category of art commissions for the public sector.

CHAPTER ONE

Flying Floors and Public Art Mores:
The Acconci Studio Commission at Philadelphia International Airport

Philadelphia International Airport's Terminal A-West is a gracious, open, and sunny space whose glass walls afford a brilliant panorama of runway spectacle. (Fig. 1.1) On the interior, clear partitions augment the terminal's airy ambiance, teasing the viewer with glimpses of areas she will soon traverse, and cleverly placing her, her fellow travelers, and a variety of airport activities on mutual display. On the chance that the architecture or the plentiful opportunities for people-watching are not enough to occupy a person's attention, the terminal's sleek ticketing area boasts two specially commissioned works of art whose singular aim is to enrich the passenger experience.¹⁹

The first commission, *Impulse* by Ralph Helmick and Stuart Schechter, is very much in keeping with the kind of art one might expect to find in an airport. (Figs. 1.2 & 1.3) Through the suspension of delicate, dangling statuettes of birds and fantastical flying creatures, the artists suggestively reference connections between natural and mechanical flight in an area where travelers begin their own airplane-reliant journeys. The novelty of a Helmick and Schechter sculpture, however, lies in the hanging. Using thin, almost visually undetectable steel cables, the artists suspend their tiny, individually cast figurines at varying heights so that when viewed from afar, the whimsical trinkets become components of a much larger profile. With *Impulse*, Helmick and Schechter take their trademark synthesis one step further. Smaller elements combine to create a line of

¹⁹ Sabina Clarke, "Artwork Premieres in the New International Terminal A-West At Philadelphia International Airport," Philadelphia International Airport Press Release, June 13, 2003, <http://www.phl.org/news/030613.html>.

six larger silhouettes the first and last of which—a goose and a DC-3 aircraft—are clearly delineated. But those in between are hybrid, amorphous floating forms—part bird/part plane—whose shapes evidence the transformation from animal to man-made flyer. Thus, when viewed en masse, the baubles coalesce into a kind of “three-dimensional ‘flip-book’” of flight that magically materializes directly above the main area of activity.²⁰

The second commission, *Flyventures* by Marcus Akinlana, is also one which directly appropriates references to aeronautic exploration and humanity’s epic quest to fly like the birds. (Figs. 1.4 & 1.5) Located on either side of the ticketing lobby, *Flyventures* guides passengers through a brightly colored history of aviation while escorting them up escalators en route to the security checkpoint. A blend of painted wall, ceiling murals, and cantilevered sculptural elements, *Flyventures* is a distorted, graphically explosive timeline of air and space mythology and flight. To some, it may even seem reminiscent of WPA mural projects from a more glamorous age of air travel.

Thematically appropriate and appealing, both of these PHL commissions offer rather predictable, if not prosaic examples of public art for the airport environment. While airport press releases exalted the new additions, not all outside critics used such glowing language to describe them.²¹ Writing specifically about the US Airways Terminal, *Architecture* critic C.C. Sullivan praised the structure as “an important new

²⁰ Ralph Helmick and Stuart Schechter, “Artist’s Statement” as found in their *Proposal for Interior Suspended Sculpture PHL Terminal One*, City of Philadelphia Percent for Art Program Files (sent to author by Yvonne Wise, Percent for Art Program Coordinator at the City of Philadelphia Department of Public Property, March 8, 2005). In their statement, the artists go on to reference this arrangement as a kind of “three dimensional pointillism.”

²¹ Like Acconci, Akinlana and Helmick and Schechter have created works for a number of airports across the country. For more information on the Akinlana mural at Denver International Airport, see http://www.akinlana.net/Gena/Public_Art/pages/milefull.htm. For more on Helmick and Schechter’s airport works, see their website: <http://www.handsart.net/index.html>.

building that transforms Philadelphia into a cosmopolitan hub for the jet set.” But the author’s no-holds barred opinions of the terminal’s art were not nearly as generous. In fact, they were scathing. Sullivan wrote: “Even more degrading to the architecture are the kitschy artworks commissioned by Philadelphia’s Office of Arts and Culture....At one end of the ticketing hall, for example, a bas-relief astronaut floats on a cartoonish outer-space backdrop; ...[it is] especially out of place in such cosmopolitan, sleek surroundings.” In other sections, the author goes on to note how “tepid artworks” do little else but “dilute” prominent spaces.²²

While harsh, Sullivan’s comments are honest. They pick up on the fact that although both *Impulse* and *Flyventures* are obviously inspired by iconographies of flight and technologies of aviation, these works ignore the more culturally relevant, cutting-edge artistic opportunities implicit in this extraordinary public space. Their exclusion of the site as a source of multivalent inspiration is made all the more apparent when one discovers the existence of a masterfully bold, thought provoking, sculptural antecedent right next door. (Fig. 1.6) Located at the far left end of Terminal B/C’s ticketing area, The Acconci Studio’s 1998 *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion* validates all that is possible in this uniquely charged airport space, and unfortunately, what is all too often untapped and/or underappreciated.

A peculiar permanent installation, *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion* is the direct result of a 1995 national public art competition sponsored jointly by the

²² C.C Sullivan, “Making Concessions,” *Architecture*, 92 (December 2003): 111.

Philadelphia Office of Arts & Culture and Philadelphia International Airport.²³ Under the “percent for art” guidelines, \$220,000 was at their disposal and an independent jury comprised of “local and national artists and arts professionals” reviewed submissions in search of a project that could, at its most basic level, “provide creative approaches to the architectural design of the building and contribute to making Philadelphia International Airport a more welcoming and user friendly facility.”²⁴ In addition, those at the airport communicated a “particular interest in commissioning works of art which [would] serve as central meeting or resting places for travelers,” incorporate natural, organic elements, and rely upon “seating and/or floor treatments to create an interactive environment.”²⁵ With these initial guidelines in place, the architects went one step further, suggesting the ticketing lobby a suitable space for public art.

Ultimately completed in 1998, *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion* was an undeniable match with competition criteria—all criteria that is, except those relating to budget. As *Philadelphia Inquirer* staff writer Stephan Salisbury explains, the selection of *Flying Floors* was a source of minor public art controversy in the city. Truth be told,

²³ The competition itself was a direct result of the consolidation of terminals B and C at PHL. According to the city of Philadelphia’s Percent for Art Ordinance, “An amount not to exceed one percent of the total dollar amount of any construction contract for a building, bridge and its approaches, arch, gate or other structure to be paid for either wholly or in part by the City, shall be devoted to Fine Arts; provided that the Art Commission certifies in writing that said ornamentation is fitting and appropriate to the function and location of the structure.” The City of Philadelphia’s Percent for Art Program manages the ordinance, “administers the commissioning of works of public art and oversees the preservation of the City’s art collection. The office is responsible for the City of Philadelphia’s public art collection in its entirety and is the centralized agency for all public art-related responsibilities including the selection, purchasing, commissioning, conservation, maintenance, and day-to-day management of the public art collection.” All information can be found on the Public Art Philadelphia – Department of Public Property “Fact Sheet.” City of Philadelphia Percent for Art Program Files.

²⁴ According to the *Call for Entries* pamphlet, “The panel will recommend up to six semi-finalists...Proposals will be evaluated on artistic merit, relationship to the site and project intent, and the artist’s or design team’s apparent ability to complete the project. Long term maintenance and public safety concerns will also be considered.” *Call for Entries: The Philadelphia Office of Arts and Culture and Philadelphia International Airport announce a \$220,000 Public Art Competition in association with the consolidation of the Airport’s Terminals B & C.* City of Philadelphia Percent for Art Program Files.

²⁵ Ibid.

Acconci's proposal was not the project originally put forth by the selection committee.²⁶

The journalist's brief account of the commission (the only one of its kind) reveals how, "in a perhaps unprecedented instance, airport and city officials...spurned a jury-recommended, big-ticket proposal for Terminals B and C and substituted a more expensive alternative project designed by well-known New York artist Vito Acconci."²⁷

That "spurned" proposal, was one by established public artist R.M. Fischer. (Fig. 1.7) As Fischer describes, his completed work would have been:

...a large, open lattice-like zeppelin form which would have been suspended from the ceiling, beginning at one end high above the room and coming within 12 feet from the floor at the other end. It also was a working, illuminated clock...its scale was quite large and it would have provided the sensation of filling the entire space of the room without a sense of mass...its effect would have been quite dramatic.²⁸

Although it did not provide seating or incorporate interior plantings, Fischer's installation would have come in under budget and served a unique utilitarian purpose. Engaging the site on both a physical and philosophical level, the proposed sculptural timepiece also could be interpreted as an ingenious exploitation of the elusive concept of airport time: at once rushed, stalled, hours ahead and/or hours behind. So what happened?

According to Salisbury, "members of the jury who recommended Fischer said Acconci's proposal was fine, but they believed it could not be constructed within the budget stipulated by the airport."²⁹ Philadelphia architect and selection committee member Thomas Buck confirms this story. Although Acconci's proposal was among the committee's top three choices, the jury feared that anything fabricated from "common

²⁶ The panel was comprised of Thomas Buck, an artist/architect from Philadelphia; Lynn Denton, an artist from Philadelphia; Martha Jackson-Jarvis, an artist from Washington DC; Peter M. Simone, ASLA, Simone & Jaffe, Inc. from Berwyn, PA; Adam Weinberg, then Curator of the Permanent Collection at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City; and an unnamed representative from the Airport and/or design team. Ibid.

²⁷ Stephan Salisbury. "Grounded Art," *Philadelphia Inquirer*. April 29, 1996.

²⁸ R.M. Fischer, email correspondence with author, July 26, 2006.

²⁹ Salisbury.

construction materials” would not hold up to the wear and tear expected in this area of the airport and thus would require an additional budget for upkeep.³⁰ However, “city and airport officials said Acconci’s ideas were so enchanting that budget considerations should take a backseat.”³¹ Fischer’s counter response was understandably glib: “If I had known that, I would have come up with something they couldn’t afford, too. It’s weird.”³²

While frustrating for all involved, this last minute undermining of the committee’s decision was well within the guidelines stipulated by the CFE. From the very beginning, it was made explicitly clear to the committee that they were to compile a *suggested* ranking of appropriate submissions. The already limiting competition protocol dictated that airport officials would take this suggestion into account, but reserved the right to have the final say.³³ While there was little press on the subversive clause within the committee’s guidelines or the subsequent vetoing (or Vito-ing!) of the jury selected piece, the implications of this little known, little documented, and apparently little publicized turn of events are significant for discussions of the public art process, especially when contextualized within Acconci’s twenty year dalliance in the world of public art commissions.

Budgetary concerns aside, the Acconci Studio project’s peripheral location with respect to the main space, its unusual seating areas, and its reliance upon ambiguous indoor/outdoor references, all reflect the demands of the commission, but also indicate

³⁰ Thomas Buck, phone conversation with author, July, 25 2006.

³¹ Salisbury.

³² Ibid. Incidentally, at the time of installation (1998) the actual cost turned out to be \$319,000, a whopping one hundred thousand dollars over budget. Yvonne Wise, fax to the author, March 7, 2005.

³³ Thomas Buck, phone conversation with author, July 25, 2006.

the enduring interests of its creator. Despite its bona fide status within the artist's more recent production, *Flying Floors* is not necessarily a work that art aficionados might expect from, or readily associate with, Vito Hannibal Acconci. This disparity has everything to do with the fact that Acconci, an artist infamous for his risqué conceptual and performance work of the 1970s, no longer acts alone. With the help of a team of architects and computer engineers, Acconci has transformed himself into the Acconci Studio, an influential atelier responsible for some of the most intriguing public art proposals of the past two decades.³⁴ Though the Studio's public projects are decidedly less controversial than the artist's solo endeavors, they represent the steady maturation of earlier artistic concerns.

When examined within the context of the artist's corpus, it becomes obvious that *Flying Floors* brilliantly navigates the dichotomous terrain of conforming to the mandates of a public art commission while remaining true to the nature of a unique artistic oeuvre. This navigation, however, presents a fascinating problem of interpretation. For, if the project is indeed reminiscent of other Acconci Studio creations, what relationship exists between *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion* and its airport setting? Is a site-specific reading of this work a valid one, or is it an interpretation mistakenly imposed upon it? And furthermore, if this is indeed a perfect marriage between sculpture and site, is Acconci suggesting that those characteristics most appropriate for this one-of-a-kind setting are not the exclusive domain of an airport, but instead indicative of universal conditions within contemporary public spaces?

³⁴ According to the 1995 project description, Acconci Studio is: Vito Acconci, Luis Vera, Celia Imrey, Dario Nunez, Jenny Schrider, Charles Doherty, and Saija Singer.

Using *Flying Floors* as a point of departure, this chapter will review Acconci's approach to "percent for art" commissions and compare *Flying Floors* to others in the artist's oeuvre: Acconci's own musings on public space and the role of public art in society will be considered. Ultimately, *Flying Floors* will be examined within the framework of its physical and theoretical sites in an attempt to understand the true correlation between the project, its airport environment, and the public space that contains it.

To understand Acconci's sophisticated rapport with space is to be intimately acquainted with the evolution of his work and, more precisely, its origins in his first love – poetry. Acconci's early fascination with poetry derived from an interest in the exclusive relationship between a writer's words and the physical spaces they permeate. Obsessed with the way lyrical formations of letters, lines and marks of punctuation unfurl from left to right, Acconci could not help but imagine what would happen if those words could tumble off the page and swirl around the reader in a kind of ephemeral poetic cocoon. Words became much more than, "fixed objects that could be seen distant from you—twelve inches or whatever away on the page," and instead took on amorphic, three-dimensional qualities much like that of "a surrounding that was in the air."³⁵

Around the very same time that Acconci was playing with perceptions of words in space, he became intrigued with the sociological writings of Erving Goffman and Edward Hall, the latter of whom wrote on "notions of personal space, intimate space, different kinds of spaces, [and] different kinds of spaces between people."³⁶ When coupled with Acconci's latest intellectual trajectory, these readings encouraged the artist to break free

³⁵ Vito Acconci, interview by Kate Horsfield, *Profile*, nos. 3 & 4 Summer 1984, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 14.

from the restrictions of the page and explore the wide open spaces of the street and the more restricted, but unavoidable, spaces of the gallery. Acconci's reincarnation as a man of the world represents a new phase in his engagement with the polemics of space, a variation born out in the canonical works *Following Piece* 1969 and *Seedbed* 1972.

Though exhibition specific, *Following Piece* (Acconci's contribution to the "Street Works IV" group show at the Architectural League of New York from October 1-31, 1969) is a perfect example of the kinds of boundaries Acconci was beginning to push through in his new art making process. (Figs. 1.8 & 1.9) Fulfilling the curatorial request that each artist incorporate some aspect of New York City's streets, Acconci created a piece that allowed him to slip back and forth between the street and the gallery, testing on many levels exactly where public ends and private begins. For a month, Acconci would venture out to the street, silently select a person at random and literally follow that person (often unbeknownst to her) until she entered a private space. The possibilities inherent in such a task were endless; Acconci would follow his chosen person into all sorts of public places: piazzas, restaurants, museums, movies, banks, etc.; and would only abort the mission when she entered an office, private home, taxi, etc. Depending on the route and destination, some pieces lasted only a few minutes, some the better part of a day.³⁷

Acconci was a natural fit for the "Street Works IV" exhibition because as he explains, "around that time I was doing a lot of pieces involving streets, involving

³⁷ While the previous description is sufficient to get my point across, the actual piece doesn't end there. As Acconci explains, "The next month, there's a follow-up to the *Following Piece*: each day, a letter is sent to a different person, somewhere in the United States—each letter describes the particular details of the following episode that occurred on that day, one month before. A month after that, there's a follow-up to the follow-up: each day a letter is sent to a different person, outside the country—each letter notates the letter sent on that day, one month before, each letter describes the following episode that occurred on that day, two months before." Vito Acconci in Judith Russi Kirshner, *Vito Acconci – A Retrospective 1969-1980*; An exhibition organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, March 21-May 18, 1980 (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1980), 13.

picking out a person in the street, gazing at a person until this person left my field of vision.”³⁸ This preoccupation with the street and “street activity,” came from the artist’s desire to integrate seamlessly into the circuitry of a pre-existing system, like a city’s patterns of circulation, and precipitated his participation in the show.³⁹ While the overall actions of *Following Piece* were an expansion of Acconci’s ongoing exploration into systems art, privacy, power relations, secrecy, and the self, this particular set was very much intertwined with a second system: the art world.⁴⁰ Because *Following Piece* was conceived specifically for the exhibition, but originally took place in real time, outside the confines of the gallery, its relationship to Acconci’s interests is complicated and more than a little ambiguous.⁴¹ While the artist embraced the system of the city, and says he wanted to bind himself to it, *Following Piece* evidences a need to push systems to their limits, manipulate them, buck them, and grapple with the fact that their existence makes the successful transmission of works like this possible.

Acconci’s efforts to negotiate spaces, systems, and secrets, and his navigation of public, private, and personal boundaries find their convergence in *Seedbed*, one of his most notorious works of the 1970s. (Fig. 1.10 & 1.11) To understand *Seedbed* is to wrangle with definitions of public and private, and disentangle, whenever possible, the

³⁸ Vito Acconci, interview by Kate Horsfield, 9.

³⁹ Acconci says, “...the way I would deal with work at the beginning was to take some system that already exists in the world and find some way to tie myself into that system. Therefore, you take something like street activity—I find a way to tie myself in as a person walking in the street. Obviously it was a world that was far beyond gallery walls, outside of museums. How could systems based so much on closure...deal with this?” Vito Acconci, interview by Kate Horsfield, 8. Tom Finkelpearl points out that this desire is very much in keeping with the popular trends of mail and systems art of the late 1960s. Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 24-25.

⁴⁰ When pressed, Acconci confesses, “...whether the piece would have existed if it weren’t for that show, I’m not sure since I was doing stuff at the time like that. But that show now made it sort of art world bound.” Vito Acconci, interview by Kate Horsfield, 9.

⁴¹ Adding to this ambiguity is the fact that though the actual “following” portions of the piece ended at the close of the month, Acconci added a new dimension to the finished work, sending, “a record of his activities to a member of the art world, a kind of urban report back to the ivory tower.” Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*, 24-25.

artist's rationale from the media hype. With *Seedbed*, a 1972 performance piece executed in New York's Sonnabend Gallery, Acconci exploits spaces within the gallery, both seen and unseen, in a manner that deals with more explicitly taboo behaviors than those of the pseudo stalker-like *Following Piece*.

Employing a wooden floor ramp, Acconci reconfigured the space of the gallery so that there was a pronounced incline on one side of the room. Concealed under the ramp, Acconci lay in wait, until the sound of footsteps on the floor above signaled he should begin his performance. Those who entered the empty gallery space cautiously realized that while there was nothing to see, there was certainly plenty to hear. As explained by Frazer Ward,

Three times a week, for eight hours a day, visitors could listen to Acconci as he moved about, voicing the sexual fantasies set off by the sounds of those above into a microphone, and masturbating: 'you're on my left...you're moving away but I'm pushing my body against you, into the corner...you're bending your head down over me...I'm pressing my eyes into your hair....'⁴²

Through his illicit verbal overtures and the deeply provocative timbre of his voice, Acconci invaded the space of the gallery and the psyche of the gallery goer without ever physically exposing himself to either. In doing so, he took an intensely private, and in many ways forbidden, solitary act and turned it into an obscure communicative dialogue between an artist and his public. He says of the work,

The way the piece has gotten its life, I think from notoriety and rumor, has the masturbation part as the end point, the goal. For me, it was the means by which there could be some relation between private and public, some relation between me and you, the viewer. There could be some kind of relation between person under the floor, a metaphor of a person enclosed in his or her shell, armor, whatever, and other persons.⁴³

⁴² Frazer Ward, *Vito Acconci*. (New York, NY: Phaidon, 2002), 40.

⁴³ Vito Acconci, interview by Kate Horsfield, 18. Acconci quite candidly continues to elaborate on the notoriety of the piece and his intentions/motivations. "What I didn't want was exactly what happened. That was the focus on here is a person masturbating in a gallery. At the same time I have to question...I

Acconci is candid about the fact that he purposefully chose an exceedingly suggestive, if not threatening, action to exploit that relation between private and public and complete the metaphor. While activities less sexually invasive could have been performed, his choice of masturbation and the resultant scandal intensify the concept of personal boundaries and of rules for tolerable and/or inappropriate behaviors in a public space.

Like many of his contemporaries who recognized that the gallery, as a public space, was inherently limiting, and that the visitor was a preconditioned audience that had come for a singular purpose, Acconci chose to re-evaluate what was public about such spaces and began equating “public space” with a more generic “urban space, removed from the context of an art gallery or museum.”⁴⁴ This theoretical equivalence soon became a literal one, a conflation of the gallery as town square (and/or town square as gallery). As the artist admits,

In the mid-1970s, I was using the gallery as if it were a town square; there was a voice on audiotape calling a group of people to order, as if at a town meeting. Sooner or later, I'd better go to a real town square. The pieces were telling me where to go; I just didn't know how to get out there yet.⁴⁵

As evidenced by his 1979 *Peplemobile*, it didn't take long for Acconci to figure it out.

(Fig. 1.12) In the catalogue essay for the Museum of Modern Art's 1988 exhibition,

“*Vito Acconci: Public Places*,” Linda Shearer points to the *Peplemobile* as a particularly

keep saying that I didn't want that part. Was I also aware that this would cause notoriety, which means publicity, which means the stuff would get around? I must have been. Of course I was. So it is mixed up. I didn't want the piece to concentrate on masturbation, because first of all that would concentrate on privacy. I thought the piece was about publicness. Yet at the same time I'm sure I wasn't unconscious of publicity devices.” Ibid, 19.

⁴⁴ Linda Shearer, *Vito Acconci, Public Places* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 10. This notion, of course, was shared by many artists of the time, particularly those creating Earthworks, like Smithson, Heizer and de Maria.

⁴⁵ Vito Acconci, interview by Tom Finkelpearl, in Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*, 184.

“pivotal piece” in Acconci’s re-evaluation of art and gallery space and an important precursor to more tangible sculpture sited in a wide-range of urban spaces.⁴⁶

Existing on that fine line between the satirical and cautionary, the *Peplemobile* is a flatbed truck shrouded in black plastic with macabre smiley face cutouts revealing portions of the cab underneath. Created in Holland, the truck made stops in the centers of five different cities to accentuate, as Shearer notes, “the European version of [Acconci’s] archetypal American meeting place.” Upon arrival in a town square, steel pieces on the truck’s bed were removed and reconfigured to form temporary furniture arrangements for the public to come and use at random. Once unloaded, the truck would remain in the town for three days. Additionally, each day, for three hours at a time, the truck’s speakers would project the artist’s characteristically ominous voice, combining the physical sculpture with such audible messages as:

Ladies and Gentleman...Is there a terrorist in the crowd...
 Ladies and Gentleman...I have come for your terrorists...
 Watch me: I can look at your terrorist straight in the eye...⁴⁷

Given the audio accompaniment, it seems as though Acconci’s invitation to the town center, to sit and gather in the environment he has created, comes at a price. Corrupting all that is wonderfully communal about this social setting, Acconci, and his *Peplemobile* underscore, “the more violent historical events associated with European town squares, from the French Revolution to World War II.”⁴⁸ This artwork’s exploitation of the town square, and introduction of functional seating elements, absolutely predict elements that

⁴⁶ Linda Shearer, *Vito Acconci, Public Places*, 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 11. The quote continues, “The work subverts ideas of civilized discourse connected with an established social venue. It illustrates the way Acconci’s use of the conventions of architecture and related cultural settings (town square, recording studio, suburban home, park memorial) is directly linked to his interest in undercutting accepted notions of order and authority.”

will prove fundamental to Acconci's foray into the world of public commissions and the theories that drive his current art making.

In retrospect, Acconci admits that he was conflating the physical space of the town square with the charged, politically driven dialogues and shared happenings he credited with activating the site. Acknowledging the circular fallacies within the term 'public space,' Acconci says,

The words 'public space' are deceptive; when I hear the words...I'm forced to have an image of a physical place I can point to and be in. I should be thinking only of a condition; but instead, I imagine an architectural type, and I think of a piazza, or a town square, or a city commons. Public space, I assume without thinking about it, is a place where the public gathers.⁴⁹

But, Acconci realizes that if he adheres to these assumptions, and follows them to their logical end, he boxes himself into a corner. In a digital age rampant with hyper and virtual realities, space can not be conceived simply in terms of a physical location, but must instead be thought of as a "condition." Acconci is on to something when he speaks of the place-less-ness made possible by technology and he is not alone. Historian Robert Bruegmann likewise references this fascinating paradox when writing, "the same communications technology that has created the global market and the corresponding rise in air travel throughout the world ultimately could make such travel obsolete."⁵⁰ In many ways this obsolescence already has happened.

Though his theoretical writings appear to contain contradictory threads, Acconci attempts in earnest to transverse this slippery slope,

The electronic age obliterates space, and overlaps places. You travel by airplane: you're in one place, then it's all white outside the window, and then – zap! – you're in

⁴⁹ Vito Acconci. *Public Space in a Private Time*. (Wien: Galerie Hubert Winter, 1992), 2.

⁵⁰ Robert Bruegmann, "Airport City" in *Building for Air Travel: Architecture and Design for Commercial Aviation*, ed. John Zukowsky (Munich and New York: The Art Institute of Chicago and Prestel-Verlag, 1996), 210.

another place, with nothing in between. You're switching channels on a TV set, re-winding and fast-forwarding a videotape, instead of watching a movie from beginning to end.⁵¹

Thus, as Acconci begins to expand his conception of space, he is quick to profess that public activity, or animated "talk," can happen anywhere and isn't bound to a particular place, piazza, or *Peoplemobile* friendly terrain. According to the artist, "the talk is already with us, in our minds, and on our earphones. We don't have to go 'there,' to the town square; 'there' is already here, 'here' is everywhere."⁵² By asserting that those activities once unique to the town square are possible in a variety of sites – both actual and virtual – Acconci questions the viability of more traditional public spaces, and opens his line of inquiry to situations made possible by new technology. He concedes that,

In the late twentieth century, early twenty-first century, the notion of a space that you go to, the notion of an outdoor room the walls of which are the city buildings, the notion of people gathering—I don't know how those notions coexist with an age of computers, airplanes, television, space travel, time travel....Why do you need a place to go to when you can take with you all the places you need?⁵³

Given this rhetorical challenge, it seems as though reconciling Acconci's views on public space with his studio's site specific public commissions is an impossible task. How can we begin to understand the relevance of the work if the artist himself thinks its existence is illogical and problematic? Perhaps the best way to get at the heart of the Acconci Studio's public projects, and by extension the fundamental core of contemporary public space, is to focus on their commissions for the airport environment, a site that for Acconci (or for that matter anyone grappling with the intersection of travel, technology and the public realm) may be as close to the ideal public place, or "condition" as one can get.

⁵¹ Vito Acconci. *Public Space in a Private Time*, 13.

⁵² Vito Acconci, interview by Tom Finkelpearl, 193.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 192.

Adjacent to Terminal A-West, the narrow ticketing area of Philadelphia International Airport's Terminal B/C receives anxious travelers within minutes of their arrival, leaving little time for the collection of thoughts or baggage before officially checking in. (Fig. 1.13) Like its A-West neighbor, B/C is an energetic crossroads for the rush, excitement and apprehension associated with air travel and a perfect architectural and social stage for a provocative, conceptually challenging encounter with contemporary art.

Tucked away in the terminal's left hand corner, the Acconci Studio's *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion* is an installation that viewers easily could walk by without realizing what they were seeing (or missing.) (Figs. 1.14 & 1.15) Put simply, the work is a bizarre architectural simulacrum – one that dispels the notion that perfectly perpendicular floors and walls should intersect at right angles. Fabricated from terrazzo, carpet, and painted steel, the project mimics the exact materials of its ticketing area surroundings while turning them on their head, quite literally.

As though the product of a minor, concentrated tremor, the terminal's floors and walls appear to curl in on themselves, creating semi-private enclosures for seating—or a moment's pause from the commotion of the airport—and exposing a garden trapped beneath the terrazzo tiles. On the mezzanine above, the floor again takes on a life of its own, spilling over the railing like a swing set slide playfully connecting the two levels.

Quoting the official proposal description:

At the end of the ticketing pavilion, now that there's nowhere else to go, the floors take off in flight. The ground floor swoops up onto the mezzanine, while the mezzanine sweeps down onto the ground. The flying floors let loose a jungle from

beneath the ground; the flying floors curl to make seats in an indoor park.⁵⁴

Despite its seemingly idiosyncratic connection to previous works, *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion* is not as radical a departure as one might think. After all, for Acconci, the 1990s was a decade spent synthesizing his views on “the role of the artist in the world of public commissions;” views which had been carefully cultivated over a lifetime of defining public and private space and were in much demand after the 1988 “Public Places” exhibition at MOMA.⁵⁵

Never one to shy away from conversation, Acconci sat down with interviewer Tom Finkelpearl in 1996 and spoke candidly about his frustrations with so-called public art commissions,

When you’re asked to do a public art project, you’re asked to do something that’s peripheral to the building designed by the architect; you’re asked to do something on the margin; you don’t get the main space, you’re put in the corner. And sometimes it’s worse than that....As a public artist, you’re asked to do something extra, something unnecessary.⁵⁶

Today, as in the 1990s, percent for art monies fund a large number of public art commissions; commissions that oftentimes imply serious artistic limitation.⁵⁷ In a separate interview with Mark C. Taylor, Acconci reduces the percent for art problem to

⁵⁴ Acconci Studio, *Project for U.S. Airways Ticketing Pavilion, Terminal B/C, Philadelphia International Airport Proposal*, May 3, 1995. As found in the City of Philadelphia Percent for Art Program Files.

⁵⁵ Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*, 175.

⁵⁶ Vito Acconci, interview by Tom Finkelpearl, 175.

⁵⁷ “Percent for art” refers to the government mandate that a certain percentage of all municipal construction budgets must be put aside and earmarked for public art. The individual states determine this percentage. According to Stephan Salisbury, controversies within the percent for art commissions in Philadelphia specifically have highlighted, “not only the vagaries and conflicts of the city’s public art process, but the shortcomings of the airport’s approximately \$1million program for selecting and siting public art.” In fact, when asked by Salisbury how the program at “the city’s gateway to the world” was going, the reply from Philadelphia architect and “chairman of the city’s percent-for-art advisory council” James Straw was a blunt, “not well.” As the thrust of Salisbury’s article demonstrates, “art projects are often considered an appendage in the design and construction process,” rendering Acconci’s views on percent-for-art pitfalls neither unique nor ill-conceived. Stephan Salisbury. “Grounded Art.”

an infuriating game of numbers, suggesting that when, “1 percent of the cost of a public building has to be spent on art,” artists are “asked to do something that’s worth 1 per cent of the architecture.”⁵⁸

Acconci’s distaste for the superficial status awarded these commissions is not something exclusive to these two interviews. Such opinions are derivative of more general public art related grievances originally communicated in his 1992 publication, *Public Space in a Private Time*.

For...– ‘public art’ – to have a function in the design of city spaces, ‘art’ has to be brought back to one of its root meanings: ‘cunning.’ Public art has to squeeze in and fit under and fall over what already exists in the city. Its mode of behavior is to perform operations –what appear to be unnecessary operations—upon the built environment: it adds to the vertical, subtracts from the horizontal, multiplies and divides the network of in-between lines. These operations are superfluous, they replicate what’s already there and make it proliferate like a disease. The function of public art is to de-design.⁵⁹

While Acconci’s annoyance with percent for art commissions is valid, his exasperated tone is not entirely convincing. Rather than being paralyzed by his grievances or the fact that public commissions often are relegated to secondary, superfluous spaces, Acconci capitalizes on the fact that these spaces are often pregnant with possibility. Such spaces give him carte blanche to be cunning, to de-design, and to do so in a subversive way that ultimately elevates the status of the public art object with relation to its site. This conclusion echoes Acconci’s bold admission to interviewer Frazer Ward that, if given the

⁵⁸ Vito Acconci, interview by Mark C. Taylor, in Ward, *Vito Acconci*, 14. One should not forget that while the Acconci Studio project was ultimately chosen by PHL officials, it was not selection number one. Had officials been steadfast in their upholding of budgetary requirements, the Acconci piece would never have been built. Public art competitions are riddled with such problems and inconsistencies in addition to limitations. As a result, Acconci decided they were no longer worth his while.

⁵⁹ Acconci, Vito. *Public Space in a Private Time*, 17.

choice, the studio probably would hand select a few of those tangential spaces to work with anyway.⁶⁰

On the surface, such comments appear to solidify the relationship between *Flying Floors* and its terminal site. As with most airport commissions, the artists were called in after “the ticket counters have been designed, the transfer corridors have been designed, all of the airport that’s actually needed and usable has already been designed by the architect.”⁶¹ However, by acknowledging a general attraction to projects that deal with spaces in/on the margin, Acconci complicates any attempt to separate out his Studio’s artistic initiatives from the commissioning body’s demands and restrictions. Thus to truly understand the synergistic relationship between sculpture and site, we must get at the heart of how and why Acconci would self select such potentially undesired spaces.

While specific to the airport, and Terminal B/C, the architectural mimicry and conceptual underpinning of *Flying Floors* simulates that of the 1993 Acconci Studio installation for the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts (MAK) exhibition, “The City Inside Us.” (Figs. 1.16 - 1.20) Devoted exclusively to Acconci Studio projects, this forward thinking exhibition brought together a survey of recent work with a site-specific installation appropriately entitled, the *Temporary Re-renovation of the MAK Central Exhibition Hall*. Though the title of the piece may sound mundane, or even redundant, the design and ultimate execution evidence a daring manipulation of space on the part of the artists. Due to the fearless “bad boy” curatorial style of museum director Peter Noever, the Studio was given free reign of the exhibition hall, which in this case meant

⁶⁰ Vito Acconci, interview by Mark C. Taylor, 14.

⁶¹ Vito Acconci, interview by Tom Finkelpearl, 175.

the complete redesign (or de-design) of the existing architecture.⁶² According to Acconci, “the project meant a lot” to the studio team because rather than approach the space as something to fill or occupy, they began to invent ways to turn the space inside out and upside down; an approach that fits well within Acconci’s preference to “make a new space” by devilishly “shifting, or mixing, or twisting” a pre-existing one.⁶³

The final product of this sanctioned architectural upheaval is like something straight out of an ersatz universe, or another possible world. By tilting the floors, angling ceiling lights, and constructing “Alice in Wonderland” like crooked doorways and fractional spaces, the artists created an entirely new, almost uncanny series of rooms within the main hall. Upon entering the exhibition hall, museum goers no doubt would have felt out of sorts, as though they were experiencing a glitch in the space/time continuum. The structural manipulation of the misshapen museum rooms, then, goes hand in hand with a significant psychological disruption on the part of the viewer. As Acconci explains,

Whenever you enter a room, you know where the walls are, you know where the floors are and where the ceiling is. But what’s wrong with having to find the space for yourself, as in this case, having to find your own way to the roof? Maybe this is a space where you have to be on your guard a little bit: you have to have the ceiling, the floor, the walls, so to say, inside you. Walking around is a kind of analysis of the space and at the same time perhaps an unfamiliar experience of the space.⁶⁴

This desire for the viewer to experience the space in a new way, to internalize it and come to terms with it rather than take it for granted is very much tied to Acconci’s own reckoning with spatial paradigms. His approach to the MAK site is particularly fitting given the fact that the commencement of the “The City Inside Us” exhibition coincided

⁶² The quote is Acconci’s from Vito Acconci, interview by Anne Barclay Morgan, *Sculpture* 21 (September 2002): 48.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Vito Acconci, *The City Inside Us*, (Vienna: MAK-Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, 2003), 9.

with the conclusion of the museum's three year renovation. Consequently, when the museum re-opened its doors to the public with this show, museum-goers were forced to reconcile their expectations for the refurbished interior with the inseparable, disorienting, de-designed spaces of the temporary installation.

This timing was no coincidence, and it speaks to the way the Acconci Studio generally approaches their installation work,

Our first goal is to come up with some kind of idea or theory of the space....We tend to work a long time on projects because we want each one to have a logic of its own connected with the activity in the building, the use of the building. These places are occasions for people, their interactions and activities—some shape, some form must exist that presents the potential for some relation, some inter-relation that might not have existed before.⁶⁵

This invitation to view the Acconci Studio works as inextricably linked to both the physical and utilitarian characteristics of their sites is an important component in the interpretation and 'siting' of *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion*. It also suggests that the humor and aberrance of the commission, while characteristic of Acconci, may be more 'site specific' than initially assumed.⁶⁶

For Acconci, designing something to the left or right of center, an architectural afterthought, comes with the alluring possibility of being a "public nuisance."⁶⁷ There is power to be had in upsetting the balance that a pre-existing architectural plan has put in place. He confesses,

⁶⁵ Vito Acconci, interview by Anne Barclay Morgan, 48.

⁶⁶ With regard to humor, Acconci says, "I think humor has been part of my work for a long time, because I hate the kinds of things in which the viewer or experiencer is meant to be drawn in and numbed by something, so that you have to believe....Laughing means you've reconsidered. Humor allows subordinate clauses and parentheses, allows you to see things in two or three different ways. Things are pretty difficult now. Is there a public or private? There is a mix, a fluidity, a blending, and the humor allows you to have both sides." Ibid., 49.

⁶⁷ When asked by Mark Taylor what he would say on his epitaph, Acconci replies, "There's a legal term for a problem in public space: something that might draw people to an area—say, across train tracks—where they might be caused harm. It's called a 'public nuisance.' I wouldn't mind being called that, for my life's work. But there won't be any epitaph." Vito Acconci, interview by Mark C. Taylor, 15.

...if we're asked to deal with extra space, marginal space, we can turn that extra space into a cancer: what superfluous space can do is disease the main space, undercut the main space. Can you nudge into it? Can you make that main space less sure of itself? Can you cast a doubt, show hesitation, insert a parenthesis, a second thought? And that's the advantage of coming in on the margin, coming in from the outside...⁶⁸

When applied to *Flying Floors*, Acconci's undercutting of the main space, his attempt to render the space self-conscious and less self-assured, occurs on both a practical and conceptual level. (Figs. 1.21 & 1.22) Though the illogical, eccentric forms of *Flying Floors* physically intrude upon the more predictable, service oriented areas of the ticketing lobby; they similarly "disease" the main space through more abstract, conceptual means. Understanding this difference is contingent upon an understanding of the goings on in this area of the airport.

The main space of the ticketing pavilion serves to expedite the check in process. In an ideal situation, this process is highly regimented: a routine operation in which lines are formed, bags are checked, boarding passes issued, and ID and destination confirmed. On many occasions, however, the order and ease for which a passenger hopes is replaced by misunderstandings, confusion and mishaps. Reservations are lost, desired seats are taken, and carry on luggage deemed too large or heavy to remain unchecked.⁶⁹ (Figs. 1.23 – 1.30) While the linearity of the actual ticketing area suggests streamlined efficiency, *Flying Floors* appears to exist as a sculptural foil, a cunning counterpoint for the rational ordering and desired effectiveness of the ticketing pavilion. Taking Acconci's words at face value, it would seem that *Flying Floors* is an intentional, tongue

⁶⁸ Vito Acconci, interview by Tom Finkelpearl, 176.

⁶⁹ For examples of how such contemporary dramas play out, one needs look no further than A&E's reality television show *Airline*, which profiles the day in, day out, trials and tribulations of Southwest Airline passengers and employees. The show's catch phrase—"we all have our baggage"—says it all! The website for the show is: <http://www.aetv.com/airline/index.jsp>.

in cheek reminder of the discrepancy between the perceived organization of the main space and its veiled, chaotic potential.⁷⁰

References to the studio's cancerous invasion of main space are also germane to the frustrating architectural challenges of building for air transport. By nature, airports are networked structures of endless transformation. Predicated on their capacity to grow and receive new planes, passengers and new technologies, these buildings strive to perpetuate impossible illusions of permanence and stability. When writing of the anatomy of airports, *Aviopolis* authors Gillian Fuller and Ross Harley employ the metaphor of "metastable forms," forms "which are constantly changing, yet appear stable."⁷¹ Remarkably similar to Acconci's own language, the rhetoric of Fuller and Harley becomes an invitation to interpret the Studio's encroaching floors as allusions to the fluctuating, permanently temporary qualities of terminal architecture.

Pushing the relation between *Flying Floors* and the restless properties of airport design still further, one can ask—as Fuller and Harley do— exactly "what is the form of something that is never still?"⁷² Equating an airport's form with "that of a dance," their answer suggests the airport be thought of "as a topology of relations continuously folding and unfolding in and out of a multitude of dimensions."⁷³ The intruding folds, curls and contours of *Flying Floors* thus become an ominous triple threat: symbols of spatial, temporal and architectural flux. In addition to foreshadowing a passenger's potentially turbulent transitional experience, the installation similarly predicts the inevitable,

⁷⁰ It can also be seen as halting the presumed fluidity of the check in process with "a parenthesis," or pause. Though the inclusion of such pause-worthy seating areas was a response to the architect's requests, it can be found in a number of other Acconci Studio works and would no doubt have been a strong element of their proposal regardless of the call for entries dictum.

⁷¹ Gillian Fuller and Ross Harley. *Aviopolis: A Book about Airports*. (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2004), 5.

⁷² Ibid, 108.

⁷³ Ibid.

upending tango that will take place when this terminal, like all airport terminals, gets renovated, refurbished or replaced. And, if airports are “the material embodiment of information architecture,” as Fuller and Harley claim, and exemplary of architecture that is “expressed through folds, frames and patterns at those threshold points where the binaries of inside/outside, public/private, movement/stasis once ruled,” than *Flying Floors* is the indisputable sculptural equivalent.⁷⁴

Returning for a moment to the portion of the earlier quote where Acconci speaks of “coming in from the outside,” it becomes clear that there is another level of discussion to be addressed. If the word “outside” is interpreted as “external,” and not just a synonym for “peripheral,” Acconci’s nudging of the main space is more intricate, more complex than originally believed. The use of plantings and organic elements in this interior corner of the airport literally brings the outside in, challenging the spatial boundaries between interiority and exteriority. However, this commingling of indoor and outdoor elements and the creation of a multiplicity of spaces within which to socially engage (a pre-requisite outlined in the call for artists’ guidelines) is not something new to the work of the Acconci Studio. As the artist statement for *Temporary Re-renovation of the MAK Central Exhibition Hall* betrays, the conflation of indoor/outdoor courtyards were an important part of that installation as well. (Figs. 1.31 – 1.32)

The inclined floor, on top of the ceiling, is grass; grass is growing over the fallen room. Replicas of columns, from the upper story, poke through the grass; they’re cut, and their exposed concrete tops function as seats. You can sit down for a while, or you can step over to the side—where the fallen ceiling meets the existent wall—and explore secret places.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Ibid, 81.

⁷⁵ Vito Acconci, *The City Inside Us*, 25.

Just as the various grasses and plantings revealed in *Temporary Re-renovation of the MAK Central Exhibition Hall* and *Flying Floors* bring the outside world in, other works in the Studio's oeuvre rely upon the strategic placement of connecting walls and walkways, or the indoor use of dirt, earth, rocks, and soil to highlight the permeable barrier between interior and exterior, and in some cases, the ambiguity present between notions of public and private space. The Acconci Studio's 1992 permanent project for the Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities in Colorado, serves as evidence for their continued exploration of these two spheres. The same can be said for the Midwest Airlines Center, the city of Milwaukee's convention center.

In the first commission, Acconci and his partners were brought in after major renovations to the facility were already in place. (Figs. 1.33 & 1.34) The artists were asked to consider as a backdrop one of the more unusual aspects of the new architecture - a musically inspired wall designed in the shape of a treble clef.⁷⁶ In trademark fashion, the Acconci Studio exploits the fact that this exterior wall penetrates the architecture, rendering itself a dominant feature on the inside too. By incorporating architectural flourishes, seating bays, and an extensive surface treatment, Acconci further disrupts the wall's continuity while reinforcing a symbiotic relationship between the built environment and the natural world.⁷⁷ Whereas other projects rely on plantings to suggest organic origins, here, connections to the earth are geological. The artistic team separated, layered and glued a variety of indigenous soil granules to panels, which were then

⁷⁶ The treble clef was the creation of architect Ken Berendt of Barker, Rinker, Seacat and Partners, the architectural firm responsible for the building's renovation. As though emerging from below the earth's surface, this whimsical wall begins outside the building, steadily increasing in height as its length unfolds. It concludes on the inside, measuring 24 feet at its peak.

⁷⁷ Given Acconci's admitted attraction for unusual spaces, it's possible the Acconci Studio may well have chosen to incorporate this challenging aspect of the building in their plans regardless of the commissioning body's requests.

attached to the wall, completely disguising the original surface.⁷⁸ Ultimately covered by a protective sheet of glass; the wall becomes a visual slice of the earth on which it is built and a reflection of the striation lines of Colorado's beloved Rocky Mountains.

Even more analogous to *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion*, the Studio's project for Milwaukee's 1998 Midwest Airlines Center treats interior pathways and seating areas as though they are indoor extensions of the benches and sidewalks on the outside of the building. (Figs. 1.35-1.37) In this work, there is a reciprocal relationship between indoor and outdoor, as the artwork is virtually the same whether located inside or outside the building. Much like the peeled back flooring in *Flying Floors*, the very same sidewalks which rise up and create a bus shelter just outside the Airlines Center, "'fold' themselves into furniture shapes to provide seating" in the foyer.⁷⁹ In the case of the Airlines Center, then, "bringing the outside in" is about connective paths rather than the inclusion of natural, organic interior details.⁸⁰

Whether tailored to a convention center, arts center or airport, the blurring of architectural and spatial boundaries found in each of these works are characteristics of what Anthony Vidler terms "the new avant-garde."⁸¹ Recognizing that computer age technology and the resulting mechanisms of surveillance have dismantled fixed borders and all but obliterated personal privacy, "the new avant-garde" artist explores the more disturbing, alienating, uncanny ramifications of boundary elimination and technological advance. According to Vidler, "the new avant-garde is no longer a joyful proclaimer of

⁷⁸ According to the center's website, <http://www.arvadacenter.org/gallery/sculptureartist.php>, The artists used such materials as, "...red volcanic rock, Cherry Creek sand, concrete sand, dry sand, red dolomite and top soil."

⁷⁹ Dean Sobel, *Vito Acconci: Acts of Architecture* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2001), 38.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Anthony Vidler, "Home Alone," in Acconci, *The City Inside Us*, 37.

future technological or formal bliss, but [instead preferences] the squatter, the panhandler, the vagrant, the unwanted stranger,” each of whom claim simultaneous ownership of everywhere and nowhere in a virtually borderless world.⁸² Because of their incessant manipulation of barriers and borders, the Acconci Studio fits well within the context of Vidler’s new avant-garde, a categorization made even more apparent when examined in tandem with the philosophical writings of Marc Augé.

All three of these public commissions (Arvada, Milwaukee and Philadelphia) have transformed spaces previously considered ‘pass-through places’ – a term borrowed from Acconci- into areas where private, personal acts of conversation, rest, or thought can take place within a presumably public realm.⁸³ Writing of the kinds of spaces found in *Flying Floors*, and quoting Acconci, Frazer Ward concludes,

...taken together, such spaces, dotted with cubbyholes, represent [Acconci’s] abandonment of nostalgia for the piazza or the town square: ‘Maybe I work in a state of shock at having my assumptions about public space, assumptions that were formed in the 1960s knocked out of me. I keep crying wolf: ‘Public space is where the revolution happens!’ But I’ve been numbed, and I don’t believe anymore, and now I resort to public space as a field of niches – a niche for a person at his/her laptop, a niche for a person with a cell phone.’⁸⁴

Thus, pass through places are no longer places of immediate transition. Instead, they encourage the passerby to linger temporarily and briefly separate himself from the flow of pedestrian traffic before moving on. While such places invite momentary pause, they

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ I am borrowing the phrase “pass-through place” from Acconci, as quoted by Ward. Ward uses the quote with regard to the Acconci Studio commission, *Extra Spheres for Klapper Hall*, a 1995 work for Klapper Hall Plaza located at Queens College, New York. With regard to the spheres, Ward writes, “Whereas the plaza was formerly ‘only a pass-through place’, the new spheres have niches cut into them providing space for different sized groups of people and interior lighting...” As Ward observes, with such works the “Acconci Studio has inserted the potential for various kinds of interaction within the conventionally open space of the plaza, from a meeting for a number of people to something more intimate, or solitary.” Frazer Ward, *Vito Acconci*, 55.

⁸⁴ Vito Acconci, as quoted by Frazer Ward, *Vito Acconci*, 59.

teasingly deny the possibility of permanence; a nuance that places them well within the context of anthropologist Marc Augé's "non-places."⁸⁵

In a world in which images and information bombard from every angle, "yesterday's news becomes history," and the simulacrum has all but replaced actual discovery and experience, Augé points to the emergence of a new kind of place: the non-place.⁸⁶ Supermarkets, waiting rooms, airport lounges, cars, trains, planes, and cable and wireless networks – all are non-places of the twentieth/twenty-first centuries and products of supermodernity.⁸⁷ To all but the airport employee, the airport is a model "non-place;" an ambiguous site or staging area between departure and destination in which locating history, establishing meaningful relations, creating a sense of identity, and putting down roots are virtually impossible.⁸⁸

Singling out the airport ticketing area, Augé articulates how non-places refuse to foster the creation of any kind of sustained collective, often demanding a usage agreement between the individual and those that govern the space.⁸⁹ According to Augé, "the user of a non-place" is "alone, but one of many" and consistently is reminded of the terms of his individual agreement through certain key symbols.⁹⁰ In the case of the

⁸⁵ Acconci is well aware of Augé's work and makes reference to it in an Atlanta airport proposal which he kindly shared with me via email on September 5, 2005. In the unrealized proposal Acconci writes, "A famous book of the '90s, by Marc Augé, put airports in the category of non-places, no-places: transitions between definable nodes, voids between fullness, abstractions between concrete realities. But time has changed quickly and space has shifted; the airport has become a shopping center, as the home has become an entertainment center—the airport has become a stopping place of recognizable brands, while the home has become a circulation-route of electronic skins—place and no-place interchange."

⁸⁶ Marc Augé, "Home Made Strange – Interview with Ethnologist Marc Augé," by Jean-Pierre Criqui, *ArtForum*, Summer 1994, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_n10_v32/ai_16097500

⁸⁷ Products of supermodernity, such non-places, according to Augé, are the direct result of three specific excesses: excess of information, excess of space, and excess of individuality. All are explained in his *ArtForum* interview.

⁸⁸ Augé in Criqui.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London; New York: Verso, 1995), 102.

airport, the terms of the contract begin in the ticketing lobby, where the individual receives his ticket and/or boarding pass.⁹¹ Despite the fact that many may have similar contracts, the agreement between the individual and the non-place is a solo endeavor, it neither requires nor promises community, nor does it “create the organically social.”⁹²

Given this equation of the solitary individual and the rootless ‘non-place’ of the airport ticketing lobby, how then, are we to interpret *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion*? It is, after all, an installation which paradoxically gives the public spaces in which to linger, perhaps even cultivate a new relationship, in a locale that normally discourages such activity.⁹³ (Figs. 1.38 – 1.40) As with his earlier performance work, Acconci deliberately toys with notions of privacy, impermanence, secrecy and security in these niches, courting a bit of danger in the process. After all, the niches bring us back to the realm of hidden spaces and private acts. Though they may be areas of individual contemplation and passing calm, they possess a threatening undertone suggesting some of the encounters which take place within them might be worthy of suspicion as well.

Whether innocent or suspect, niche interactions (like most at the airport) are unreplicable, random, and fleeting at best. Because of the fugitive experiences it fosters, the overall installation can hardly claim to put down roots. If anything, the upturned walls and floors of *Flying Floors* represent the complete uprooting of the original terminal space and the upending journeys on which the contracted individual is about to embark. Fascinatingly, Acconci used this very terminology when reflecting upon the installation,

We called the Philadelphia project (after we had designed it) ‘Flying Floors...’ But

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid, 94.

⁹³ Clearly, the call for entries asked for an installation that would incorporate seating elements. But, as this brief journey through Acconci Studio works proves, the studio consistently and creatively incorporates such elements regardless. So, there is more being suggested here than simply the fulfillment of the CFE regulations.

did we really have an airport so much in mind? Probably in the sense that we were dealing with unknown, and constantly changing, users (after all, an airport isn't a neighborhood); probably in the sense that we wanted to 'uproot' the floors' probably in the sense that we wanted an in-between space, a floating space.⁹⁴

Therefore, as an in-between space in an in-between space, *Flying Floors* does not champion stability, but instead suggests the futility of trying to plant roots at all.⁹⁵ Even the transplanted vines of the "jungle" point to this ineffectuality, for the building's foundation disconnects them from the earth, thwarts their natural growth, and prevents them from truly spreading in their soil. The entire installation then, is a subtle but powerful visual reminder of the fractured disconnected truths that pervade our supermodern reality, a reality in which people search for home, and a sense of rootedness in the most unlikely places.

When considered in light of the conditions described in Walter Kirn's 2001 novel, *Up in the Air*, the marginal, itinerate qualities of *Flying Floors* seem even more culturally apropos. Like many the contemporary businessman, Kirn's protagonist, Ryan Bingham is a man with a lot of frequent flyer miles. In charge of his company's rolling layoffs nationwide, Bingham has spent a ridiculous amount of time in the air, flying from city to city without ever really spending significant time in any one place. He is a proud inhabitant of what he has sarcastically dubbed "Airworld;" a hypothetical place whose initiates use airline bonus miles more than they do actual currency and consider *USA*

⁹⁴ Vito Acconci, e-mail message to author, September 5, 2005.

⁹⁵ What remains to be seen is whether this work is a metaphor for the impossibility of planting roots in a legitimate 'non-place,' or whether for Acconci, that impossibility is part of a larger cultural condition in contemporary public spaces. "You're right, I think: any United States public space (which exists only as the edge of a corporate space) is just as much of a non-space as an airport is." Ibid.

Today and the *Wall Street Journal* their “hometown papers.”⁹⁶ In trying to explain himself and his unusual lifestyle to the reader, Bingham says,

I suppose I'm a sort of mutation, a new species, and though I keep an apartment for storage purposes—actually, I left the place two weeks ago and transferred the few things I own into a locker I've yet to pay the rent on, and may not—I live somewhere else, in the margins of my itineraries.⁹⁷

The very fact that Kirn chose to write “I live somewhere else, in the *margins* of my itineraries” suggests that Bingham, operates outside the confines of normal, everyday, schedules, rituals, and locations.⁹⁸ Bingham’s transient, fictional existence is shared by many of today’s travelers and offers a striking literary/pop cultural corollary to the visual turbulence evoked in *Flying Floors*. The essence of this character, then, cements the idea that *Flying Floors*, and its marginal location is particularly befitting the airport environment.

Such corollaries also can be found in the travel writings of Pico Iyer. In his 2001 *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls and the Search for Home*, Iyer considers the airport as a venue for social and cultural interaction. He focuses on LAX (Los Angeles International Airport) observing the patterns of behavior among those who pass through over the course of a few months. The language he uses to describe his findings is just as important as the thoughtful results of his surveillance. His word choice enhances the fact that the marginality and spatial ambiguity inherent in *Flying Floors* is something fundamental to the human experiences played out in this public space. According to Iyer, airports are “especially curious” because their “settings are the scenes for the most

⁹⁶ Walter Kirn, *Up in the Air* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 7.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ (Emphasis mine)

emotional moments in our public lives.”⁹⁹ In truth, “many passengers are at the far edge of themselves in transit areas, in mingled states of alertness and discombobulation.”¹⁰⁰

Like the carefully chosen prose of Kirn, Iyer’s decision to use the phrase “passengers are at *the far edge* of themselves in transit areas” is not accidental and gets at the core of the what goes on, psychologically, in this area of the airport.¹⁰¹ In this space, people are getting ready to depart. They are saying goodbye, collecting their things, using the restroom, sneaking a drink of water from the fountain, double—even triple—checking the contents of their carry on bag and preparing for the humbling possibility of getting frisked at the security checkpoint. This is the area where over caffeinated “alertness” meets disheveled “discombobulation,” where the organized details of boarding passes, gate numbers and departure times meet the unpredictable realizations of forgotten items and forbidden luggage. It is also the first of many airport areas in which, Iyer notes, “immortals rub shoulders with the rest of us, and everyone is subject to the same rules.”¹⁰² There is a strange, uncommon commonality here among travelers regardless of nationality, gender, destination, age, or socio-economic background. As a result, in the airport ticketing lobby, everyone is, in one way or another, on the edge of themselves. They are on the border between home and the journey, chaos and control, individuality and anonymity; colliding transitional states all made manifest in *Flying Floors*.

⁹⁹ Pico Iyer, *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls and the Search for Home* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 44.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ (Emphasis mine)

¹⁰² Ibid., 54.

When compared with the Acconci Studio's commission for San Francisco International Airport the overall success, and contemporary cultural relevance, of *Flying Floors* and the undeniable presence of Acconci within the work become even more apparent. Originally proposed around the same time as *Flying Floors*, *Light Beams for the Sky of a Transfer Corridor* (1997-2001) went through several conceptual revisions before its official dedication at SFO in 2003.¹⁰³ (Fig. 1.41) In addition to being analogously sited in an airport, this work merits discussion because the final product, which differs drastically from the Philadelphia commission, is not originally what the artists had in mind. While traces of the studio's modus operandi can be found in the SFO installation, the project is, at first glance, more of an anomaly than anything else. Thus, in order to understand what the Studio is trying to do with airport space, and more broadly, public space, one must be able to tease out the intricacies of the SFO project and discern what is common to these very dissimilar works.

As admitted to Kenneth Baker, art critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Acconci and his studio team proposed and re-proposed upwards of seven site-specific installations for SFO's new terminal structure.¹⁰⁴ Each of these submissions toyed with notions of interiority and exteriority, bringing the outside in, creating areas for conversation, and using natural, organic elements – and each was rejected by the architects and arts commission. According to Acconci,

We first suggested things that would go throughout the airport, and it became clear that they were putting us further and further downstairs, like a kind of bad cousin.... We started with one that would have brought the sidewalk inside the airport

¹⁰³ There was not an open call for artists, however. "Both Sonnier and Acconci were selected based on past work and an interview, not on specific proposals. Their charge was to work with the architects to find a location and make a proposal for that site." Susan Pontious (San Francisco Arts Commission), email to the author, May 26, 2006.

¹⁰⁴ Kenneth Baker, "Vito Acconci's beams of light transform SFO corridor into bank of 'twisted phone booths,'" *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 1, 2003.

to become the ticket counter....Then we were given a long glass wall and proposed making it fold in and out so it could become seating. Then we were asked to do something for the light rail system...Then we were asked to do something with interior columns, peeling the surfaces off them so people could sit in them.¹⁰⁵

After a series of watered down reconsiderations, the artists settled for space in the rather bland, architecturally uninspired transfer corridor. Not surprisingly, Acconci and his team promptly examined every inch of the hallway in search of the most unique, marginal feature to bring out, blow up and distort. They eventually settled on a thin strip of lighting mounted along the uppermost edge of the interior wall. Acconci says of this feature, it “was the only quirk of the space that we could find, so we asked ourselves, could we stretch out from the strip?”¹⁰⁶ And with that rhetorical question, they began to de-design. To “stretch out from the strip,” the artists installed large florescent light boxes which zigzag across the hallway and slice through the space at random angles.¹⁰⁷ As if that image weren’t strange enough, each beam of light dead ends in a phone booth, a design decision that is without precedent in Acconci Studio creations and, in retrospect, has left Acconci wishing they had “done something better.”¹⁰⁸

In 1997, cell phones were no where near as ubiquitous as they are today; phone booths were still very much in demand and pay phones were often welcome, frequently used public amenities.¹⁰⁹ That caveat, however, in no way aids in understanding why the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ The actual materials are: acrylic paneling, florescent lights, telephones, sheet rock, and plastic laminate paneling.

¹⁰⁸ The actual quote reads, “‘If there’s a connection between sight and sound here, it’s something we tied into but we didn’t really take anywhere,’ Acconci said. ‘I wish we’d done something better. It seems a little too pretty, a little too acceptable. You hope it teaches you something, but then you go on to make some other mistake.’” Acconci in Baker, “Vito Acconci’s beams of light transform SFO corridor into bank of ‘twisted phone booths.’”

¹⁰⁹ The artist himself recognizes this discrepancy. According to Kenneth Baker, “Acconci admits the irony that as the project has come to fruition, fewer and fewer people appear to use pay phones. Seven or eight years ago, when discussion of the project began, he noted, the situation was very different.” Ibid. It also bears mentioning that although payphones are disappearing nationwide, many immigrants still rely

studio chose to incorporate this particular feature within the commission. Acconci's own confession compounds the confusion, for he tells Baker quite simply and without elaboration that, "the only thing we could really figure out to do was make the lights hold phones."¹¹⁰ The most revealing clue with regard to these out of character design decisions, however, comes from yet another admission to Baker in which Acconci makes known his affinity for a previous version of the installation, one that replaced the payphones with "private seating along the solid wall."¹¹¹ This admission is important for it calls attention to the absence of the niche not as something Acconci espouses, but as something he laments. And so, despite the fact that *Light Beams for the Sky of a Transfer Corridor* does manage to capitalize on the corridor's quirkiest element, it is less the encapsulation of studio ideals than it is a rather watered down exercise in design anomalies, regrets, and seventh drafts.

Interestingly enough, Acconci's own stream of conscious literary musing about the piece conjures quite a different image than the completed installation. Perhaps this written description betrays his ultimate hope for the piece and best connects it to both its site and *Flying Floors* in a way in which the actual project falls a bit short.

As two light beams come down, against the wall, toward each other, they push the wall in. The pushed-in wall makes a niche off to the side of the corridor....Within the niche, the light-beams are shaped into furniture: face-to-face seats, a seat in front of a table. The niche is place where you might stop, now that you have an extra minute, on your way to catch a connecting flight: you might have a last-minute conference here, on your way to different planes –you might have time here, now that you've found a place, for a last-minute check (you can re-organize, you can re-arrange your hand-baggage and pull out something you need to have in your hands, on your person).

upon airport payphones to facilitate their arrival in this country. This insight came from a June 15, 2006 conversation with Christopher H. Sterling, Professor of Media and Public Affairs and Director, Graduate Telecommunication Program at The George Washington University in Washington D.C.

¹¹⁰ Acconci in Baker, "Vito Acconci's beams of light transform SFO corridor into bank of 'twisted phone booths.'"

¹¹¹ Baker, "Vito Acconci's beams of light transform SFO corridor into bank of 'twisted phone booths.'"

As you walk down the corridor, light-beams shoot across the width of the corridor, over your head. Bursting out of the existent light-strip, embodied beams of light sweep down across the corridor—they bounce off the glass of the window-wall and turn back out above the counter that runs alongside the glass wall. At the end of each light-beam, embedded into the flat vertical end, is a telephone. As you walk through the corridor, on your way to a plane, you can stop, off to the side, to make a last-minute phone-call – it’s as if you’ve heard the call, as if you’ve been pulled into a beam of light.¹¹²

In this proposal then, the permeability of interior/exterior boundaries and internal/external truths are not natural, geological, or architectural—but telephonic. The phones are the means through which to know and communicate with those outside the airport’s walls and the beams of light might well suggest that ideas, if not people, can be freely beamed in and out (a la Star Trek). Though the niches of which Acconci writes were never realized, the pay phone itself can be considered an extension of the niche, if not an instrument through which to separate yourself from the rush of those attempting to make a connecting flight, to have a secret, private conversation in public, and to engage in a new level of dialogue with the outside world never before made possible in an Acconci Studio work.

The choice to include a pay phone within the installation takes on new meaning when considered within the context of artist Martha Rosler’s career long observations about airports. In her reflections about the spaces and goings on of these facilities, Rosler makes specific reference to connective ideas between telecommunications and air transport observing how, “one of the great blessings of railroad and subsequently [pre-

¹¹² Vito Acconci, project description as found on roveTV.net Gallery website <http://www.rovetv.net/ac-SFIA.html>. This quote was confirmed via email on February 15, 2006 by gallery director Kenny Schachter. Special thanks to Aaron Alcorn, who made me think differently about the communicative possibilities inherent in this installation and how they connect to previous Acconci pieces.

1980s] plane travel was the inaccessibility it afforded the traveler: no phones.”¹¹³ In the words of Rosler, “telephone slavery completes the circuit of physical passage from point A to point B. As the plugged-in body moves through real-space, the plugged-in-mind, in the loop of information in transmission, has no respite.”¹¹⁴ The ramifications of such ever-present technologies are significant, especially for their hostile take-over of contemplative public spaces. “This never-terminated hookup –an ad hoc version of cyberspace, after all—reflects the auditory horror vacui of all formerly silent public spaces, from elevators to restaurants, to dentist’s offices, places that used to be without piped-in sound, a condition of auditory freedom now apparently forbidden.”¹¹⁵ For Rosler, who was writing in 1995, there were few places that “had not yet been deemed conveniently colonizable by ‘easy listening’” or where one could escape telephonic bombardment, but the airport was one of them.¹¹⁶

Things have changed since Rosler committed her thoughts to writing. More so than ever, inhabitants of the twenty-first century are at the mercy of their electronic devices. Cell and satellite phones, blackberries and global positioning systems render a person perpetually on-call and always within reach. There is no longer an escape from the cacophony: airplanes and airports are no exception. For confirmation of this irritating barrage of sounds—particularly the one-way conversations of strangers on cell-phones—one needs look no further than Ben Stein’s recent article in the *New York Times*. Referencing the decision to ban in-flight cell-phone usage, the comedian/economist writes:

¹¹³ Martha Rosler, “In the Place of the Public: Observations of a Frequent Flyer,” *Assemblage* 25 (December 1994): 67.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

That prohibition was one of the great decisions ever. Now, in a fit of idiocy, some airlines are suggesting that they be allowed to sell the use of cellphones in the air at nominal prices. This will mean yelling and screaming and boasting and complaining for almost all the time you're sealed in that sardine can....This is rank madness....It will take what could have been a bearable experience and turn it into hell....Please, Mr. Bush, step into this one and just say no to turning airplanes into penal colonies.¹¹⁷

Like Rosler, Stein is right to pick up on the more annoying—if not needlessly noisy—aspects of living in a society of spoiled cell-phone users and how today only a smattering of public spaces offer respite from the drone of background babble.

Alluding back to the consequences of such constant communication and locational precision, Rosler takes her observations one step further explaining how, “everywhere is anywhere when you retain the means to ‘phone (or fax or modem) home’ at will. Then there is no ‘there’ there.”¹¹⁸ When applied to the atypical telephones of *Light Beams for the Sky of a Transfer Corridor*, Rosler’s observations allow for a new level of interpretation. Though the phones may not have been Acconci’s first choice, they are an acutely appropriate means through which to highlight the placeless-ness of the transfer corridor and by extension the airport at large. Both are places in which the ‘there’ is virtually impossible to locate.

A true pass through place in every sense of the term, the transfer corridor represents an air traveler’s brief physical connection with the ground and real time before setting off again. And, in terms of place-less-ness, perhaps no airport zone connotes the “non-place” of Augé and the inevitable loss of the sense of self, as much as a transfer corridor. Acconci believes this too, for in a proposal for an unrealized airport transfer corridor project asks readers to, “picture yourself in this mixed world of place and placelessness; picture yourself getting off a plane...you’re rushing to catch another

¹¹⁷ Ben Stein “Cellphones in Flight? This Means War!,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2006.

¹¹⁸ Rosler, 71.

plane...who are you anyway?”¹¹⁹ With this question, Acconci touches upon previously considered notions of marginality and in-between states, but also opens the door for a discussion of that dreaded flight related phenomena – jetlag. While *Flying Floors* is located in the ticketing area, it foreshadows the nightmarish sensations of time delay and disorientation one might eventually begin to experience in a transfer corridor and everywhere thereafter. Jetlag, as evidenced by the observations of Iyer, is yet another means through which to connect the Acconci Studio’s airport works and securely bind them to their site.

When recounting his own experience of jetlag, Iyer, too, invokes the language of the “no-place.” After several days of his own monotonous air travel, Iyer writes,

And so, half-inadvertently, not knowing whether I was facing east or west, not knowing whether it was night or day, I slipped into that peculiar state of mind—or no mind—that belongs to the no-time, no-place of the airport, that out-of-body state in which one’s not quite there, but certainly not elsewhere...I had entered the stateless state of jet-lag.¹²⁰

For Iyer, jetlag is a “stateless state,” a rather fitting scenario to play out in the place-less place of the transfer corridor, or more generally—the contemporary airport. When examined together, and in light of the physical and mental displacement often experienced in this unique public space, *Flying Floors* and the somewhat flawed *Light Beams for the Sky of a Transfer Corridor* emerge as provocative visual parallels to the visceral and emotional trials of every traveler passing through an airport.

The abstract concepts to which these commissions allude are all the more striking when viewed in tandem with unrealized projects for the cities of Dayton, Ohio and San Diego, California. These proposals are relevant for they demonstrate the studio’s ability

¹¹⁹ Vito Acconci, e-mail message to author, September 5, 2005.

¹²⁰ Iyer, *The Global Soul*, 59.

to intermix and mingle flight related iconography with their own artistic preferences, even though the artists shy away from such references in their proposals for the airport environment.

The studio's 1994 *Flying Park* for Dayton, Ohio, was a project conceived for a prominent traffic island in the middle of downtown Main Street. (Figs. 1.42 & 1.43) Home to those famous flyers Wilber and Orville Wright, the city desired a memorial to flight which would double as a gateway to the downtown district. Wanting to create a work that somehow conveyed the "experience of flight," the artists proposed "a flying park," complete with plantings and seating typical of Acconci Studio works.¹²¹ Because of the narrowness of the esplanade, the artists decided to design a piece that rose off the ground at an angle, much like an airplane beginning its ascent, and spread out over the trolley lines and traffic patterns below, without disrupting their flow. Viewed from a distance, the piece takes on the convincing silhouette of an aircraft, complete with wings and tail, all supported by lacy steel trusses. Pedestrians are meant to board the "plane" (either via the tail's ramp or the stairways that connect the wings to sidewalks on the street below) and make their way through the open air cabin and around the perimeter of the structure, which is composed of walkways and an above ground garden. By far the most intriguing feature of the proposal is the mist that rises from pools of water beneath the plane and conceals the structural supports in a nebulous fog.¹²² The result is an outdoor installation that appears to be floating in the clouds and imbues this rather humdrum intersection with one of the more magical aspects of flight. While this public

¹²¹ From the "La Generazione delle Immagini" Public Art panel discussion online transcripts: <http://www.undo.net/Pinto/Eng/falconci.htm>.

¹²² Vito Acconci, proposal description as found in Heinz Schütz ed., *Vito Acconci: Courtyard in the Wind*, (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2003), 72.

proposal did not get selected, nor has it ever been realized, it demonstrates the studio's willingness to find creative ways to incorporate literal associations to airplanes and aviation. This willingness can be traced to an even earlier proposal of Acconci's submitted to the city of San Diego in 1987.

Conflating the unique properties of earth, air, sea, and sky, *Spanish Landing* represents yet another Acconci contrived outdoor park; one created specifically for the San Diego Unified Port District. (Fig. 1.44) Rejected, no doubt, for its use of what could look a lot like post-crash airplane fragments, the work is a cross between a gigantic toy sandbox and the set of *Cast Away*. In this strange, surprisingly lush park, Acconci has grounded a number of sailboats, pressing their hulls into the earth to create areas for picnicking and seating. When not sailing through the grass, park-goers can climb up and down airplane wings, or walk around "airplane-shaped lakes and hills" out of which grow strategic airplane inspired arrangements of palm trees.¹²³ While little is written on this work, and there is certainly much that could be discussed and interpreted about the Port District's rejection of the piece, it is of most import because it demonstrates how the Acconci Studio is entirely capable of incorporating and/or manipulating more obvious flight related objects and referents.¹²⁴ The deliberate choice not to do so in their airport

¹²³ Michael Kimmelman, "Art: A Tamer Vito Acconci in Show at the Modern," *The New York Times*, February 19, 1988.

¹²⁴ There exists a second proposal, appropriately titled *Spanish Landing 2*, which also exists only in model form. In this instance, the park is dotted with mounds and cut-outs in the shape of airplanes, a deliberate pun on the word "plane" as shape, shadow, and surface. As the project description details, "The site is an empty plot of grass, 500 feet by 150 feet: on one side is the ocean, on the other side a highway; nearby is an airport—overhead, constantly, airplanes are taking off or coming in for landing. The proposal is a play on words; the proposal is to stamp flat planes, like the shadows of airplanes in the sky, onto and into the ground: planes of grass, planes of water—horizontal planes, above-ground and below-ground—including planes, toward the ground and away from the ground." Vito Acconci, *Vito Acconci - Catalog of a traveling exhibition shown at the Museo d'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, Italy, Jan. 18-Mar. 30, 1992* (Prato, Italy: Giunti, 1991), 40.

commissions signals there must be something special about that space, something that lends itself to a very different way of rendering of the “experience of flight.”

Taken as a group, all of these commissions - both those realized and those unfulfilled - offer convincing evidence as to why the Acconci Studio has chosen to turn away from percent for art commissions and smaller public projects in favor of the opportunity to create their own, unhindered, unrestrained architectural environments. Thus, *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion* represents but a moment in the output of the Acconci Studio and it's one of a kind status will remain in tact as long as the terminal goes untouched.

Mirroring all the exhilaration, disorientation, thrills, fears and trepidation associated with the experience of air travel, *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion* solidifies the airport's status as a progressive public space. If the airport is Acconci's new urban piazza, it is a dizzying, problematic one in which contemporary anxieties and utopian fantasies are most concentrated and most palpable. As interpreted through *Flying Floors*, Acconci's airport is a town square redefined for the millennium. It is simultaneously place and non-place, public and private, inside and outside, everywhere, nowhere, and all points in-between.

That Acconci would revamp and update notions the town square makes sense. In a 2002 interview with Anne Barclay Morgan, the artist discloses a preference for modern spaces confessing, “I feel much more comfortable if I am in a place where the culture and the place coincide.”¹²⁵ But what is the culture of an airport? Is that collision even possible? If the airport truly is a ‘non-place’ that defies the collective, can it have a

¹²⁵ Vito Acconci, interview with Anne Barclay Morgan, 48.

culture? I believe it can and it does. Airport culture is a culture of fleeting and stolen moments, of spaces and places in-between, of secret niches, blurred boundaries, rootlessness, upheaval, apprehension and uncanny surface relationships. It is a place in which, “the ‘here’ and the ‘now,’ the ‘there’ and the ‘then,’ the possible and the actual all begin to loop into each other;” a place where the control of the individual is usurped by the oftentimes precarious rules and consequences of air travel and the threat of jet lag (or terrorism) always looms large.¹²⁶ It is in these spaces, be they those of beginnings, endings or the journey still in process, that Acconci asks,

Are you having fun yet? Don’t know; but maybe the thrill of flying, mixed with the fear of flying, doesn’t have to stop abruptly as you get off the plane. Maybe the exhilaration of flying, the disorientation of flying – the kind of excitement and disorientation that were commonplace on early flights – maybe they can stick with you for a while, maybe they ease off only gradually as you walk through the corridor, maybe you’re still giddy with flying as you leave the airport or as you go toward another plane, another place.¹²⁷

This is the cultural essence captured in *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion*; a visual representation of exactly how this unique place and this unique culture might coincide in sculptural form.

¹²⁶ Fuller and Harley, 108.

¹²⁷ The language used here is taken directly from Acconci’s rejected, unpublished proposal for Atlanta Airport. Vito Acconci, e-mail message to author, September 5, 2005.

CHAPTER TWO

What's in Your Suitcase? The *Travelogues* of Diller + Scofidio

The majority of international flights arriving at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport process their passengers in the airport's stylish new Terminal 4.¹²⁸ After landing and leaving the plane, Americans, immigrants, tourists, and business travelers alike all make their way through marked hallways leading to customs and the baggage claim. However, well before the travel weary can claim to be on American soil, they must pass through a series of thresholds each containing a thoughtfully commissioned work of art. It is in the first of these three areas, the first sterile corridor, where viewers come face to face with Diller + Scofidio's *Travelogues* (2001), an installation as edgy and original as the spectacular city this airport serves.¹²⁹ (Figs. 2.1 & 2.2)

Whereas most public art commissions begin with a generic call for artists, those at Terminal 4 began with New York art consultant Wendy Feuer. Preferring her suggestions and taste to an open artist competition, JFKIAT officials empowered Feuer to vet a spectrum of artists and ideas she thought appropriate for the site.¹³⁰ Culling from

¹²⁸ Terminal 4 is also referred to as JFKIAT, the acronym for the John F. Kennedy International Arrivals Terminal.

¹²⁹ At the time of this dissertation, Elizabeth Diller (professor of architecture at Princeton) and her husband Ricardo Scofidio (professor at Cooper Union) were part of their own design firm Diller, Scofidio + Renfro. In 1999 they received a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. See her faculty webpage for more background information and firm accolades: http://www.princeton.edu/~soa/02fac/fac_frame.html

¹³⁰ Wendy Feuer, phone conversation with the author, March 5, 2005. The artwork in Terminal 4 is a privately owned public art collection, thus rendering its categorization as public art slightly problematic and worthy of explanation. As clarified by a JFKIAT press release, "Terminal 4 is an achievement of JFK International Air Terminal LLC, a private consortium consisting of Schiphol USA, the U.S. subsidiary of Schiphol Group, operator of Amsterdam Airport Schiphol; LCOR Inc., a national real estate developer; and Lehman Brothers Inc." Unauthored May 2001 press release entitled "New \$1.4 Billion Terminal 4 Opens at Kennedy Airport," which can be found on the Terminal's website, http://www.jfkia.com/Documents/News?Past%20news?Terminal_4_Opens.htm

her experience as former director of Arts for Transit at the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Feuer presented her client with several public art possibilities to consider. Ultimately, those of Diller + Scofidio, Harry Roseman, and Deborah Masters were chosen as the final three.

Shortly after their selection, the finalists were invited to submit proposals that considered the specific role of Terminal 4 within the airport; a terminal Feuer referred to as “the new Ellis Island.”¹³¹ Prior to the final review, Feuer arranged for the invitees to meet with specialists in the field of immigration to learn about what the arrival experience can mean to the diverse populations channeled through these airport halls. With three distinct pre-immigration areas set aside for art, the finalists were encouraged to conceive designs for one or all of the highly charged zones. Once submitted, the client and architect together matched the artists’ proposals with their Terminal 4 locations. What follows is a quick walk through the resulting program of public art.

When an aircraft lands at JFKIAT, its passengers deplane by way of a jetway and enter the airport via a series of secure, connecting hallways. As briefly mentioned earlier, *Travelogues* is located in the first of these halls and is the first artwork the public will encounter. After traversing the *Travelogues* corridors and passing by its pseudo-holographic screens, new arrivals then transition through hallways embellished with white, free-form sculpture by Harry Roseman. (Figs. 2.3 – 2.5) Billowing on its sky blue

Because The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, owner and operator of JFK, chose to enter into an aviation management partnership with JFKIAT, it is no longer considered a public agency. Though it is displayed in a public venue, artwork paid for by JFKIAT is not considered part of the Port Authority public art collection. David Sigman, the terminal’s development general manager reinforces this nuanced distinction when saying, “We are delighted to be able to bring a high caliber of art into a public space like Terminal 4...and we are especially proud that this will be one of the largest displays of privately funded art in New York City.” The quote comes from an unauthored March 2000 press release entitled “Art to Take Center Stage at the New Terminal 4, JFK International Airport,” which can be found on the Terminal’s website, http://www.jfkia.com/Documents/News/Past%20news/art_to_take_center_stage.htm

¹³¹ Wendy Feuer, phone conversation with author, March 5, 2005.

background, Roseman's *Curtain Wall* breezily aims to recall the recent past when travelers and clouds shared the same airspace. Upon re-emerging from Roseman's friendly skies, travelers enter the expansive area devoted to Customs and Immigration. There, spanning the wall just above passport control, Deborah Masters' *Walking New York* welcomes them with a series of scenic, folk-like images of their New York destination. (Figs. 2.6 – 2.8) Appropriately, Masters' figurative relief panels highlight the diverse neighborhoods and cultures of the five boroughs; neighborhoods and cultures made possible by the flood of immigrants who continue to pass through the city's borders.¹³²

According to Feuer, this drastic visual and artistic transition—from something as complex as *Travelogues* to something as straightforward and local as *Walking New York*—was intentional. The art commissioned for this zone of the airport had to reflect the identity of the terminal—that of international arrivals—while also capturing the various expectations and associations attached to the vibrant, dynamic city of New York.¹³³ When experienced in sequence in fact, both *Curtain Wall* and *Walking New York* emphasize the more site responsive, technologically innovative qualities of

¹³² Fascinatingly, there lurks within Masters' work an unrecognized potential for conflict, one that Diller and Scofidio chose to meet head on in their own. One could argue that *Walking New York* is not really in sync with the actual experiences of those passing through immigration (an idea first brought to my attention by Sascha Scott). Immigration is not always a friendly, welcoming airport zone and in fact can be a trying, worrisome hurdle through which many are forced to jump. After all, how many travelers get turned away at customs well before they can experience the city these panels advertise? Does that city even really exist? The incongruous scenario brought forth through Masters' panels calls to mind Stephen Spielberg's film *the Terminal*. Though far fetched, it is possible that travelers could find themselves in situations akin to Victor Nevorsky, the fictional citizen of Krakhozia who is denied entrance to this country because of a sudden military coup in his own. Navorsky instantly and unwillingly becomes a "citizen of nowhere," an identity reinforced by his location within the airport, when is notified he is "free to go anywhere...within the confines of the International Transit Lounge." New York City, and in effect, the United States of America beckons, yet Navorsky is not permitted to enter. This nonsensically tragic conundrum is brought to light when an airport employee greets Victor with the line, "Welcome to the United States, almost," and informs him that he "is not to leave this building, America is closed."

¹³³ Wendy Feuer, phone conversation with the author, March 5, 2005.

Travelogues and the ways in which Diller + Scofidio eagerly, relentlessly confront the ironic ambiguities and tensions inherent in the travel experience.

Familiar with the work of Diller + Scofidio, Feuer knew the architectural duo would propose something provocatively appropriate for both the space and the city, and be perfect for this commission. Because their conceptual work is often “...very slick and cutting edge, with lots of advertising,” she thought it a natural choice for the gateway to the city; a city which shares the very same slick, sexy, avant-garde reputation.¹³⁴ Deriving much of its meaning from its unique airport site, *Travelogues* is a work with which all travelers—exhausted, excited, anxious, rushed or bored – can relate. From conception to execution Diller + Scofidio have synthesized the eclectic range of experiences and stimuli that bombard the twenty-first century traveler and subtly explore how unaware of, or numb to her surroundings even the savviest of today’s travelers really may be. Reflecting sophisticated trends in technology, tourism, gender studies, globalization, and surveillance, *Travelogues* willingly offers up these complex, multi-faceted concepts for mass consumption all the while representing the kind of honest, empowering mirror that we, as a public, should expect from public art.

Throughout their careers as architects and designers, Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio have explored a variety of media – visual and otherwise. Exercising their concepts through such disparate means as theatrical productions, webcams, lenticular screens, suitcases, lawn, and fog, Diller + Scofidio have produced a discursive body of work bound by a desire “to explore how contemporary culture, media and technology

¹³⁴ Ibid.

inform and affect our lives.”¹³⁵ While the goal may be clear cut and transparent, the way in which the artists attain that goal is anything but. Their industrious, unconventional choice of materials is matched, if not surpassed, by their eclectic choice of social themes with which to engage.¹³⁶ Like other works in their conceptually cohesive oeuvre, *Travelogues* relies heavily upon techniques of advertising, contemporary critical and architectural theory, and artistic manipulations of digital age technology. This tripartite reliance is particularly fitting given that the work is located in an area of the airport where disembarking passengers are more conditioned to expect a random series of advertisements than an installation of public art. Instead of glimpsing commercial signage for Broadway musicals, hotels, restaurants, and Big Apple tours, new arrivals can observe the perplexing, thought-provoking imagery embedded in a series of digital screens.¹³⁷

The images of *Travelogues* unfold in much the same way as old Burma Shave billboards on the side of highways across the country, tapping into a nostalgic form of roadside advertising once a staple of family summer vacations, Sunday drives, and good old fashioned Americana.¹³⁸ (Figs. 2.9 & 2.10)

¹³⁵ From the 2003 Whitney Museum of American Art Pre-Visit Education Packet for *Scanning: The Aberrant Architectures of Diller + Scofidio* compiled by Dina Helal, Head of Curriculum and Online Learning. <http://whitney.org/www/programs/educators/disco-es-prepost.pdf>

¹³⁶ On the relationship between materials and concept, Diller says, “We have always asserted ourselves as architects even though building buildings is just one strand of our production....Broadly, our interest lies in interrogating spatial conventions of the everyday. The choice of medium is a matter of the right tool for the particular job.” As quoted in Edward Dimendberg, “Blurring Genres,” in *Scanning: The Aberrant Architectures of Diller + Scofidio*, ed. Aaron Betsky (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2003), 67.

¹³⁷ It was the artists’ hope that as travelers passed these screens, they would be “transformed from passive viewer into active participant and interpreter of a moving-picture narrative that provides only bits of information – sometimes nostalgic, sometimes surprising, humorous, or mysterious.” This is a direct quote from Diller, as included in “Along the Sterile Corridors, A Fantasy of Suitcases,” in *Art for John F. Kennedy Airport Terminal 4*, unsigned pamphlet sponsored by the JFKIAT Art Committee.

¹³⁸ Thanks to Dr. Sarah McHam for the idea to connect *Travelogues* to the Burma-Shave roadside advertisements of the 1950s.

Traveling men
Know ease
And speed
Their shaving kits
Hold what they need
*Burma-Shave*¹³⁹

Just as the sequential rhymes and puns of the Burma-Shave ads reveal themselves phrase by phrase, sign by sign, so too do the flickering images of *Travelogues*, albeit with more twenty-first century flair. In both instances, the viewer activates the sequence, bringing the jingle or images to life. But in the case of *Travelogues*, the passerby's actions also trigger the more localized shifting of shapes within each individual panel.¹⁴⁰ Each backlit lenticular *Travelogues* panel consists of two separate yet superimposed digitized images.¹⁴¹ As the viewer approaches and then moves beyond the individual screens, the images slip back and forth between one another until the viewer advances to the next frame.

¹³⁹ This particular advertisement was taken from the website http://burma-shave.org/jingles/1942/traveling_men. Each line would be displayed on a billboard one placed after the next along the roadside. As cars drove by, the occupants could sing/chant along and complete the limerick.

¹⁴⁰ In their project description, Diller + Scofidio explain that the, "Lenticular screen is an extruded lens in sheet form. When used in conjunction with an offset printing process, it can produce an image with depth and motion. The ribbed lens sheet, consists of hundreds of optical quality cylindrical lenses. A number of interleaved parallel images are compressed beneath each rib, or lens. As the eye moves across the lenticular image, the lens refracts the images beneath so that a sequence of images are revealed. Lenticular images are often called autoanimated or autostereo images. Lenticular's 3-D effect is generated through the same principle as stereoscopy. Each eye sees a different view as each eye is at a different angle to the lens. The effect of animation is generated through the movement of the eye past the lens, exposing sequential frames of animation." From the 2001 *Travelogues* project description emailed to author by Denise Fasanello on behalf of the artists, January 18, 2005.

The inner-workings of the installation also are explained by Jessie Scanlon of *Wired Magazine*, "As the eye moves across the surface, the lens focuses it on a series of interlaced images beneath, revealing an animated sequence. The *Travelogues* images are produced from 35 mm film, large format transparencies, or medical x rays, all digitized." Jessie Scanlon, "Making It Morph," *Wired Magazine* 8, no. 2 (February 2000), <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.02/diller.html>.

¹⁴¹ In addition to requiring neither electricity nor extraneous parts (stipulations of the commission) the work also had to be low maintenance.

When considered in light of the comments of *New York Times* journalist John Leland, this conflation of the highway and the airport should come as no surprise. For Leland, contemporary fascination with the airport:

marks a twist in one of America's central continuing narratives: the romance of the open road....Like the road, the airport is a non-place, something encountered on the way to going somewhere else....Now that it is unsafe to hitchhike, and affordable to fly, the terminal makes a better canvas for transition or self-discovery.¹⁴²

As Diller + Scofidio subtly suggest, that newly paved runway to self-discovery may be more circuitous, unsettling, and/or open-ended than many care to admit. It is here where the distinctions between the highway billboards and the terminal screens are of utmost importance, for their conclusions, and therefore their overall messages, evidence a shift from "the romance of the open road" to a very different kind of modern travel experience.

Although both the Burma Shave limericks and the *Travelogues* vignettes evolve in a seemingly logical order, the former concludes in a whimsical sing-song finale before a predictable product plug. While *Travelogues* is void of such conclusiveness, its cryptic termini are just as telling, just as much a part of its meaning as any definitive resolutions would be. In fact, it is this opaqueness, in all its variegated forms, which solidifies the relationship between the installation, its air traveling public, and its airport site.

Understanding the ways in which Diller + Scofidio navigate through the world of technology and look to the screen as both an artistic tool and a powerful, yet potentially dangerous electronic truth are vital to understanding the motivations behind any of their installations. As observed by Edward Dimendberg, "...rather than simply overwhelm the viewer or aestheticize electronic technology...the work of Diller + Scofidio encourages viewers to question culturally sanctioned understandings of vision, transparency,

¹⁴² John Leland, "Our Airports, Ourselves," *New York Times*, July 11, 2004.

presence, and desire and to reach their own conclusions.”¹⁴³ This opinion, which positions Diller + Scofidio as disseminators of technology rather than artists with an agenda is shared by Shafer, who suggests that for the artists, “technologies offer neither control, predictability,...nor promise for the future; they neither respond to a problem nor yield a solution.”¹⁴⁴ According to these critics, despite being well versed and incredibly proficient in their use of cutting edge technology Diller + Scofidio are merely facilitators who empower viewers to discover and posit technology’s merits and pitfalls on their own.

Although facets of *Travelogues* support this open ended relationship between the artists and technology, an analysis of the specific relation between this installation and its airport site reveals more of an artistic and critical agenda than most critics admit. In the words of Diller, technology is “an instrument,” a fabrication. “It presents new opportunities. It’s pervasive, it’s undeniable, and it’s welcome,” but that does not mean its role within *Travelogues* is altogether innocent or without prejudice.¹⁴⁵ Nor does it mean the artists erase their presence and allow their work to guide the viewer to his own conclusions. While the artists use technology as an instrument, their agency is perhaps most visible here—in the airport—where they subtly invite viewers to remain wary of technology’s “pervasive,” subliminal potential and take nothing for granted about their travel experience.

Unlike the airport installations of the Acconci Studio, Aycock, or Sonnier, *Travelogues* does not evolve from a traceable or readily recognizable sculptural lineage.

¹⁴³ Dimendberg, 79.

¹⁴⁴ As quoted in Ashley Schafer, “Designing Inefficiencies,” in Betsky, *Scanning: The Aberrant Architectures of Diller + Scofidio*, 97.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Its existence is less rooted in a progression of forms than it is in a carefully cultivated conceptual trajectory. As a result, understanding the origins and site-specific significance of *Travelogues* requires an exposure to the issues which most fascinate Diller + Scofidio; issues which they have peppered throughout a colorful array of installations, architecture, literature and set design.

Perhaps the best way to get into this artwork and to begin to understand its daunting social, cultural and art historical complexities (elements which cement it more concretely to both its creators and its airport site) is to jump in and let the images be our guide. As though underscoring the monotony and universality of contemporary air travel, each of the three *Travelogues* narratives begins with images of a busy airport interior; photos which all eventually zero in on a specific piece of luggage. (see Fig. 2.2) The premise here is that to scan and/or unpack a person's luggage is to know her, to learn her, and to have a privileged glimpse into her life.¹⁴⁶ The suitcase—that obvious and often cumbersome tell of travel—is in fact an extension of the self.

As the artists and title suggest, the suitcase is also a condensed kind of travelogue. Whereas more traditional literary travelogues are often positive, romantic records of experience and adventure, the travelogues contained within a Diller + Scofidio suitcase are far less innocent. In ways both obvious and inferred, Diller + Scofidio use the suitcase as both travelogue and prosthetic double, the unpacking of which should—in theory—lead to a better understanding of its owner's personality, travels, and/or secrets. Sorting out the significance of the suitcase in the context of *Travelogues* is contingent upon recognizing its recurrence within the broader framework of Diller + Scofidio's art and

¹⁴⁶ This too is complicated – for what can you really know? Even when you see the contents, as we will, a person's story is still difficult to string together. Take the first narrative for example – who is she – cancer survivor, accident victim? How can we know?

literature. As demonstrated by its role in *Tourisms: suitCase Studies* (1991), the suitcase is a worthy, iconographically loaded vehicle through which to express a wide range of the artists' cultural interests and conceptual concerns.

At its most basic, *Tourisms: suitCase Studies* is a brilliant play on the notion of a traveling exhibition.¹⁴⁷ (Figs. 2.11 & 2.12) But, as this chapter has indicated, nothing the Diller + Scofidio designers do is ever basic. Originally commissioned by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the exhibit is comprised of fifty Samsonite suitcases which when fully installed hang from the ceiling in neatly ordered rows. Each of the fifty suitcases represents one of the United States (a single "case study") and contains a state-specific postcard, road map, and tourist related accoutrements. The postcard is of utmost interest here, because just as the suitcase is "the irreducible symbol of home," the postcard is "the irreducible representation of its site."¹⁴⁸

Though unique to each state, the postcards and items within each valise correspond to two particular genres of national tourist attractions: historic battlefields and bedrooms in which famous (or infamous) Americans have slept. The selection of this kind of commemorative site derives from Diller + Scofidio's interest in the peculiar relationships between tourism, war, domesticity, memory and authenticity. Expanding on the writings of Jonathan Culler, the artists explain that "one of the characteristics of modernity...is the belief that authenticity has somehow been lost, and that it can be recuperated in other cultures and in the past."¹⁴⁹ By focusing on these repositories of the

¹⁴⁷ Dimendberg, 71.

¹⁴⁸ Diller + Scofidio, "SuitCase Studies: The Production of a National Past" in *Back to the Front: Tourisms of War*, eds. Diller + Scofidio (Basse-Normandie: F.R.A.C, 1994), 48. According to the artists, "the suitcase is the irreducible symbol of home" and "since the suitcase is a highly edited version of one's home or travels, the unpacking of a suitcase is the telling of a personal story, a journey." From "Along the Sterile Corridors, A Fantasy of Suitcases."

¹⁴⁹ Diller + Scofidio, "SuitCase Studies: The Production of a National Past," 34.

American past *Tourisms: suitcase Studies*, “examines the spatial and temporal devices” employed by the institution of tourism in the service of creating and/or perpetuating national narratives.¹⁵⁰ According to the artists, the installation casts tourism in an affirmative light, “as a tacit pact of semi-fiction between sightseers and sightmakers which results in a highly structured yet delirious free play of space-time” and “thwarts simple, binary distinctions between the real and the counterfeit, ultimately, exposing history as a shifting construct.”¹⁵¹ Thus, as *Tourisms: suitcase Studies* displays: history, travel, and tourism are all “shifting constructs” rife with artifice, veracity, and contested negotiations between the two.¹⁵²

However, in the midst of all of tourism’s “shifting constructs” and the “delirious free play of space-time,” there exists a stable, “fixed point of reference.”¹⁵³ For Diller + Scofidio, “the *actual* home of the traveler,” is that touchstone; it is “the only certainty in touristic geography.”¹⁵⁴ While the home may be the one sure thing, the relation between the traveler and that truth is more than a little paradoxical. As the artists explain,

...travel is a mechanism of escape from the home. According to Freud, ‘A great part of the pleasure of travel lies in the fulfillment of early wishes to escape the family and especially the father.’ Being sick of home may lead to travel which may, in turn, lead to homesickness, which will surely lead back home. This circular structure is the basis of travel. Tourism interrupts this circuit by eliminating the menace of the unfamiliar: that which produces homesickness. It domesticates the space of travel—the space between departure from home and return to it.¹⁵⁵

If tourism “domesticates the space of travel,” then the suitcase – that portable shell synonymous with vacation and leisure, both facilitates and embodies that domestication.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 46.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 52.

¹⁵² In *Travelogues* this shift is mirrored in the superimposed imagery of the lenticulars, but is also implicit in the fragmented snippets of the protagonists’ overall journeys.

¹⁵³ Diller + Scofidio, “SuitCase Studies: The Production of a National Past,” 42.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 41.

It is an intermediate object between a person, her home, and her destination and a powerful symbol of the potential fictions and authenticities which constitute both a traveler's identity and the (inter)national geographies she tours.¹⁵⁶

In the first *Travelogues* narrative, an anonymous woman in a lavender dress begins to emerge out of a frenzy of people briskly maneuvering through the airport. (Fig. 2.13) As the viewer approaches this screen, and proceeds beyond it, the woman's yellow suitcase becomes the focal point. In the next panel, the image focuses on the suitcase alone, shifting to include superimposed listings of arriving airline flights. Such fashionable international cities as London, Copenhagen, Rome, Berlin, Frankfurt, Bangkok, and Dublin surround the highlighted flight signaling the woman's arrival in Paris. As the images continue to flicker, the yellow suitcase dematerializes, as though it were being X-rayed right before the viewer's eyes. At times difficult to decipher, the bizarre contents include a prosthetic leg, a high heeled shoe, goggles, a wig and wig mount. In subsequent panels this strange amalgam of objects dissolves yet again and the mysterious woman reappears.¹⁵⁷

No longer at the airport, the viewer is now situated behind the red headed woman as she overlooks the city of Paris from the Eiffel Tower—a location betrayed by her vantage point, the lacy ironwork above her head, and the telescope to her side. Using this Parisian view as a dramatic backdrop, the disjointed vignette comes to a surprising end

¹⁵⁶ To those familiar with the history of twentieth century art, the suitcases of Diller & Scofidio conjure associations to Marcel Duchamp's 1941 *La Boite-en-Valise*. Connections to Duchamp should not be overlooked, for they add another rich layer to the interpretive possibilities available to anyone trying to come to terms with the textured significance the *Travelogues* suitcase and its status as both an object and stand in for the self. Special thanks to Anne Collins Goodyear for brainstorming this connection. For a particularly relevant discussion on *La Boite-en-Valise* see T.J. Demos, "Duchamp's Boite-en-valise: Between Institutional Acculturation and Geopolitical Displacement," *Grey Room* 8 (Summer 2002): 6-37.

¹⁵⁷ In fact, the woman reappears in the exact spot in the image that was formerly occupied by the wig stand, thus serving as a place holder for her head/body within the image when she wasn't present.

when, out of nowhere, a gust of wind takes with it the woman's auburn wig, leaving her alone and blonde, helplessly reaching out into the distance. While the story's ending is certainly abrupt, it is anything but conclusive and leaves the viewer with a number of unanswered questions. A full examination of the individual screens allows the viewer to use information found in the later panels to revisit and decode some of the earlier ones – ultimately revealing the extent to which the protagonist may be different than what she seems. Remember, Diller + Scofidio never allow the viewer to see the woman's face, or for that matter, her legs. In those instances when her body isn't cropped at the waist, her legs are covered cleverly and conveniently by her suitcase.¹⁵⁸ Despite even the most valiant efforts to connect the dots, the *Travelogues* viewer is, and will remain, the victim of limited information.

The question, then, becomes how to interpret such a problematic and unresolved series of images. What if the narrative is not meant to be interpreted merely within the confines of its images, but instead within the context of prosthetic technology, cyborgs, and the blurring of geographic, gender, and identity related boundaries? If one examines the mysterious woman and her suitcase of defining possessions within the context of these larger global themes (which happen to be of utmost interest to the artists at this time) she can begin to peel away the layers of meaning and get at the heart of how and to what end this woman operates within this work as a whole. If the suitcase is indeed the extension of the self and the key to personal identity, than this woman's prosthetics

¹⁵⁸ Special thanks to Katherine Ott at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History for the observation about the suitcase covering the woman's legs and for insights with regard to the leg in general. The leg revealed by the x-ray scan is not a particularly unique prosthesis. In the opinion of Ott, it is a very typical SACHS foot, one which probably would not be worn in combination with high heels. The foot in the suitcase is meant for more casual everyday attire and activities. Advancements in prosthetics from both a technological and cosmetic standpoint have improved the naturalness of false limbs and it is not uncommon for amputees to have different sets of legs for different occasions. Katherine Ott, conversation with author, March 21, 2006.

further the assertion that she is relying upon foreign components to complete her. In this instance, the suitcase not only contains prosthetics, it becomes a prosthetic – literally and metaphorically replacing the woman’s legs and becoming her extension out into the world, or the means by which her true self can be learned.¹⁵⁹

As Aaron Betsky has noted, all throughout their work, Diller + Scofidio have consciously concerned themselves with social stereotypes, particularly those with respect to gender.¹⁶⁰ Their artistic and architectural partnership revolves around and is made possible by this awareness and their concerted efforts “to make perverse reversals of gender roles.” One need not look further than the couple’s working relationship for evidence of these efforts. Diller, a partner in her own successful architectural firm, refused to be relegated to the more traditional professional realms of “interior design or craft” with which women are often associated. Scofidio traded in “the traditional role of the master architect in which he was trained and had worked,” for the chance to collaborate in a mutually beneficial architectural cooperative. In addition to shattering professional boundaries with respect to gender, “the pair uses the methods that have been reserved for women, such as the organization of domestic elements, in combination with the technological tricks for which male architects are famous,” to perpetuate the inversion and dissolution of gender stereotypes.¹⁶¹ According to Betsky, Diller + Scofidio engage with the “artificiality of gender role assignments” well beyond the point with which most

¹⁵⁹ Like the suitcase, prosthetics are a recurring theme in the work of Diller + Scofidio. According to Aaron Betsky, “Diller + Scofidio have used many elements one might call prosthetic, especially in their early work. It is in these pieces that display and control come together; through prosthetics we both internalize the world around us and extend our bodies and the technologies they have assimilated out into the world. Prosthetic elements stand in for our arms, our legs, and our eyes. They bring perverse actions beyond what our bodies are capable of into the realm of possibility.” Aaron Betsky, “Display Engineers,” in Betsky, *Scanning: The Aberrant Architectures of Diller + Scofidio*, 32 & 35.

¹⁶⁰ This entire paragraph is paraphrased from Betsky, “Display Engineers,” 32.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

artist and critics do. They don't simply state the artificiality, but attempt to make it clear "that there is a more general problem in defining both what the body is and what our reality as bodies is."¹⁶² Their use of prosthetics, in both theory and practice, is but one of many ways Diller + Scofidio hope to attain such ironic clarity.

If one takes a step back from their role as the artists of *Travelogues* and casts Diller + Scofidio as architects, their conception of architecture is of particular relevance. As communicated in their keynote address at the 1993 National Technology Conference, Diller + Scofidio believe that,

Architecture typically enters into a role of complicity, to sustain cultural conventions...However, architecture can be put into the role of interrogator. Given the technological and political re-configurations of the contemporary body, spatial conventions may be called into questions by architecture. Architecture can be used as a kind of surgical instrument to operate on itself (in small increments).¹⁶³

I would argue that their theatrical productions, conceptual art, and installations do the very same thing. Through their use of prosthetics and prosthetic imagery, Diller + Scofidio absolutely hold up an interrogating mirror to society; a mirror which poses pointed, if not leading questions to which the viewer can find her own answers.

Those familiar with Diller + Scofidio's oeuvre will recognize the themes of gender identity and prosthetics within this work. But the average passerby, empowered by her day to day experiences and exposure to the ads, imagery, and technologies of mass media also can glean valuable information from this mysterious woman and her prosthetics. Ever present in our science fiction and film, such cyborgs as Darth Vader, RoboCop, Neo, and various X-men are part of a number of pop-cultural references which point to the ever-increasing reliance of man on machine. While such dependency can be

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ As quoted in Georges Teyssot, "The Mutant Body of Architecture," in Diller + Scofidio, *Flesh: Architectural Probes*, 9.

obvious, some of the most intriguing technological couplings are those that are more discreet – like those of our protagonist. It is those more subtle dependencies on technology that often get taken for granted and yet carry with them more profound implications.

As explained by performance and cultural studies scholar Petra Kuppers, whether viewed as a medical marvel (like the late Christopher Reeve) or an enhancement of the human body (like the Van Phillips designed legs for athlete Aimee Mullins), cyborgs are everywhere, often places where one might least expect to find them.¹⁶⁴ (Fig. 2.14) They have pervaded every facet of contemporary culture and when they are not literally a hybrid of human/animal or human/machine, they represent a hybridity of ideas and technology with lived experience.¹⁶⁵ Technology – including the technologies of flight – and prosthetics allow us to put ourselves out into the world in a way in which our own bodies are incapable. By extension, *Travelogues* then becomes a kind of prosthetic in and of itself. It is an apparatus through which the viewer can question his identity, the ramifications of his assumptions, his travels, his relationships to those around him, and the way he projects himself out into the world.¹⁶⁶ Not just a promulgator of cyborgian imagery, *Travelogues*, too, is an artistic cyborg comprised of cropped images, internal superimposed shifts, framed breakages, and jumps from one coupling to the next.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Petra Kuppers, “Addenda? Contemporary Cyborgs and the Mediation of Embodiment,” <http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/vol0101/petrakuppers.html>.

¹⁶⁵ According to Donna Haraway, “By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machines and organism; in short, we are cyborgs.” Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, ed. Donna Haraway (New York: Routledge, 1991), 151.

¹⁶⁶ For a discussion of the twentieth century’s hybridity of flesh and machine and the larger art historical and theoretical ramifications of this coupling, see Teyssot.

¹⁶⁷ My use of the word “breakage” comes directly from Kuppers, who writes, “In contemporary culture, the cyborg has a greater presence than ever, and new forms of boundaries and breakages emerge from its diffuse forms.” See footnote 37.

More than a quick trip to Paris, this *Travelogues* sequence is rife with tensions about the virtual and lived experience and about the personal and geographic borders we create and traverse in the airport and outside the terminal walls. As Donna Haraway points out, implicit in the cyborgian model is the idea that, “a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.”¹⁶⁸ For artists who thrive on bending the rules, and perverting assigned gender roles, cultural boundaries and stereotypes, *Travelogues* can be interpreted as yet another invitation not to be afraid of blur.¹⁶⁹ It is a disjointed montage whose content and presentation embrace both the ironic and contradictory. It is not afraid to let multiple influences and vantage points inform our lives, experiences, decisions, and ultimately - our conclusions.

For Haraway, “the dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically.”¹⁷⁰ Therefore, it is only natural that *Travelogues* reflect such fundamental theoretical inquiries. Perhaps that is exactly what this mysterious redhead, her prosthetics, and her suitcase are trying to tell us. She is the anonymous traveler, the amputee, the cyborg, the survivor and the artist. In a number of ways, she is also the viewer and a reflection of us – a crucial point that will be made even more transparent when considered in tandem with the storyline of the second vignette and the installation’s location within the airport.

¹⁶⁸ Haraway, 154.

¹⁶⁹ See Footnote 79.

¹⁷⁰ Haraway, 164.

In the second narrative, framed portrait souvenirs quickly replace a tapestry suitcase as the medium through which the viewer experiences an older woman's journey. (Figs. 2.15 – 2.24) In this instance, allusions to limbo are less bound to definitions of the corporeal self and decidedly more touristic in nature. At first, the new protagonist is shown in a domestic interior. Her smile wide and kind, she poses in front of a staircase where she is paired with a large, middle-aged man. The photographic narrative begins here, as the snapshot changes to reveal the woman in the same purple blouse, striking the same pose, yet now paired with a much younger man in a cutoff jersey. This younger man soon gives way to an older gentleman who, bundled in a coat and hat, stands with the woman outside the Kremlin. Next, this Russian inspired photo is replaced with another posed portrait pairing our traveler with a beautiful Indian woman in front of the Taj Mahal. As the viewer moves beyond this frame and on to the next, she watches the women part ways and make room for other tourists to step up to this coveted vantage point and record their visit. Consistently photographed in her purple blouse, our protagonist remains true to her style regardless of the culture or climate in which she travels, thus obliterating any attempt to locate her in a particular time.

At this point in the narrative, the viewer is pulled off the site-seeing tour and given a birds-eye view of a hotel room, the location of which is unknown. The tapestry suitcase lay open on the queen size bed, which occupies a large portion of the room also furnished with a bureau, side table and desk.¹⁷¹ (Figs. 2.25-2.26) A window, offering a cliché panoramic view of Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament, and a picture of Diana, Princess of Wales, eventually betray London as the location. As the viewer approaches

¹⁷¹ In addition to the photographs, the woman's suitcase contains an alarm clock, lamp, baby doll, tea set, tapestry, birdcage, items—it seems—that allow this woman to make wherever she is feel like home.

the image, facets of this London hotel room change in a split second. Buddha replaces Diana and the view outside the window becomes an East Asian cityscape. While the location-related details of the hotel room change, the generic elements remain constant. Again, viewers familiar with Diller + Scofidio's oeuvre will recognize the debt these images owe to both *Tourisms: suitcase Studies* and their 1997 *InterClone Hotel*. It is here, in the second vignette, that the conceptual underpinnings of these two previous works (the latter of which will be discussed in detail in a subsequent section) come together and find renewed relevance.

Firm believers that, "the tourist's accountability resides in the snapshot or videotape – portable evidence of the sight having been seen," the artists never shy away from communicating the potency of the camera as an artistic, touristic, and prosthetic device.¹⁷² For Diller + Scofidio, the camera is "the ultimate authenticating agent" a fact communicated through the inclusion of this woman's carefully constructed photo souvenirs.¹⁷³ Anyone who sees these photos will assume she has been to these sites. Hers are the international architectural "must sees:" The Kremlin, the Taj-Mahal, Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. But why these sites? A far cry from the bedrooms and battlefields of the suitcase studies, these images perpetuate ideas of the omnipresence of travel, and the inevitable homogenization that results when cities of the world become one big tourist attraction. In a strange way, they may serve to welcome foreign nations to JFK. But it is more likely these images pay small tribute to the foreign travels, or the dwindling "lost in translation" experiences of all who arrive in Terminal Four. And, as

¹⁷² Diller + Scofidio, "SuitCase Studies: The Production of a National Past," 42.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 43.

Pico Iyer would argue, those experiences are no longer tied to exotic locales; they have become part and parcel of the international airport experience.¹⁷⁴

The idea of souvenirs capturing, signaling, or standing in for experience (not unlike prosthetics) is made even more obvious in the third vignette where x-ray scans of a final suitcase reveal a collection of carefully compartmentalized souvenirs of monuments and objects from all corners of the globe. (Figs. 2.27 – 2.29) Within the suitcase of “The Collector” lies a miniature replica of the Eiffel Tower, a Dutch windmill, the Statue of Liberty, and the Leaning Tower of Pisa.¹⁷⁵ These tokens of tourism line the top register of the suitcase while the bottom seems to be reserved for more personal, romantic reminders of experience.¹⁷⁶ This distinction is made clear when the x-ray image shifts to bring the leaning tower and a wine glass – the object around which the narrative revolves – to life.

As the viewer soon sees, the tower and wine glass serve as props in the tumultuous relationship between a faceless man and a cigarette smoking woman who share a table overlooking the Pisan baptistery and campanile. As the woman pours a glass of wine, the gentleman rolls a pair of dice across the table. The woman matches this gesture by promptly throwing her glass of wine on his shirt. The narrative ends there with the viewer left with nothing but to watch this anonymous man walk through the airport with his suitcase full of collectibles.

As the objects suggest, this “ragazzo” has traveled the world over, but why the need for such touristic reminders? Presumably, a seasoned traveler would dismiss them

¹⁷⁴ Iyer, *The Global Soul*, 50.

¹⁷⁵ Celestine Bohlen, “Being Met at the Airport by New Art: Big, Bold Installations For a Rebuilt Kennedy Arrivals Terminal,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2001.

¹⁷⁶ The objects appear to include a necklace, rose, and stuffed animal.

as kitsch and not at all synonymous with or relevant to his actual adventures and encounters. In fact, that disconnect may well be exactly what the carefully separated contents of this suitcase symbolize. For many travelers, there exists a gap between the souvenir and the actual experience. In our tourist/souvenir driven culture, the former often clouds or replaces the latter. If the viewer is to equate a person with the contents of his suitcase and imagine this man a jet-setting, heart-breaking international man of mystery, then the souvenirs ironically become an important part of creating and perpetuating that fiction.

A driving force in both the second and third vignettes, this idea of a generic, universal touristic experience being similarly found and fabricated is made all the more apparent when considered in relation to *InterClone Hotel* a work unveiled, coincidentally, at the Ataturk Airport for the Fifth International Istanbul Biennial. Presented in much the same vein as a decorator's design boards, the posters of *InterClone Hotel* take the form of a fictive "advertising campaign for an invented hotel chain located in six cities with emerging economies."¹⁷⁷ (Figs. 2.30 – 2.32) In this case, the client is an imaginary international hotel (not unlike the InterContinental) which strives to provide the same basic accommodations whether you are in HoChi Minh City, Vietnam or Bangalore, India.¹⁷⁸ While Diller + Scofidio derive their schematic ideas from the city and culture being promoted, the composites border the satirically ridiculous.

¹⁷⁷ K. Michael Hays, "Scanners," in Betsky, *Scanning: The Aberrant Architectures of Diller + Scofidio*, 130.

¹⁷⁸ According to the unsigned photo caption on page 131 of *Scanning: The Aberrant Architectures of Diller + Scofidio*, "*InterClone Hotel* promotes the culturally specific decorative themes featured by each hotel and offers information on local leisure activities, economies, and travel advisories. The chain's promotions of the cultural diversity of each location, calculated to satisfy the traveler's wish for the exotic and novel, are couched within a formula of sameness that appeases the traveler's need for comfort and familiarity."

In the room for HoChi Minh City, for example, the color palette—inspired by army fatigues and camouflage—is various shades of greens and browns and the walls are covered in helicopters.¹⁷⁹ In Bangalore, the palette is fuchsia and the wallpaper a series of desktop computers and keyboards. Exploiting, among other things, the ubiquity of travel, *InterClone Hotel* is a blatant attempt on the part of the artists to be ambiguously ironic. As K. Michael Hays points out, it is difficult to decide whether “*InterClone Hotel* [is] a wink of condescension or a proposal?”¹⁸⁰ Does it speak to the comfort of the familiar, or the eerie similitude that now can be found across the globe regardless of place or time?

As evidenced by *InterClone Hotel*, and other works in their oeuvre, Diller + Scofidio do not hesitate to present the “hellishness” of “contemporary tourism.”¹⁸¹ Nor do they shy away from the tough subjects, from illustrating a potential discrepancy between the tourists who visit these developing nations, frequent these fictitious hotels in search of a particular touristic experience, and the people who live, work, and make their homes there. While their works could be interpreted as a kind of wake-up call from the fake glamorization of souvenir-driven travel and an invitation to see our choreographed, predictable tourist habits for what they really are, Hays says that the avoidance of concrete conclusion and indisputable cultural critique is what contributes to the artists’ overall effectiveness.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ This also harkens back to their fascinations with the cross-overs between war and tourism

¹⁸⁰ Hays, 133.

¹⁸¹ True, Diller + Scofidio aren’t afraid to allude to the “hellishness” of “contemporary tourism – the jet lag, crowds, crooked taxi drivers, lost luggage, pickpockets, currency exchange, and air traffic delays,” aspects of a travel experience that are never advertised and always the first thing a haggard traveler forgets. This quote comes from a section of their writing in which where they refer to an awesome sequence in the 1990 movie *Total Recall*. Diller + Scofidio, “SuitCase Studies: The Production of a National Past,” 33.

¹⁸² According to Hays, Diller + Scofidio are too smart to allow their work to be a definitive critique of culture. “For one thing, they are too savvy to risk the embarrassment of a critical claim to know right from wrong, good from bad. But more, they are aware that even the more self-conscious and sophisticated tactics of rebellion and negative critique seem to be, in our time, not so much co-opted by ‘the

As the narrative images of the hotel room prove, these open ended issues get re-conceptualized and re-presented in *Travelogues*. However, contrary to Hays' remarks, it seems as though the opaque qualities of the work, compounded by the installation's airport site, paradoxically allow for more clarity and conclusion than ever before.¹⁸³ For Hays, this work and all in which Diller + Scofidio employ a screen, demonstrate how the artists, with

palms raised in neither defiance nor resignation...are ready instead to press up against the screen of our information technology—driven, globalized commodity culture—smooth, elastic, and opaque—to discern its contours, to feel its textures, to scan its surface. What they find in the screen is a period problem, a condition specific to our own moment in history, in which the de-differentiation of disciplines and the tendentious erasure of boundaries between specific cultural materials and practices promise to homogenize all distinction, difference, and otherness into a globalized, neutralized sameness.¹⁸⁴

But this act of scanning the surface so to speak cannot be presented to the viewer without some kind of posturing on the part of the artists. By pointing out the ubiquity of “sameness” and using the space of the airport (which facilitates and perpetuates that very sameness) to do so, Diller + Scofidio are in fact critiquing both the space and the practice. They can't help but point out how our airports actually say much more about our society, habits and travels than we care to admit.

It is with a tinge of irony the artists underscore how our airports and all who pass through have been emptied of the glamour and fascination once attached to technologies

system' as they are a strategic part of the system's internal workings (one doesn't have to think past Eminem for proof). So, more often than not, their projects are integral and complicit with the very condition they aim to expose and analyze.” Hays, 133.

¹⁸³ As this dissertation demonstrates, the airport, too, is an emerging generic space. Even though municipalities strive to make it a civic gateway or symbol, it has a generic – almost uncanny resonance. As Iyer notes, “A modern airport is based on the assumption that everyone's from somewhere else, and so in need of something he can recognize to make him feel at home; it becomes, therefore, an anthology of generic spaces –the shopping mall, the food court, the hotel lobby—which bear the same relation to life, perhaps, that Muzak does to music.” Iyer, *The Global Soul*, 43.

¹⁸⁴ Hays, 133.

of flight, let alone the novel experiences those technologies afford. In theory, man and machine are never more harmonious than at the airport, a location which sends forth and receives the planes and passengers of commercial aviation itself “one of the most important developments in the history of modern America.”¹⁸⁵ By juxtaposing man and machine, the traveler and the cyborg, the artists seem to call to mind the mythic relationship between Lindbergh and Spirit of St. Louis as immortalized in *WE*.¹⁸⁶ Unfortunately that recollection brings with it the recognition that the monumentality of flight, the awe and exuberance of seeing the world from never-before imagined perspectives, the glamorous adventure embedded in the travelogue and the profundity of the journey all have been lost in the great disconnect that exists between our reality and our inability to see our habitual experiences for what they really are. Thus, it is exactly because of its location within the sterile corridor, that *Travelogues* betrays meaning and appears to take a position, perhaps even allowing for new readings of previously indeterminable works (like *InterClone Hotel*). But, to understand this critical point requires a familiarity with the artists’ understanding of the airport’s spatial and temporal complexities.

Diller + Scofidio’s exploration of the inevitable, disorienting consequences of air travel, and the teasing out of an artistic language through which to express jarring, yet all-too-common deferrals of time, finds its origins in *Jet Lag*, a 1998 multimedia theatrical production on which Diller + Scofidio collaborated with Marianne Weems of The

¹⁸⁵ David T. Courtwright, “The Routine Stuff: How Flying Became a Form of Mass Transportation,” in *Reconsidering a Century of Flight*, eds. Roger D. Launius and Janet R. Daly Bednarek (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 220.

¹⁸⁶ Thanks to Jeremy Kinney for this connection between the cyborgs of *Travelogues* and the possible link to Lindbergh and his plane.

Builder's Association.¹⁸⁷ Familiarity with this production permits the viewer to go beyond an innocuous, surface interpretation of the travelogue narratives and associate *Travelogues* with the deeper, psychological, if not more sinister implications of air travel and a life lived somewhere in the margins between contemporary space and time.

Jet Lag is a theatrical and theoretical labyrinth, informed by the abstract ideas of philosopher Paul Virilio and the uncanny coupling of two unrelated but strikingly similar real-life "stories on obsessive and thwarted travel."¹⁸⁸ The first event derives from a story relayed by Virilio in his "The Third Window" interview of 1988. At the story's core is Sarah Krachnov,

...the American grandmother who in six months crossed the Atlantic one hundred and sixty-seven times to enable her grandson to escape the psychiatrists. This little kid was seven or eight; his father wanted him to undergo analysis or psychiatric treatment, and the grandmother said no, it's out of the question. She took the kid and she did Amsterdam-New York, New York-Amsterdam...like that for six months without ever leaving the hotel room, the plane, etc. And the kid's father tried to join them, but never caught up with them, and she died after six months because of the time-zones, finally...¹⁸⁹

Though it sounds far-fetched, this nonsensical, trans-Atlantic adventure did happen and in 1971 made headlines around the globe. Newspapers as diverse as the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune* ran the woman's obituary in addition to a series of sensationalized articles with such irreverent titles as, "Widow, Grandson's Baffling Odyssey Halted," "Grandma Spends \$140,000 Commuting to

¹⁸⁷ The unsigned photo caption on page 59 of *Scanning: The Aberrant Architectures of Diller + Scofidio* reads, "*Jet Lag* 1998. Multimedia theatre work in collaboration with Marianne Weems of The Builders Association. Premiered at Lantaren Theatre, Rotterdam, at the Dutch Electronic Arts Festival, Video developed in association with Chris Kondek. 80 min."

¹⁸⁸ Elizabeth Diller, interview by Patricia C. Phillips, "A Parallax Practice: A Conversation with Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio," *Art Journal* 63, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 71.

¹⁸⁹ Paul Virilio, "The Third Window: An Interview with Paul Virilio," in *Global Television*, eds. Cynthia Schneider and Brian Wallis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 196. While Virilio's grandmother is Sarah Krachnov, the woman profiled in the newspaper headlines is Sarah Krasnoff – two different spellings of the same name.

Europe and Back,” and “Death Grounds Flying Granny.”¹⁹⁰ When compared with the *New York Times* reportage, Virilio’s retelling of this poor woman’s death does indeed capture the essence of the actual events:

The travels of 74 year old Mrs. Sarah Krasnoff ended last Wednesday, in Amsterdam within earshot of the big jets she had used to cross the Atlantic almost daily this summer along with her grandson, Howard Gelfand, 14. The boy’s mother died in 1960 and since then he has spent much of his time with his widowed grandmother. Then this summer, friends and relatives said, Mrs. Krasnoff and the boy’s father differed over whether or not the youngster was showing problems of adjustment. The grandmother took the boy out of school and the pair began traveling. There followed 130—and perhaps 160—crossings of the Atlantic at a cost of more than \$1,000 a trip. In most cases they would arrive at Amsterdam in the morning and return to New York that evening without leaving the airport or even bothering to go through customs. Asked once why they were returning so soon, the youth answered: ‘We forgot to turn off a leaking tap.’ But last Sunday, Mrs. Krasnoff arrived in Amsterdam alone and after complaining of feeling tired, was taken to a hotel. Howard arrived on Monday afternoon and called a doctor. But the exhaustion was too great. On Wednesday Mrs. Krasnoff died.¹⁹¹

Given the unbelievably extraordinary circumstances which lead to Mrs. Krasnoff’s death, it is easy to understand how anyone would be enthralled by the story. For Virilio, however, Krasnoff is much more than simply a tragic figure; she is a “marvelous heroine” whose uncanny saga validates Virilio’s theories on speed, duration, and technology’s role in the abduction, organization, and unnatural “distribution of time.”¹⁹² Because of the ways in which Krasnoff both created and traversed her own days, hours and geographies, she is the tangible, real-life personification of Virilio’s deferred time.¹⁹³ Partly informed by Virilio’s writings, and partly informed by the unimaginably

¹⁹⁰ Frisco Endt, “Widow, Grandson’s Baffling Odyssey Halted,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 1971; Friso Endt, “Grandma Spends \$140,000 Commuting to Europe and Back,” *The Washington Post*, September 1, 1971; “Death Grounds Flying Granny,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 2, 1971.

¹⁹¹ “Headliners,” *New York Times*, September 5, 1971.

¹⁹² Virilio, 188. She is also important because her story makes his theories accessible to a much wider audience. According to Virilio, technologies like the VCR (this is 1988 remember!), are particularly significant because they allow a person “to organize a time which is not his own, a deferred time, a time which is somewhere else—and to capture it.” Ibid, 187.

¹⁹³ Virilio refers to Krasnoff as, “a marvelous heroine,” who lived in a “time in which her son couldn’t catch up with her.” Ibid, 196.

convoluted chronicle of sailor Donald Crowhurst (whose manufactured attempt to sail around the world resulted in mental breakdown and suicide), *Jet Lag* is a reflection of Diller + Scofidio's curiosity about living and/or dying in differed time.¹⁹⁴ It is also an exercise in how to stage the spirit of such an existence and transmit its ramifications to a theatre going public. Together with Weems, Diller + Scofidio sought to use these two twisted tales to magnify and disclose "the roles sophisticated technology played in dislodging these three characters [grandmother, grandson and sailor] from their day-to-day existence in time and space."¹⁹⁵ To do so would require a unique approach to set design and live action theatre, a challenge that Diller + Scofidio welcomed and approached with their usual verve.

Since these stories were so intertwined with manipulations of time, space and media, the artists wanted to broadcast the tensions between live/mediated culture and experience.¹⁹⁶ The resulting tableau wove together their own digitally enhanced, projected backdrops with video simulations of news footage and real-time performance. (Figs. 2.33-2.38) As observed by performance/live art historian Roselee Goldberg, the

¹⁹⁴ *Jet Lag*, then, evidences the pairing of the tragedy of Sarah Krachnov with a second story that, for the artists, had similar overtones. As summarized in the unsigned photo caption on page 59 of *Scanning: The Aberrant Architectures of Diller + Scofidio*, "The other incident, a great media spectacle at the time, described a British eccentric, Donald Crowhurst, who in 1969 joined a round-the-world solo yacht race sponsored by the Sunday Times of London. Ill-prepared but driven by the publicity of the event, Crowhurst loaded his boat with film equipment provided by the BBC so he could record his journey, and set sail. Though his yacht was soon disabled and he drifted in circles for the remainder of the race, Crowhurst broadcast false radio positions, produced a counterfeit log, and documented an apparently successful voyage on film."

As was the case with Krasnoff, there were quite a few interesting newspaper articles about Crowhurst and the race. Two journalists for the *London Times*, Nicholas Tomalin and Ron Hall, wrote a book about the strange events in 1970, *The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst*, which was republished in 1980. The story is one that could be accessed in a variety of ways and is definitely the stuff of sailing legend and lore. In 1998 Rinde Eckert wrote an opera called "Ravenshead" that was based on Crowhurst. It was performed across the United States and thus perpetuated the Crowhurst tragedy for audiences some thirty years later.

¹⁹⁵ As found in the unsigned photo caption on page 59 of *Scanning: The Aberrant Architectures of Diller + Scofidio*.

¹⁹⁶ Roselee Goldberg, "Dancing About Architecture," in Betsky, *Scanning: The Aberrant Architectures of Diller + Scofidio*, 60.

balance between screen-projected actions and those by live performers was precarious. While in some instances the mediated image took center stage, in others the focus was on the motions and emotions of the actors. As Goldberg notes, “These shifts between foreground and background, between flesh and celluloid, accentuated the emotional undertow of both stories and, at the same time, made the audience aware of the multiple registers of information present in the production.”¹⁹⁷ Such variegated staging encouraged the audience to approach *Jet Lag* with an acute sensitivity to the compound perils of all three protagonists and equal attention to both the message and means of delivery.

There is never any question that Krasnoff’s immediate situation is that of a lonely, depressing airport existence. Nor is there any doubt that in Diller + Scofidio’s airport, monotony and ennui rule the day. As Philippa Wehle of *American Theatre Magazine* describes,

When the characters are not in flight between New York and Paris, we see them moving among images of an airport, with waiting areas and escalators, as we hear the dull sing-song of announcements, planes taking off and landing, a continuous soundscape of time ticking by. Even death can’t dispel the technological tedium. ‘Mrs. Ackerman’s death occurred sometime between the meal service and the in-flight movie,’ states the airline announcer with not a hint of feeling.¹⁹⁸

Their staging of the Krasnoff event lays the foundation for how they envision, “the limbo spaces of airplane travel” and the soul of the airport.¹⁹⁹ The theatrical shifts between foreground and background, fact and fiction, live and mediated action distilled in *Jet Lag* find their kindred in the screens of *Travelogues*, a work analogously staged and performed in the airport.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Philippa Wehle, “Living in Deferred Time,” *American Theatre*, May 2000.

¹⁹⁹ Betsky, 35.

The relationship between *Travelogues* and its airport site needs to be considered, for locating this work in the airport permits us to rethink its ambiguity and critical thrust. After foiled attempts to bring cohesion to the *Travelogues* narratives, it becomes clear that its disruptions are intentional. They mirror those of *Jet Lag* and those of the viewer as he transitions through the airport, the staging area for the city of his final destination. Using fractured narratives, Diller + Scofidio distort and manipulate what the viewer sees, what the viewer thinks he sees, and how he experiences both. By toying with the identity of the protagonists and the role of the viewer, the artists create a constant push and pull between the viewer as animating participant, real-life mirror image, and voyeur.

The viewer can relate to the anonymity of these characters, for when a person travels he is given the rare opportunity to reinvent himself, mask his true identity, fake an accent, and fake a past.²⁰⁰ Not every traveler seizes this opportunity, but the possibility exists, a possibility which according to travel writer Pico Iyer renders the airport such a singularly fascinating space.²⁰¹ The airport is “the spiritual center of the double life” – a place where a traveler can enter as one person and leave as another.²⁰² This notion of the

²⁰⁰ Incidences like this are all over pop culture – *The Pilot’s Wife*, *Up in the Air*, *Catch Me if You Can*, – as well as in terms of terrorism etc. The idea of creating new/false identities or false impressions is also present in cyberspace, which like the airport, has become a realm that is much more a part of our everyday routines than ever before. According to Sherry Turkle, “The use of the term ‘cyberspace’ to describe virtual worlds grew out of science fiction, but for many of us, cyberspace is now part of the routines of everyday life. When we read our electronic mail or send postings to an electronic bulletin board or make an airline reservation over a computer network, we are in cyberspace. In cyberspace we can talk, exchange ideas, and assume personae of our own creation. We have the opportunity to build new kinds of communities, virtual communities, in which we participate with people from all over the world, people with whom we converse daily, people with whom we may have fairly intimate relationships but whom we may never physically meet.” Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 9-10.

²⁰¹ As Iyer notes in his reflections on time spent at LAX, “Traditionally, of course, what makes the airport unique (though now it is more and more common on every sidewalk in many cities) is that no one knows where anyone is coming from (in both Californian and the global sense), and no one really knows where anyone is at.” Iyer, *The Global Soul*, 51.

²⁰² Iyer, *The Global Soul*, 42.

double life is taken to an extreme by Walter Kirn's *Up In the Air* narrator Ryan Bingham, who disturbingly suggests he is in the air so often there are times he feels like he has gone someplace before he's left. Bingham's exact words to readers are, "this has happened before. I've never told a soul. I've met myself coming and going. It's a secret."²⁰³ Fuller and Harley express still another nuance of this "double life" when observing how "there is a certain sublimeness in becoming airborne, anonymous, absent, and a corresponding banality to becoming stuck and identified," and the airport is the threshold for both.²⁰⁴ As Iyer points out, though "we can make games and adventures out of this strangeness" and "we can relish the slippery glamour of a place where everyone can be anyone for a while....the quality that underwrites all of this is vulnerability, the exposedness we feel whenever we're in a place we don't understand, but compounded many times over when we've just descended thirty thousand feet." The bottom line is this: in the airport, the viewer takes on multiple identities; he is the tourist, the frequent flyer, the business traveler, the observer and the observed, and he can find traces of his own tangled, sundry experiences in the Diller + Scofidio narratives.²⁰⁵

This idea of actively observing and passively being watched is directly related to themes of security, transparency and surveillance so crucial to the successful operations of an airport. Diller + Scofidio use X-ray scans as another way of grounding this work in reality, and faithfully acknowledging part of the passenger experience. The digital scans serve as a reminder that the threat of in-flight terrorism and airplane hijackings is more frightening than ever, and airports must strive to maintain appropriate standards of

²⁰³ Kirn, *Up in the Air*, 152.

²⁰⁴ Fuller and Harley, 44.

²⁰⁵ Iyer, *The Global Soul*, 67.

safety. Created before September 11th 2001, the x-rays of *Travelogues* uncannily remind the viewer that personal privacy may be sacrificed for the sake of security.

Paradoxically, while the digital scans of *Travelogues* reflect current surveillance techniques, they also prevent veritable acts of surveillance from taking place.²⁰⁶ The lenticulars trap the traveler within their perplexing, episodic narratives and their shifting, digital images.²⁰⁷ Accuracy is forbidden, for there are always hints of a second image, effectively rendering the scene, and the viewer, in a permanent state of limbo.

This sense of being caught between images, stories, places and journeys is reinforced by the intended transparency of Terminal 4's architecture. Believing that "comfort and clarity are central to the drama and experience of air travel," the architects saturated the terminal with windows, encouraging travelers to be aware of their surroundings both inside and outside the terminal walls.²⁰⁸ In today's travel climate, however, "comfort and clarity" are luxuries which few can afford, a discrepancy highlighted by the frustrating opacity of *Travelogues*. Ironically, while the work was installed "to help humanize the often disconcerting sequence from arrival gate through a

²⁰⁶ This idea is shared by Aaron Betsky, who uses it with regard to other Diller & Scofidio works. I have taken the liberty of applying his critique to *Travelogues*. He writes, Diller and Scofidio, "...have also developed a defense mechanism against surveillance in recent years: the effect of blur. Starting with their use of the 'snow' of an untuned television in the installation Non-Place, and with the limbo spaces of airplane travel they later explored in Jet Lag, Diller & Scofidio have concentrated on the undefined. It is almost as if they are reacting against their own desire to control and produce recognizable images, places, and objects by creating works in which one is never quite certain what one is seeing." Betsky, "Display Engineers," 35.

²⁰⁷ Alicia Imperiale also observes the artists' fascination with the non-places of society, mentioning the airport lounge as an example. Imperiale writes, "Diller & Scofidio have been acutely aware of the status of place and...non-places...the airport lounge, the suburban sprawls, and shopping malls – all places that signify the 'norms' of polite society and behavior that border on the empty, vacuous space of contemporary life." Her comment has informed the way I interpret *Travelogues* and its location in the larger context of the airport and the sterile corridor; areas I consider to be versions of a non-place. Alicia Imperiale, "Installing Diller + Scofidio at the Whitney," <http://architettura.supereva.it/allestimenti/20031029/index.htm>.

²⁰⁸ Edie Cohen, "First Class: Skidmore, Owings & Merrill designs a new international terminal at JFK," *Interior Design* (September, 2001).

‘sterile corridor’ to immigration and customs,” it does so by exacerbating exactly those aspects of the airport experience that are the least humanizing and most disconcerting.²⁰⁹

In the larger context of their oeuvre, *Travelogues* represents the last of Diller + Scofidio’s smaller installations. Such carefully selected projects now seem to be an artistic means to an architectural end.²¹⁰ They afforded the artists the opportunity to exercise larger concepts and problems of technology and design in the hopes of courting major architectural commissions. Understanding this calculated career strategy means that Diller + Scofidio should be thought of not as “border crossers between art and architecture” but as creative minds processing each of their works “through an architectural filter.”²¹¹ Although they engage with “seemingly extra-architectural themes such as tourism, globalization, conventions of domesticity, and visibility,” Diller emphasizes “the work has always been about space” and *Travelogues* is no different.²¹² The work finds “clarity” by exposing the disparity between the desired transparency of the architectural site and the vacillating obscurity of the installation. By calling attention to all that is incongruous about the sterile corridor Diller + Scofidio use *Travelogues*, as “a kind of surgical instrument to operate” on Terminal 4 and all the terminal represents (both conceptually and architecturally).²¹³ Remember, this reflexive probe is exactly what they believe the purpose of art/architecture to be. Architecture should manipulate the spaces we occupy and traverse; it should both reflect and challenge our social habits

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Nicholas DeMonchaux (former studio assistant), conversation with author, June 8, 2006. I’d like to extend a special thanks to Nicholas, whose tenure at NASM briefly coincided with mine. His insight, experience, and observations with regard to *Travelogues* helped inform the way I interpret this work and the spirit behind its creation.

²¹¹ Elizabeth Diller, interview by Patricia C. Phillips, “A Parallax Practice: A Conversation with Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio,” *Art Journal* 63, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 65.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ See footnote #39

and cultural norms. But to do so effectively, it must be inquisitive and allow all who use and pass through it to do the same.

In an odd way, the constant fluctuations present in *Travelogues* authenticate the spatial and temporal deferrals a passenger experiences within the sterile corridor, the airport, and when traveling from one airport to the next. The passing glances and temporary encounters or fictions we have/create with other people in an airport are unique to this kind of physical environment. As Iyer has observed, the airport terminal is a backdrop for the most unpredictable meetings. The traveler has no way of knowing whom she may see,

a sweetheart she had kissed good-bye three weeks before, or a daughter she had protected every day for twenty years. And though this has been true of ports and stagecoach stops for centuries, it has surely never had an intensity or speed akin to that of the modern airport, where Henry James dramas are played out to an MTV beat.²¹⁴

As a non-place, the airport forbids anything more substantive, conclusive, or permanent. After all, the airport is a liminal zone, a highly charged point in between one's home and one's destination, between the potential certainty of the past, and the uncertainty of the future.

All evidence and comments suggest Diller + Scofidio subscribe to the definition of the airport as non-place in both theory and practice, particularly as pertains to the sterile corridor. The opportunity to create an installation specifically for the terminal's sterile corridors, to incorporate and exploit "their state of suspended identity" was in large part what drew the artists to this commission.²¹⁵ It is this understanding of the artists' approach to the site as a non-place that helps transform *Travelogues* from an

²¹⁴ Iyer, *The Global Soul*, 65.

²¹⁵ Bohlen. As explained by Diller, the artists found this "space of limbo" particularly compelling and thus approached "the banality of these very long corridors" with great enthusiasm.

open-ended, conceptually ambiguous work to one that begins to take a position. For, because of its site, it may well be an invitation to see our virtualities, vulnerabilities and barrage of simulated experiences for what they really are.

Both the experience of flying to and arriving at an airport can be considered one big technological interruption in a much larger journey and part of a much larger visual and virtual experience. This concept is of particular interest to Virilio, who believes that one of the more interesting ramifications of technology is not that it provides for more intense experiences, “but that it interrupts us differently.”²¹⁶ For Virilio, it is life’s interruptions that cause the most stress. Using the car as an example, he explains that when on the road, the most stressful possible scenario is getting stuck in traffic; “an interruption which seems exaggerated” if not “imposed.”²¹⁷ It’s a forced pause, a forced delay which causes you to experience time, and your journey, in slow motion.²¹⁸

Such interruptions are not limited to our use of cars; they are ever present in our daily lives, especially in our travels by air. In airports, we have come to expect long lines, delayed or canceled flights, layovers and various obstacles to thwart our best efforts for a smooth transition from point A to point B. We reserve, book, and confirm our flights over the internet, print out e-tickets, and then sit, wait, and monitor arrivals and departures from screens in boarding gate waiting areas as a steady stream of CNN, or god help us FoxNews, reports from televisions scattered throughout the terminal. Though they can make life easier and in many ways less stressful, technologies create constant

²¹⁶ Virilio, 189.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ While I think we can all agree that an automobile accident is perhaps the quintessential stressful experience, it’s a different kind of interruption, one that often irrevocably changes the ride rather than simply putting it on pause.

intrusions in our natural daily routines; cuts which are acknowledged, ignored, mediated, exploited and taken for granted oftentimes simultaneously and/or subconsciously. As illustrated by the *Travelogues* vignettes, these rifts and breakages can be in the form of cyborgian extensions, prosthetic couplings, or confusions between the real and the virtual, the authentic and the simulated. Virilio's interruptions, be they a pause in traffic or a pause on TiVo point to the capabilities of technology to synthesize, delay, and distort time and our natural, "biorhythmic" experience of it.²¹⁹

In a way, each Diller + Scofidio screen acts as a new, fictive, virtual "window" within the sterile corridor. It frames edited images of a person's travels and presents them to the viewer at the exact moments when she is either beginning to synthesize and process her own recent adventures or daydreaming of those about to take place. More importantly, because the panels are displayed in front of the windowed wall, the viewer experiences the *Travelogues* journeys concurrent with the real-time goings on of the airport. Outside on the runways, planes fuel up, load up, taxi, take off and land. Inside, an internationally eclectic mix of passengers disembark and stream in from the arriving flights. The narrative images slice through all of this activity and each other, allowing the artists to give equal attention, yet again, to the live and mediated. In the case of *Travelogues* though, the unsuspecting viewer is not merely an innocent bystander or audience member, she also becomes the performer, the agent provocateur.

While I have taken the opportunity to use Diller + Scofidio's involvement in *Tourisms: suitCase Studies*, *InterClone Hotel*, and *Jet Lag* to interpret the interplay of concepts and screens in *Travelogues*, passersby do not need to rely on their past works as

²¹⁹ Virilio, 189.

sole point of entry. Though this work is inextricably bound to its artistic predecessors, and understandings of it are enhanced by them, a degree in contemporary art history is not a pre-requisite to grasp the distinctions being made (or blurred) between real life actions and those on the screen.²²⁰ Just as we have all experienced the monotony of airline travel, we are all accustomed to the idea of experiencing the drama of everyday life unfold on multiple levels, windows and screens.

Comfort with such multiplicity is directly connected to our familiarity with and dependence upon computers and the infinite possible worlds of the internet.²²¹ On any given day, most Americans sit in front of a computer screen, engaged with countless open documents, web pages, and pictures in various windows, while real life office activities, conversations and happenings take place in the background. As Sherry Turkle explains, while a person may be only physically capable of focusing on one specific window at a time, “in a sense you are a presence in all of them at all times.”²²² Taking this idea a step further, Turkle suggests that a person’s “identity on the computer” is the sum of her “distributed presence” throughout the various open windows on her screen.²²³ Thus, like the contents of our suitcase, the collective contents of our “windows,” are an extension of who we are.

As a society, we have become conditioned to experiencing life in, on, and in front of the screen. Some people even go so far as to create alternate/multiple internet personae, sexual identities, and relationships whose veracity seem to rival, if not surpass,

²²⁰ Diller knows her audience and is not afraid to challenge them. In an interview with Laurie Anderson, she goes so far as to suggest that at the end of the day, “the public is smarter than we give them credit for.” Elizabeth Diller, interview by Laurie Anderson, “Interview with Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio,” in Betsky, *Scanning: The Aberrant Architectures of Diller + Scofidio*, 153.

²²¹ An idea borrowed from Turkle.

²²² Turkle, 13.

²²³ Ibid.

those in the real world.²²⁴ As Turkle explains, “Our new technologically enmeshed relationships oblige us to ask to what extent we ourselves have become cyborgs, transgressive mixtures of biology, technology, and code. The traditional distance between people and machines has become harder to maintain.”²²⁵ As the boundaries between ourselves and our technologies become increasingly more permeable, the ease with which we embrace “a culture of simulation” and substitute “representations of reality for the real” become increasingly more prevalent - and more frightening.²²⁶ According to Turkle, “*we have learned to take things at interface value* [sic],” and while that may be well and good for allowing passersby the interpretive framework they need to appreciate *Travelogues*, it is a rather scary notion nonetheless.²²⁷

Despite the potential negative social and cultural ramifications of a life lived in hybrid reality, Turkle explains there is a big payoff. The benefit of being so familiar and comfortable with simulation and the virtual world is that rather than using it to forsake the real,

We can use it as a space for growth. Having literally written our online personae into existence, we are in a position to be more aware of what we project into everyday life. Like the anthropologist returning home from a foreign culture, the voyager in virtuality can return to a real world better equipped to understand its artifices.²²⁸

Thus, familiarity with “transitional space” of virtuality and the internet may well equip the traveler to better know, recognize, confront, and interpret the artifices which bombard her in the real world.²²⁹ The entire *Travelogues* experience –the screens, the images, the vignettes, the sterile corridor airport site - facilitates this confrontation, which is exactly

²²⁴ According to “Doug” one of the college kids profiled in this text, “RL is just one more window and it’s not usually my best one.” Ibid.

²²⁵ Turkle, 21.

²²⁶ Turkle, 23.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Turkle, 263.

²²⁹ Ibid.

what the artists have in mind. For Diller, their work is a chance to admit “all kinds of perception, mediated and live” and subvert the ubiquitous couplings and binary distinctions which traditionally keep such perceptions apart.²³⁰ And as illustrated by Turkle, visual and cultural historians, and countless reality television programs alike, the lines between mediated and live may well be more blurred than we realize.²³¹

The sterile corridor is the epitome of a non-place within a non-place and therefore a most fitting backdrop for the interruptions, cuts and displacements which abound in this work. As Fuller and Harley note, in this area of the airport, “borders of all kinds become refined into a series of connections and processes.”²³² After all, “how does inside/outside really work when you can be inside the plane and still outside the terminal building, when you can be inside the airport but not yet in the country, and so on?”²³³

According to the artists themselves, the sterile corridor,

...is a featureless non-place between jurisdictions, between the place left behind and the one about to be entered. It is a space in which diverse travelers share the status of world citizens in limbo. Defined by one-directional movement toward Customs and Passport Control, the sterile corridor is a space to pass through and not stop.²³⁴

However, as travelers leave *Travelogues* behind and progress towards customs, they soon find themselves in the more familiar places of the airport, and that much closer their New York destination.

When examined in the context of its location, *Travelogues* can be seen as the most recent incarnation of art for air transport; one that fuses sculpture and site on all

²³⁰ Goldberg, 58.

²³¹ Laurie Anderson notes that the majority of subjects in any Diller + Scofidio work, “seem to be lost in a blurry public space.” Anderson, 159.

²³² Fuller and Harley, 81.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ From the 2001 *Travelogues* project description emailed to author by Denise Fasanello on behalf of the artists, January 18, 2005.

possible levels and redefines the rules of engagement for airport art. Flashy, sarcastic, ironic, and acutely aware of its surroundings and its audience, *Travelogues* provides a sharp and witty commentary on the mores of air travel in contemporary society and has forever changed what is appropriate art for the airport environment. Its manipulation of technology, mass media, surveillance, and advertising are cutting edge and very in tune with this space, perhaps more so than the travelers themselves. It is informed, candid and frank with regard to our preoccupations with identity, simulacra, visual consumption, tourism, and travel. But perhaps most importantly, it illustrates on many levels how twenty-first century travelers should take nothing for granted and be ever present in their experiences.

CHAPTER THREE

Alice Aycock's *Star Sifter*: Putting a Little Air in Space

When Terminal One at John F. Kennedy International Airport opened in 1998, it did so to rave reviews from *New York Times* architectural critic Herbert Muschamp. Hailing the building “a small oasis in Kennedy’s dessert of decrepitude,” Muschamp praised “its roadways, runways, jetways and hangars” which he believed “define an architectural language as epic as anything in ancient Rome.”²³⁵ While excessive with the praise he lavished on Terminal One’s architecture, Muschamp had few kind words for the public sculpture commissioned for the rotunda. (Figs. 3.1 & 3.2) He cavalierly referred to Alice Aycock’s *Star Sifter* (1998) as an obstruction which thwarted his enjoyment of the mezzanine’s atrium architecture. Had Muschamp taken the time to recognize Aycock’s sculpture as something other than simply “an artwork designed to foil the tossing of contraband,” he may have applauded its ability to appropriate the characteristics of his beloved terminal in ways that few others would dare.

Much more than a mere obstruction, Aycock’s *Star Sifter* is an inspired expression of site responsive public sculpture. Its existence is indebted to the vision of public art consultant Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz, hired by the terminal’s tenant airlines to commission artworks for their new building.²³⁶ Schwartz’s plan called for a series of visually stunning, site-specific installations to be scattered throughout the terminal. Unfortunately, as construction progressed, the priorities of both the architect and airlines shifted and the budget and initial enthusiasm for a series of high profile art commissions

²³⁵ Herbert Muschamp, “A Return to the Glamour of Flying,” *New York Times*, May 15, 1998.

²³⁶ More will be said about the terminal’s ownership later in the chapter.

began to wane; *Star Sifter* was the only project realized. Aycock's work endured not only because it is—to quote Brook Kamin Rapaport—“an optimistic vision of what air travel might lead to,” but also because it doubled as a security barrier and could compensate for an intrinsic flaw in the mezzanine's design.²³⁷

Original plans for the mezzanine called for a large, open hole in the center of the atrium so that people on the second floor could gaze down upon passengers as they made their way through the security checkpoint directly below. (Figs. 3.3 – 3.6) However, soon after construction began, the architect saw how easy it would be for a person on the mezzanine to slip an unscreened item down to a previously screened passenger. Aycock's challenge then, was to find a way to discourage such breeches of security. The end result is nothing short of a visionary sculptural machine.

Like a shuttle poised to reenter the earth's atmosphere, *Star Sifter* hovers between the first and second levels of the rotunda, encouraging fanciful connections between earth and cosmic travel. Within the once open hole, Aycock wove a web of metal tight enough to prevent the passing of objects and yet transparent enough to afford entertaining views between floors. Mirrors, curlicues, a painted zoetrope disk, a book, fuselage, and various curved trellis-like floating forms suspend above this sunken web; just a few of the abstract metallic objects caught in the sifter's vortex. Some viewers might recognize A-frames and architectural scaffolding; others might see the makings of airplane parts or various fabrications of an aviation engineer. Whatever the associations, the installation is an invitation for the public to be aware of the power and possibilities inherent their surroundings and to experience this terminal as both an architectural space and a point of

²³⁷ Brooke Kamin Rapaport, “Alice Aycock: Public Artist” *Sculpture Magazine* 22, no. 10 (December 2003): 37.

origin for travels to far off places—be they in the immediate future or in the private recesses of the mind.

On the surface, Aycock and her monumental *Star Sifter* may appear to pay tribute to more traditional themes of air and space flight, themes from which the artists profiled in this dissertation tend to shy away. But Aycock, a self proclaimed “sucker for the stars,” imbues this focus on the essence of flight, physics, astronomy, and celestial discovery with a conceptual profundity and rigor absent in most airport artworks of this genre.²³⁸ Such theoretical saturation solidifies her place among those artists creating innovative, strikingly relevant commissions of public sculpture for airports and is integral to any meaningful understanding of the interpretive intricacies of this work.

To stand in front of an Aycock sculpture is to surround oneself with the product of an inquisitive – if not encyclopedic – artistic mind; a mind that is unafraid to tap centuries of thought, faith, science, and mystery and relish the inevitable layers of interpretation each can provide. Aycock’s fascinations with space, flight, time, and the ability of the past to affect the present take many forms. They range from the literal to the imaginary, the metaphorical to the prophetic. They are often autobiographical and highly personal, revealing an acute sensitivity to dreams, ghosts, subconscious musings, childhood fears, the deterioration of her grandmother’s mind, or obsessions with schizophrenia. They also demonstrate an insatiable desire to read across disparate texts and images in pursuit of new ways to reconcile scientific fact and miraculous fiction. It is through her sculpture and drawing that Aycock is able to exorcise her fears, obsessions, and a lifetime of formative experiences which seem to fold in on themselves without end.

²³⁸ Aycock, conversation with author, November 4, 2005.

By analyzing the themes that thrill her and examining how they are brought to life in her art, it becomes clear that Aycock and the airport is an excellent match.

Outspoken with regard to her passions, Aycock is never reluctant to explain her art objects or the frame of mind that resulted in their creation. She is honest about what excites her and is always candid and thoughtful in her reflections about the visions which preoccupy her. Refreshingly, her opinions and installations are without pretense, a fact emboldened by her desire to infuse them with multiple meanings so there is never a single way to view her work.

Over the course of her career, Aycock has been particularly vocal about her fascinations with flight. For her, flying is a “natural obsession.”²³⁹ Even though twentieth century aeronautical advancements have helped humans realize the dream of flight, for Aycock, “flying and airplanes are still magic,” a bewitching notion at the core of much of her works and artistic philosophy.²⁴⁰ As shared in a 1982 interview with Jonathan Fineberg, Aycock does not limit herself to viewing flight as a strictly physical or technological phenomenon:

...there are certain desires to fly which we have fulfilled in a certain way, although we haven't in the fact that we are unable to fly in the way we do in our dreams. But we can move through the air....perhaps it is necessary to project yourself farther into another place where you can't go, where for certain reasons you are unable to be, to almost fall asleep, to go backwards and to dream it and wish it and just want it.”²⁴¹

For Aycock, flight is bound with desire. It is as much a mental and spiritual endeavor as it is a literal one, and it is only when those aspects of flight are singled out and harnessed

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ As quoted in Jonathan Fineberg, “Alice Aycock, Reflections on Her Work: An Interview,” in *Complex Visions: Sculpture and Drawings by Alice Aycock*, Alice Aycock (Mountainville, N.Y.: Storm King Art Center, 1990): 9. Though published in 1990, the interview was initially recorded in 1982.

that people truly can experience its wonders. Aycock's outlook is not so different from that of Huston Paschal, who writes that, "flight's virtue, for airborne or armchair traveler, can be found in the wandering and wandering's gift for inducing—or becoming—wonder. A long distance perspective can refresh understanding of the strange mysteries close at hand."²⁴² Aycock's sculpture is an invitation to embrace, acknowledge and continue to question this potential, even if it can not be realized just yet.

A brief examination of Aycock's personal postcard collection, which she began compiling around 1977, illustrates both the kind of visual imagery most influential to her art and the concepts she continues to push and probe today. (Figs. 3.7 – 3.10) In the words of Robert Hobbs, author of a monograph on the artist, "while collecting her postcard series, Aycock began musing about the frustration that people must have experienced before the age of airplanes when they wished to represent or realize the desire to fly."²⁴³ Consisting of four images, the seemingly random collection profiles figures in various poses of "levitation and flight" up through a test flight of the Wright Brothers' glider.²⁴⁴ Though the images in this series are individually intriguing (both in terms of content and composition), it is Aycock's curation of them that is most compelling.

When viewed as a collection, the unrelated reproductions become a visual testament to Aycock's all-encompassing fascination with flight. But to understand the collective importance of this series is to recognize the specific details that caught

²⁴² Huston Paschal, "The Possibility of Impossibility," in *Defying Gravity: Contemporary Art and Flight*, co-curators Huston Paschal and Linda Johnson Dougherty (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art 2003): 50.

²⁴³ Robert Hobbs, *Alice Aycock: Sculpture and Projects*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005), 201.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

Aycock's fancy. In the first postcard, a fifteenth century scene of an angel proclaiming Christ's birth to the shepherds by Sano de Pietro, Aycock found the artist's depiction of the angel particularly mesmerizing. The figure is in the center of the top register and is backed by a clear blue sky. No doubt unsure how to portray a flying figure, the artist gave the angel wings, painted what can only be described as a strange, cloud like form in the place of legs, and surrounded the entire shape with a faint golden glow. The result is an odd, angelic hybrid who symbolically straddles earth and heavenly spheres while hovering between this world and the next. Sano de Pietro's angel finds an unlikely counterpart in the second image of the series, a 1905 photograph of horse-diver Eunice Winkless. Aside from the fact that Winkless is an amusing character who completes her feats of daring while fully clothed, Aycock loved the image for the way it froze this talented performer mid-dive. The result is a petrified scene in which the horse is "momentarily defying gravity" and virtually perpendicular with the ground.²⁴⁵

A similar heart-stopping pause is captured in the third image, which dates from 1887. Yet another freeze-frame, mid-action shot the third postcard depicts a lone male figure leaping across a natural rock divide in the Wisconsin Dells. The gap he has chosen to bridge is significant and the moment was photographed early enough so that it's difficult to conclude whether the jumper indeed made the jump. As a result there is something thrilling but dangerous about this man's momentary flight. The forth and final reproduction is a photograph of Wilbur Wright experimenting with one of the gliders he and his brother constructed the year before his famous flight. In this image, Aycock clearly was drawn to the momentous, if not pregnant, occasion. On a more formal level,

²⁴⁵ Hobbs, 201. Hobbs also notes that, "Aycock's fascination with this postcard image may also derive in part from the approximately forty-foot-high wooden diving platform that resembles some of her sculptures." Hobbs, 210.

she was captivated by the way the glider seemed to hover effortlessly in the sky, itself starkly delineated from the darker ground below. Of utmost interest was what she saw as “a strong relationship between the position of Wilbur’s body on that glider and the position of the angel’s body in the air.”²⁴⁶ This relationship is not at all surprising, for as Aycock’s entire postcard collection demonstrates, spiritual elevation and physical flight are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

In addition to a broad interest in the instruments, imagery and mechanics of flight as found within this postcard series, Aycock repeatedly points to the fading memory of her grandmother as a metaphor for viewing traversals of time and space less literally. Elaborating on her enchantment, Aycock explains:

I want my art to be as fluid and fantastical as my grandmother’s mind....Now that she’s 100 she voyages in time. One minute she believes it is 30 years ago, the next it is tomorrow. She sometimes knows it’s me. Then I become her sister, or the daughter that she never had. Her life is fueled by dreams.²⁴⁷

Thus, Aycock’s version of flight is not a straightforward progression from point A to point B, nor is it a progression from past to present or present to future. Aycock’s flight is undirected and knows no bounds. Its motion is simultaneously forward, backward, and elliptical. It has the ability to encompass mind, body and spirit or simply isolate and expose each individually.

While her grandmother’s loss of mental faculties provided an initial metaphor, Aycock soon found herself drawn to the plight of schizophrenics. The hallucinations of a person suffering from this psychological disorder obliterate all rationality, particularly when it comes to distinctions between time and space. Oftentimes schizophrenics

²⁴⁶ As quoted in Fineberg, 7.

²⁴⁷ As quoted in Paul Richard, “Stage Props in Search of A Pastime: Alice Aycock’s ‘Game of Flyers’ at 12th & G,” *Washington Post*, February 23, 1980.

seamlessly locate themselves in multiple identities both in the present and in the past. Such scopic associations with speed, time travel and free fall – all facets of a schizophrenic mind grappling with the pervasive nature of reality and illusion – fit well into Aycock’s own interests in “flights of the imagination.”²⁴⁸ They also solidified her wish to create works that derived from unconventional schools of science and philosophy and could prompt viewers to embrace, in the words of Robert Hobbs, “new ways of thinking about themselves and the world around them.”²⁴⁹

Aycock’s entire approach to flight and the mysteries of the universe is itself rather like a schizophrenic’s. She purposefully conflates time, speed, memory, and reverie while also engaging the technical wonders of air and space travel. According to Howard Risatti, “it is these...contradictory but co-existing ideas that are the keys to Aycock’s work,” that the universe can be understood both through scientific, rational, enlightenment thought and through explorations of ghosts, the subconscious, and unsubstantiated faith-based phenomena.²⁵⁰ Aycock’s sculptures then can be viewed as three-dimensional renderings of this collision between scientific fact and historical hypothesis. Taking this idea one step further, critic Brooke Kamin Rapaport suggests that Aycock’s more recent projects (like *Star Sifter*) are an attempt on the part of the artist “to place the complexities of our uncertain moment within a larger sense of history.”²⁵¹ While such preoccupations find their way into all of Aycock’s works, a brief examination of select sculptures allows the viewer to understand how such complex, competing definitions of the universe truly come alive in the airport – a place in which a traveler’s

²⁴⁸ Hobbs, 70.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Howard Risatti. “The Sculpture of Alice Aycock and Some Observations on Her Work,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 6, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1985): 37.

²⁵¹ Rapaport, 33.

experience of flight is all too often as confused, jumbled and as broadly defined as Aycock's.

Published in 2005, Robert Hobbs' *Alice Aycock: Sculpture and Projects* is the first monograph on the artist and an unflinchingly thorough exploration of her artistic output and the pedantic philosophical fascinations that inform her art. Situating this artist among her peers and those who came before her is no easy task. Yet Hobbs' assessment leaves no connection unexplored, no literary or artistic source unrecognized as he elevates this artist to her rightful place among the most influential sculptors of the late twentieth century. Rather than retrace much of the work Hobbs has done to compile this artistic biography, I have chosen to highlight one of Aycock's works which I believe most predicts the themes, associations and design elements present in *Star Sifter* and are therefore most relevant to unlocking the uncanny report between the sculpture and its airport site.

First exhibited in 1978 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, *The Angels Continue Turning the Wheels of the Universe despite Their ugly Souls: Part II, in Which the Angel in the Red Dress Returns to the Center on a Yellow Cloud above a Group of Swineherds (It was a Pseudo-World of Love-Philters and Death-Philters)*, is a work that collapses Aycock's flight related obsessions with the imaginings of medieval mystics and twentieth century philosophers alike. (Fig. 3.11) This work also showcases her love of long, intricate titles and corresponding texts.²⁵² In fact, Aycock modeled the first portion

²⁵² The text which accompanies this work is as follows:

"FIRST: The emperor maintains his connection with the dome of heaven by devising a lunar calendar. The emperor speaks: 'When a moon creature is unwise enough to allow itself to be caught in the open air near midday its outer fur is singled by the intense heat.'

SECOND: The comet of 240 B.C. reappears on the sail of a small boat. Peter Peaks: 'What is this unknown pushing force?'

of this title on “a French manuscript illumination that depicts two angels turning the wheel that guides the universe.”²⁵³ Much like the reproductions in her postcard collection, this image prompted Aycock to make a variety of disparate scientific, spiritual, and historical connections. She found in this illumination “a correlation between the wheels of the universe and the wheels that resulted in the Machine Age, the Industrial Revolution.”²⁵⁴ Spurred by her fascination with this correlation, Aycock found herself “involved in false speculations [and] concocting various world views.”²⁵⁵ Not surprisingly, these world views were multifaceted.

Fabricated entirely from wood, *The Angels Continue Turning the Wheels of the Universe despite Their ugly Souls: Part II*, is a room-filling installation that commands attention much like a church altar. Public participation is limited to viewing, but there is certainly no shortage of things to see. The installation’s many parts all sit on a circular platform slightly above the ground. That raised circle is inscribed in a wooden square a configuration which Aycock says, “came from an Islamic diagram describing how a rainbow was formed. It’s a beautiful diagram, it’s totally inaccurate but it intrigued me.”²⁵⁶ The decision to include these derivative forms was made not because Aycock wanted to pepper the work with pedagogic elements, but rather because the artist thrives on introducing herself to concepts and imagery with which she was previously

THIRD: The windbag man uses his wings to fan the fire with which to kill his enemies, the French doves. The windbag man speaks: ‘Anyone who for so long has owned a horse or a dog or a cat has felt its uncanny sense of trouble in the air.’

FOURTH: The emperor, trying unsuccessfully to hide a noisy fart, speaks again: ‘Is it a circle or an ellipse?’” A.A.

²⁵³ Hobbs 214.

²⁵⁴ As quoted in Ruth K. Meyer, “Interview with Alice Aycock.” *D.A.A. Journal* (January 1980): 8. I think it’s also fair to say she might be directly referencing Sano de Piero’s angel in the title as well.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ As quoted in Fineberg, 8-9.

unfamiliar. For Aycock, the fact that the diagram is inaccurate is secondary to the beauty of the form and the beauty behind the idea of the form.

A strange amalgam of three dimensional wooden structures surrounded by a small fence is arranged upon the platform. To the viewer's right is what looks to be the shaft of a thick truncated wooden column. Sliced at about a forty five degree angle, the column remnant is oriented so that its center, like that of a tree, reveals a series of concentric circles. Moving from the perimeter of the form to the center, the circles decrease in both diameter and height like concave stairs descending to the column's core. What only can be described as a wooden halo held in place in the air by two thin planks of wood is above the shaft. A ladder leans on the back of the halo and finds its counterpart on the extreme left of the installation, where Aycock has constructed a sturdy but narrow stairway.

The stairs appear climbable; that is until they end and resume only after having been inverted!²⁵⁷ Aycock says about this sculptural detail:

where the steps go sort of normally and then there's a break and then they go upside down, was a metaphor for what I was trying to get at: there is a normal system that you are accustomed to and then all of a sudden something intervenes and the world is completely changed around and you have to develop a new way of dealing with it, a new structure in order to get somewhere else.²⁵⁸

This metaphor of impediment is an important one at this phase in Aycock's career, for in the years leading up to the creation of *The Angels Continue Turning the Wheels of the Universe despite Their ugly Souls: Part II*, such pivotal works as *Maze* (1972), *Low Building with Dirt Roof (for Mary)* (1973), *A Simple Network of Underground Wells and*

²⁵⁷ "As she has remarked, 'I intend my architectural elements to be taken literally. If there are stairs in a piece, they are intended to be stairs.'" Hobbs, 114.

²⁵⁸ As quoted in Fineberg, 9.

Tunnels (1975), *Circular Building with Narrow Ledges for Walking* (1976), embraced a very different approach. (Fig. 3.12 – 3.16)

In each of these preceding works (outdoor projects all) Aycock invited the viewer to participate by physically moving through (or at least attempting to move through) these most restrictive spaces. Labyrinths, rooms that prohibit standing, underground crawlspaces and impossibly precarious stairways all toyed with notions of encroaching, seductive spaces, darkness, danger and claustrophobia. Whereas Aycock once reveled in forcing her audience to reckon with such fears on a physical level (and through the physical find a philosophical enlightenment of sorts), she began to shy away from such large scale earthworks in favor of those in which audience participation was verboten.

In his 1982 interview with the artist, Jonathan Fineberg inquired specifically about this shift. Aycock responded:

First of all, it's very worrisome that someone might hurt themselves. Secondly, you exhaust a set of ideas and you want to move on. I don't make sculpture to reassure myself of what I already know; I make it to find out about something I don't know. I also wanted the pieces to be very directed experiences on my part, into which you projected yourself and fantasized. But when a sculptor designs large scale public pieces people don't necessarily know how to behave. You may want them to behave as if they're in a church and they mostly behave as though they're on a football field. So it just seemed as if it were necessary to step back and reassess that situation.²⁵⁹

When pushed further, Aycock confessed that what she really likes to provoke is “the idea of the *potential*....There's that *potential* that you feel and that's the sort of sensation that I like you to fantasize about.”²⁶⁰ She is more intrigued by creating situations in which the viewer can imagine what would or could happen, rather than be limited by practicalities. She infuses her sculptures with a fair amount of danger, be it through the use of sharp metal objects, treacherous walkways, or hauntingly magical machines. But because the

²⁵⁹ As quoted in Fineberg, 18.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

viewer is not allowed to physically enter the works, he instead is left with fancifully teasing scenarios of probability to contemplate. He becomes filled with the very inquiries, the very miraculous problems and possibilities that so fascinate the artist.

That is exactly what happens in *The Angels Continue Turning the Wheels of the Universe despite Their ugly Souls: Part II*. Aycock asks the viewer to contemplate what it would be like to enter the installation, what would happen should she attempt to climb, scale, and/or descend the various parts of the piece. Once the viewer registers both the ladder and staircase, she can pick out all sorts of inverted, non-traversable, or nowhere-leading options. The wheel made so explicit in the title can be found in various different places too. It may exist as the halo, or truncated column. It may be the lattice work structure next to the stairway which takes the shape of an old fashioned turbine.

And then there's the center grouping, a balloon-like form which appears to be rising from its own sectioned off, fenced in area of the platform. If all of these options for "normal" ascension truly ended in an impasse, the viewer could presumably float away on this magical orb. Better still, she could lose herself in the attempt and stumble upon a completely transcendent option. According to Aycock, it would be as though "one is moving through the world in a normal way and suddenly something intervenes and one has to jump over space as if it were a new space/time continuum and walk upside down in order to continue."²⁶¹ As Aycock explained to Fineberg, this entire installation "has a lot to do with fantasy."²⁶² Because "there is no longer a possibility for the spectator to enter the piece," Aycock asked herself "to try to design a series of structures that one

²⁶¹ As quoted in Hobbs, 214

²⁶² As quoted in Fineberg, 8.

could inhabit if one were in a weightless state, if one could walk upside down and didn't have to conform to the laws of gravity."²⁶³ As a result, "the piece is very symbolic."²⁶⁴

After all, Aycock stacks her sculptures with droves of details so there is never one right way to view them. Doing so is her way of trying "not to be deciphered."²⁶⁵ In other words, her "stories" and therefore her sculptures "were intended to be impenetrable fictions" so that she could remain mysterious, "not be found out," and therefore not be taken so literally.²⁶⁶ Aycock relishes these symbolic breaks, these moments of uncertain paths, unexpected solutions, and impenetrable fictions. It was only a matter of time before her works would be able to find a rightful home in an airport – itself a space which caters to the impossible by facilitating human flight.

Shortly before the International Arrivals Building at JFK was transformed into the much touted JFKIAT, the renaissance of a neighboring terminal had garnered headlines and praise of its own. Completed in 1998, construction on Terminal One evidenced the first new building project at JFK in over twenty years. Improvements to the terminal – which facilitates air transport for Air France, Japan Airlines, Korean Air and Lufthansa German Airlines – were financed and regulated by the airlines themselves.²⁶⁷ All involved hoped that the facility would encapsulate a new era of air travel, "lead the way

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ As quoted in Hobbs, 168.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ The airlines served as partners in the Terminal One Group Association, L.P, or TOGA. TOGA, together with its general partner a New York Corporation - Terminal One Management, Inc., or TOMI, oversaw all aspects related to the development of a new Terminal One. In the words of the Port Authority's Executive Director, while the governance of JFK had "always been a joint effort" between the New York/New Jersey Port Authority and its "tenant airlines," the refurbishment of Terminal One was a "benchmark product of this kind of public/private partnership." Billed as "A Private Enterprise Project to Enhance New York's Gateway Status" Terminal One was expected to "offer travelers a gateway to the world as well as the coming century." All quotes and information can be found in the Terminal One Promotional Material located in the Air Transport Files of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Archives.

for other major renovations and improvements,” and “become a symbol of the re-creation of a better JFK airport.”²⁶⁸ While these goals for Terminal One certainly seem attainable and confidence in the building campaign justified, the invocation of such hopeful rhetoric begs the question – why was the terminal in need of such an overhaul to begin with?

The history of JFK is complicated, and a thorough discussion of it well beyond the scope of this dissertation. Suffice it to say, in the decades leading up to this new construction the impression most people had of the airport was that of a dark, dreary series of poorly maintained terminals inhabited by poor souls. To understand the significance of such sweeping improvements and how they are relevant to interpreting the site-specificity of Aycock’s installation, it is helpful to imagine what an experience at JFK used to be like. There is no better source for this information than James Kaplan’s 1995 *The Airport*. Believing the soul of the airport lies with those who work behind the scenes, Kaplan set out to document a very personal history of the inner-workings of JFK, a place which has captivated him since childhood. His observations reflect a profound affinity for the airport; and though highly critical are also incredibly poignant. One can not help but sense a touch of sadness pervading his prose, a lament for the fact that this great airport’s terminals and towers seem unable to live up to the potential they once had. His language communicates the depressing aura associated with the airport in the years leading up to its reconstruction and the reputation those behind the make-over of Terminal One were trying to erase.

While many of Kaplan’s descriptions revolve around the old International Arrivals Building (which Kaplan refers to as “Kennedy’s worst place” and “the nexus of all that is wrong at the airport”), they also communicate the generally negative perception

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

the public had of JFK.²⁶⁹ Reflecting on the IAB from the outside where “the wind is assaultive” and “the present is bitter,” Kaplan writes:

It is impossible to draw cheer from acres of perpetually-under-construction asphalt, and as one approaches the great outmoded-looking terminal, one feels more repelled with every step, not by any specific outrage, but only by the sense that it ought to be better. Meeting or seeing off friends and loved ones should be sweeter, more mysterious, less aversive. Departing for faraway places should be less prosaic. The building itself should continue to inspire the awe it provoked when it was first built, only forty years ago, in an age when travel itself (and air travel in particular) was awesome.²⁷⁰

Continuing to demonstrate his frustration with the airport’s deterioration, Kaplan goes on to conclude, “No one is eager to linger in this space. This is New York at the end of the twentieth century, the American century: the greatest city in the greatest country in the world. Where are sunlight, grandeur, beauty, mystery, philanthropy, welcome, awe?”²⁷¹ Not surprisingly, Kaplan was not the only one asking such pointed questions of disappointment and disbelief. More recently (and with a great deal of sarcasm), Kaplan’s inquiries were echoed by New York Times architectural critic Herbert Muschamp who equated the outdated Kennedy with much of what’s universally wrong with airports today. Muschamp quipped:

No one goes to Kennedy International Airport expecting other than a deeply grim hour or two before boarding time. At best, the hour might be thought of as an anthropological field trip. This is the best place in New York to verify the news reports: Americans are indeed obese. We probably got that way in airports, gobbling French fries in an effort to dispel the anxiety produced by ugly surroundings, no smoking, irrational fears of crashing and the reasonable expectation that our luggage is on its way to the moon.²⁷²

²⁶⁹ James Kaplan, *The Airport: Terminal Nights and Runway Days at John. F. Kennedy International* (New York: W. Morrow 1994), 6-7.

²⁷⁰ Kaplan, 6.

²⁷¹ Kaplan, 8.

²⁷² Muschamp.

Indeed, although much of the mystique of the old Kennedy had been lost, it was hoped that the new terminal would go a long way towards recovering the airport's original brightness and allure. The tenants of Terminal One had the unique opportunity to return JFK to its glory days, make traveling through the airport a pleasant experience and set a new standard for terminal design. As Muschamp goes on to report, the completed terminal did not disappoint. (Figs. 3.17 & 3.18)

Praising everything from the “giant steel trusses” to the “soaring ceilings” and gorgeous views of a distant Manhattan skyline, Muschamp commends the architects of Terminal One for “offering an incredible flight through time...a trip back to an era before Kennedy became a theme park of life in modern Albania, to a time when jet travel still felt new and glamorous.”²⁷³ While he concedes that today's travelers may be “too sophisticated, or jaded, for such concepts,” the critic can't help but applaud what he deems an architectural triumph.²⁷⁴ Gone is the dank dinginess of previous terminals; in its place is the brightness of natural light which pours in from every possible angle. The effect, in the words of pilot and Salon.com contributor Patrick Smith, “is one of overwhelming white-ness. Everything is blindingly, brilliantly, electrically white. Huge ceiling lights reflect off the newly painted stanchions and the entire place sparkles clean as an operating room.”²⁷⁵

In addition to providing a radiant, transparent, and therefore welcoming environment, the terminal makes way finding effortless. For Muschamp, “clarity is the new terminal's greatest virtue. You always know where you are and where you're going.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Patrick Smith, “Terminal One: At JFK International Airport, in an enormous swath of asphalt, glass, and aluminum flying machines, the pilot stalks old ghosts,” from Salon.com's *Ask the Pilot*, February 21, 2003. <http://dir.salon.com/story/tech/col/smith/2003/02/21/askthepilot29/index.html>.

You even know you're on planet Earth.”²⁷⁶ Muschamp's observations about the terminal's intelligibility are particularly interesting when considered in light of Huston Pascal's thoughts about the wonders of flight. According to Paschal, “flight intrigues one to look in a direction never looked before, to think of Earth and self in a new sense – thus conjuring a world where reason and fantasy function in tandem.”²⁷⁷ In a strange way, because of its clarity, the architecture of Terminal One allows viewers to be at ease with their physical surroundings and comfortably “look in a direction never looked before.” Without question, the best views (be they literal or imaginary) can be found on the mezzanine where the curious can look across to the city, to the airfield, to the concessions, or down onto the real-time activity of the terminal itself. All of this surveillance takes place in front of the backdrop of *Star Sifter*, whose monumental presence is just as inspiring and symbolic as the building itself.

Whether entering Terminal One through street-side revolving doors or via escalators from the baggage claim below, all who arrive in the great hall have the pleasure of experiencing a welcoming, user-friendly ticketing lobby. Neatly ordered rows of check-in desks occupy the main floor space while the mezzanine rotunda designates a separate area for communing with sculpture, purchasing refreshments, or just simply sitting around and waiting. *Star Sifter* is best experienced from the mezzanine, as it successfully conveys Aycock's desire to create a work that could be “playful but like the building make a big splash.”²⁷⁸ Indeed, *Star Sifter* is a mirror of all that is praiseworthy in this terminal. Its construction is strong, steely, open, and

²⁷⁶ Muschamp, B9.

²⁷⁷ Paschal, 51.

²⁷⁸ Carol Vogel, “Visions of the Heavens,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1998.

transparent. It is colossally impressive without being intimidating and, like the building that houses it, *Star Sifter* expressly embraces and evokes the spirit of flight.

In more ways than one, the sculpture is exactly what its title suggests: a giant steel sieve which captures and attempts to siphon everything in its stratosphere.²⁷⁹ While the title and initial look of the piece may encourage more literal interpretations, viewers should not be deceived. As so accurately expressed by Hobbs:

In many respects, Aycock's art is iconographic in a traditional as well as in a striking new sense. Its many references, which take great effort to unravel, do not seem pat and formulaic after one has analyzed them. Like involved mazes seen with clarity from a bird's-eye view, they again confuse and confound once one starts to traverse them.²⁸⁰

And *Star Sifter* is no different. Because this sculpture was designed by an artist with such an expansive approach to flight, the essence captured here transcends the literal and goes far beyond what most could ever hope to envision for this space. In addition to offering a variety of visual stimuli, Aycock's mixed references to astrological signs and celestial symbols reinforce ties between earth and cosmic flight, but also between physical, philosophical, and mental journeys. They are both of the present and of the future, simultaneous indicators of what is inevitable, imaginable, and/or destined to be. Be it once or several times over, those who invite this "little spectacle" into their subconscious will discover untold interpretive possibilities and connect it to their airport experience in ways that will continue to unfurl long after they've left both behind.²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ It is interesting to note the geometry of the skylights and the wonderful shadows the piece casts on the mezzanine floor when sunlight filters down through the glass ceiling. This is perhaps one way the work might be considered participatory, for during daytime hours, viewers easily can get caught up in this web of shadows.

²⁸⁰ Hobbs, 8.

²⁸¹ Aycock, conversation with author, November 4, 2005. According to Mark Gottdiener, "when we get stuck in terminals for unexpected waits, we are forced to deal with our surroundings. Suddenly through these circumstances, things that once went unnoticed when we used the terminal at our convenience, now begin to loom large in our consciousness." Mark Gottdiener, *Life in the Air*, 31.

Taking the sculpture at face value for a moment, it is not hard to picture viewers on the mezzanine looking down through *Star Sifter*'s mesh and imagining that they are the next to be lured in and sifted.²⁸² For many, that sifting and sorting is exactly what lay in store. (Figs. 3.19 & 3.20) As is the case with any airport terminal, not all who enter Terminal One are travelers preparing for take-off. While the mezzanine and ticketing areas are accessible to the general public, the area directly below the sculpture is restricted to ticketed passengers. Only those travelers who have been scanned and "sifted" by airport security are permitted underneath.²⁸³

If one goes beyond the references implicit in the title and really analyzes *Star Sifter* in terms of its relation to its site and the language critics use when referencing this piece, a wonderfully unexpected mess of meanings results. After all, in today's precarious travel climate where airline hijackings, bombings, and in-flight terrorism are constant concerns, *Star Sifter* is a highly unusual, if not ambiguously charged, piece. Because it appears to be crashing through the floor, it could seem quite out of place in an airport lobby – a space ideally designed to maximize processing efficiency and minimize passenger anxiety. Many of today's travelers locate their flight related fears in the attacks on September 11, 2001 and the disruptive, often disturbing travel advisories in

²⁸² This is particularly interesting given the recent reports about exactly what and how much waste might be floating in space.

²⁸³ This kind of restriction –in this case having to do with security and access- is nothing new in the work of Aycock. As mentioned in a previous section, earlier works toyed with danger and claustrophobia, earthworks which soon gave way to sculptures incorporating shrapnel and sharpened objects that forbade physical interaction. It is important to point out that the security checkpoint and rotunda viewing area have been in place since the building's construction. The terminal has been arranged this way since its inception. Aycock was brought on to the project only after the architects realized that the hole in the rotunda provided a security issue. Those on the mezzanine easily could throw anything (guns, knives, weapons) down to ticketed passengers who already had been cleared for boarding. Again, it was Art Consultant Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz who suggested the architects find an artist to deal with the problem creatively and passed on Aycock's name. Aycock, phone conversation with author, October 17, 2006.

place since that date. Travelers are forced to remember how every time they enter an airport, they “must place their trust in something that they have reason – or reasons (mechanical or human failure, sabotage) – to fear.”²⁸⁴ Naturally, it would be safe to assume that a particularly sensitive traveler could have an adverse visceral reaction to this sculpture.

Although Aycock herself readily acknowledges the ironic tension inherent in the specific siting of this installation, she also is quick to point out that “the physics of explosion are not really present” here.²⁸⁵ Interestingly, critics commenting on this work post September 11, 2001 focus on the work’s positive connotations, also ignoring potential associations to collision and destruction. The very fact that negative associations seem to have been passed over is itself a kind of metaphor for the way in which the post-9-11 American public has been forced to come to terms with a new normal, especially when preparing to travel by air.

Brooke Kamin Rapaport’s 2003 *Sculpture* magazine article on Aycock, which provides a critical inquiry of the artist’s relationship to public art, is an example of such criticism. Including *Star Sifter* in her discussion, Rapaport uses glowing language to describe what she considers a spirited and transformative installation. In Rapaport’s words:

Constellations, galaxies, and ideas of space travel are all sucked into [Aycock’s] cosmic configuration, which pulses in and out, transforming a once mundane airport waiting room into a seat in the heavens. Tired, bored travelers waiting for their flights now see an optimistic vision of what air travel might lead to.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁴ Paschal 48.

²⁸⁵ Aycock, conversation with author, November 4, 2005.

²⁸⁶ Rapaport, 37.

Written over two years after planes brought down the World Trade Center Towers, Rapaport finds nothing but promise and wonder in this work. *Star Sifter* is not viewed as an explosive force nor is it the aftermath of some destructively cataclysmic event. It is instead an emblem foreshadowing “what air travel might lead to.” And in the hands and mind of Aycock, those possibilities are endless.

Writing more than two decades earlier, Edward Fry uses the very same rhetoric when analyzing the dominant, recurring themes of “levitation, fantasy, the immense invisible energies of the universe, [and] the paucity of positivist logic” in Aycock’s work.²⁸⁷ Suggesting that together, these topics are really “a call for a declaration of freedom for late twentieth century minds,” Fry goes on to praise how Aycock’s “viewpoint is ultimately optimistic, and justifiably so in the context of her own insights and among those who can grasp, even proximately, the implications of her metaphors.”²⁸⁸ These metaphors remain constant in the work of Aycock and by extension, so too does the “optimism” which underscores her entire oeuvre. Rapaport appears to understand this thread of positivism and through her comments on *Star Sifter* reinforces the relevance of it in Aycock’s public art. In the tradition of Fry, Rapaport realizes the density and abundance of Aycock’s metaphors and the profound significance they have when appreciated as part of a much larger artistic and theoretical framework. In the case of *Star Sifter*, Terminal One’s rotunda can be credited with allowing the myriad of metaphors to remain at once obscure and transparent. In this instance, site deepens meaning. The deeper one delves into the physical and philosophical significance of the airport, the more the implications of Aycock’s work teasingly unravel.

²⁸⁷ Edward F. Fry, *Alice Aycock Projects 1979-1981*. (Tampa: University of South Florida, 1981), 6-7.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

Though the objects caught in *Star Sifter*'s snare may be abstractions, there are several whose unique derivations are discernable and/or debatable. Examining these abstract forms compounds the ways in which *Star Sifter* can be interpreted as both extrapolating from, and solidifying its place within, this unique airport site. Perhaps the best shape to begin with is that which is equally reminiscent of a book, passport, or laptop, even. (Figs. 3.21 & 3.22) While the shape may well reference the businessman's triad of necessary travel – if not time killing – tools, Aycock's inclusion of it also can be interpreted as connecting back to her own love of reading; a beloved habit instilled by her father when she was just a little girl.

Recalling her childhood enthusiasm and naivety, Aycock confesses, "I thought that if I read enough books, I could know everything without having to experience it all for real. I could do everything in my imagination and stay safe. For me, even now, my safety net is books."²⁸⁹ Today, books are not just Aycock's keys to alternate histories, universes and ways of thinking. They are also a means through which to begin the artistic process. Aycock gladly admits:

I have always gone to books as a way to start the creative engine....In some cases the reading is stimulated by a specific project, like getting an expanded sense of forms relating to wind and weather for an airport proposal. But in other cases, there is just an ongoing obsession about a subject....The notion that people have devoted entire lives to investigating positive things about the world is somehow comforting...If I get a sense of the world through a particular discipline, it helps to center myself and brings both pleasure and security.²⁹⁰

Connecting these comments back to *Star Sifter* allows us to track yet another optimistic quality/nuance of the work. Books may be Aycock's theoretical safety net, but with *Star*

²⁸⁹ As quoted in Hobbs 32.

²⁹⁰ As quoted in Phyllis Braff, "Reading Informs Their Art," *New York Times*, November 18, 2001.

Sifter, that net seems to have found a sculptural form and become a metaphorical parachute for the traveler. The sifter becomes a subtle, almost prophetic protector, literally catching anyone security deems unfit for travel or anyone not imaginative enough to give in to the hidden power of dreams, fantasy, faith, improbable connections, and mysteries they cannot possibly hope to understand. Extending the metaphor still further, it may be that *Star Sifter* suggests that inquiry and the pursuit of knowledge itself are perhaps the most important safety nets of all. The sculpture's location in a building whose purpose is to facilitate one of the twentieth century's most influential dreams-turned-technology certainly strengthens this claim.

Not surprisingly, the rhetoric of optimism that surrounds this work also can be found in the words of the artist herself. As is the case with all of her works, Aycock can verbally trace this installation's physical and metaphorical origins and gladly shares these delicious morsels with her audience. When describing her immediate inspiration for *Star Sifter*'s design elements, Aycock explains that many of the forms "relate to the construction of things like buildings and airplanes."²⁹¹ Here again the language is explicitly one of *construction* and not *destruction*, and her use of the airplane structure as an inspirational source further binds this work and the more unique qualities of its airport site.²⁹²

Viewers should not forget, however, that Aycock is a quick witted artist with a sharp sense of humor. Where there is optimism, there is also sarcasm and one needs look no further than the other side of the sifter to find it. Across from the book, a mirror and a blue disk painted with a circle of white monkeys "jumping through hoops through a

²⁹¹ As quoted in Vogel, "Visions of the Heavens."

²⁹² Italics are mine

constellation” offers a unique splash of color within an otherwise industrial web of steel.²⁹³ (Figs. 3.23 – 3.26) Inspired by nineteenth century zoetropes (about which Aycock had been reading at the time), the disk is a play on motion, animation and optical illusion. It also references the unfortunate but inevitable monotony of our airport experiences. Were the zoetrope activated, spun, and viewed from the correct angle, its monkey would appear to move forward—hurdling his hoop over and over again. This allusion is particularly befitting the airport, a non-place between departure and destination where a traveler – especially a frequent flyer– can feel as though he’s been robbed of the excitement of the journey, instead finding himself on a conveyor belt of sorts, jumping through the hoops of airline regulations and airport security – inevitably feeling as though he’s “traveling but going nowhere.”²⁹⁴ In ways both “slightly humorous and a little cynical” then, *Star Sifter* hints at the banalities inherent in the contemporary flight experience but does so while offering a more imaginative alternative to the monotony.²⁹⁵

When the overall curvature of *Star Sifter*’s silhouette is considered, the work’s overwhelming optimism truly begins to reveal itself. Aycock has confirmed that, “metaphorically speaking, the curved elements [in the work] are a celestial deconstruction...loosely taken...from the computer diagrams of outer space.”²⁹⁶ Even without Aycock’s leading but vague confession, (or clues from the title) however, science fiction aficionados, *Donnie Darko* fans, and space history enthusiasts alike might well

²⁹³ Vogel, “Visions of the Heavens.”

²⁹⁴ Aycock, phone conversation with author, October 17, 2006.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ As quoted in Vogel, “Visions of the Heavens.” Though Aycock does say the form is taken from computer diagrams from outer space, she is never more specific. The wormhole interpretation is mine, though Aycock’s confession certainly gives it more plausibility.

associate Aycock's sculpture, as I do, with the "cosmic shortcut" known as a wormhole.²⁹⁷ (Figs. 3.27 & 3.28) In the words of astronomer David Darling, a wormhole is a phenomenon of physics; "a hypothetical 'tunnel' connecting two different points in spacetime."²⁹⁸ Hovering as it does between the mezzanine rotunda and the floor below, *Star Sifter* could be mistaken for just such a space age conduit. Its shape, silhouette and physical relation to its site all further this association.

As explained by BBC news science reporter Paul Rincon:

[One of the easiest ways] to visualize these phenomena involves marking two holes at opposite ends of a sheet of paper, to represent distant points in the Universe. One can then bend the paper over so that the two remote points are positioned on top of each other. If it were possible to contort space-time in this way, a person might step through a wormhole and emerge at a remote time or distant location. The person would pass through a region of the wormhole called the throat, which flares out on either side.²⁹⁹

When this description and accompanying two-dimensional computer renderings of wormholes are compared with *Star Sifter*, the work appears to be a sculptural extrapolation of just such a "flare." This corollary is profound, for it again suggests the depth with which *Star Sifter* is in tune with the goings on of this site. Not only is it in synch with the literal happenings that occur in this space, it is prescient in the possibilities and consequences it suggests the viewer contemplate.

Unproven vehicles of time travel, wormholes successfully connect with Aycock's interest in schizophrenia, her grandmother's failing mind, and her fascination with the writings of Jorge Luis Borges. While wormholes may be "one of the most menacing and mysterious things in space," their potential existence keeps the hope of time travel

²⁹⁷ Paul Rincon, "Wormhole 'no use' for time travel," *BBC News Online*, May 23, 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/4564477.stm>.

²⁹⁸ David Darling, "Wormhole," from *The Encyclopedia of Astrobiology, Astronomy and Spaceflight – A resource of The Worlds of David Darling*. <http://www.daviddarling.info/encyclopedia/W/wormhole.html>.

²⁹⁹ Rincon.

alive.³⁰⁰ “Popping through a wormhole could bring distant galaxies to your doorstep” and allow those who pass through and safely return “to travel into the future,” assuming they lived to tell the tale.”³⁰¹ Like the mental travels of those who dreamed of flying long before it was possible, wormholes offer a back door into the mysteries of flight, time travel, and heretofore inexplicable universal forces. They also relate to Borges’ ‘tear in the universe’ a concept with which she is particularly enraptured.

Among the authors and philosophers whose literary works Aycock often conjures, Borges is a favorite. In a 1990 interview with Grace Glueck, Aycock had the following to say:

I keep remembering the Borges story ‘The Aleph,’ in which the narrator finds a tear in the universe that allowed him to see everything that was and is and will be. He is thus able to pull himself away from the ‘now’ by understanding what came before him, living in the world that is, and envisioning another one.³⁰²

In one of her trademark witty confessions Aycock goes on to say, “I’d be happy if I could just find a tiny rip.”³⁰³ After reading this statement, one can’t help but equate the way *Star Sifter* collapses the first and second floors of the rotunda with Aycock’s attempt at creating and/or finding “a tiny rip.” Like a wormhole or universal tear, *Star Sifter* simultaneously predicts and provides the journey – whatever that may be. Whether an odyssey through the regenerative, creative mind of an artist, through the airport, or through all the imaginings of flight this unique site affords, *Star Sifter* is at once a work of the now, then, and future. Hobbs asserts that understanding Aycock’s infatuation with Borges’ writing may well be the key to understanding the overarching philosophy of her

³⁰⁰ Un-authored link related to Rincon’s article entitled “Space – Wormholes,” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/space/deepspace/wormholes/index.shtml>.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² As quoted in Grace Glueck, “A Sculptor Whose Imagery is Encyclopedic,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1990.

³⁰³ Ibid.

oeuvre. As a result, *Star Sifter* is but one sculptural expression of Borges' delineation of "the discovery of a glitch in our time-space continuum;" one "that affords a view beyond it" to a time, place or galaxy far, far away.³⁰⁴

Associating *Star Sifter* with both the look and practicability of a wormhole or a "tear in the universe" builds on questions inherent in the travel by air experience and the unpredictable journeys which begin and end at the airport. Such routine queries as: Will my flight get in on time? Will my luggage get lost? Will the person in front of me keep her seatback in the upright position? Will there be a terrorist on my plane? All find their counterpart in Aycock's construction and the more profound what ifs it prompts. After all, wormholes are uncertainties:

No one knows whether wormholes exist let alone what would happen if you sent a spacecraft through them. If they do exist they could be very short-lived, and may not even survive long enough for a spacecraft to reach the other side. And if the spaceship did make it, its mass might cause the wormhole to snap shut, cutting the astronauts off for good.³⁰⁵

So, the lines of inquiry that are opened through this association are just as valuable, if not more so, than a simple sifter might suggest. While it may foster visions of future air and space transportation, fundamentally, *Star Sifter* is a work that empowers viewers to find merit in asking questions and seeking knowledge about our universe, our place within it, and the future of both.

This connection to various kinds of time and space travel also opens the door for investigations into the eventuality of commercial space transport. Such companies as Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic "space tourism firm" and its leading rival Rocketplane Kistler are making headlines as they race to be the first to allow tourists to "hitch a

³⁰⁴ Hobbs 151.

³⁰⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/space/deepspace/wormholes/index.shtml>.

galactic joy ride” into outer space.³⁰⁶ Assuming their crafts and crews met the standards of federal regulations, enthusiasts willing to pay the prohibitively high premium routinely will be able to blast off into space as early as 2008. In the words of retired NASA astronaut John Herrington, these firms are ushering in “the beginning of a whole new era of commercial space travel.”³⁰⁷ It is fair to suggest that, because of the lines of inquiry it champions, *Star Sifter* foreshadows the intergalactic touristic experiences we may come to know and take for granted decades from now.

But the visions we have of the future—the visions and dreams encouraged by the “openness” of *Star Sifter*—need not be restricted to outer space.³⁰⁸ They can also refer to advances in the commercial airplane industry and the dream of each person being able to own his own plane or fly as easily as he would drive his car; a dream that remains very much in vogue in the popular press. Shortly after the completion of *Star Sifter*, an article by David Fallows appeared in the *New York Times* that profiled Cirrus Design, a Minnesota based company whose “basic idea is to build small airplanes that ordinary people will find simple and safe enough to fly...fast enough to beat the airlines on door-to-door speed for short-and medium-length trips and...inexpensive enough...to appeal to those who already constitute the market for fancy cars, expensive R.V.’s and vacation homes.”³⁰⁹ While personal planes were (and still are) a long way from being a viable,

³⁰⁶ Alicia Chang, “The race to blast tourists into space is on,” *USA Today*, March 19, 2006. http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/space/2006-03-19-space-tourism_x.htm.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ The use of the term “openness” here is not dissimilar from Hobb’s use of it in the introduction to his monograph. Hobb’s outlines how one of the goals of his book is to “demonstrate how the openness Aycock courts in her art is relatable to new ways of viewing the world in the late twentieth century that are a legacy of the information age, first in terms of the widespread advance of the mass media in the mid-twentieth century and then in terms of the creation of PCs in the 1970s followed by changes enacted by the Internet at the century’s end.” Hobbs, 3. I would argue that the “openness” I deem specific to *Star Sifter* is a microcosmic indicator of the kind of varied openness Hobbs finds in all of Aycock’s works.

³⁰⁹ James Fallows, “Turn Left at Cloud 109,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1999.

day-to-day transportation option for the everyman, commercial aviation indeed might be moving in that direction.

This myriad of associations nurtured by *Star Sifter* fall directly in line with Stuart Morgan's on point and now prophetic comments of 1978. So presaging are Morgan's comments, they may as well be in reference to her more recent installations. Writing of Aycock and her projects of the 1970s, Morgan observes:

the main trajectory of her career implies the recognition that the world may not be ordered or chaotic but the product of a third possibility: merely that it is very complex. Her sustaining belief has been that objects can be made to reflect this. Her method has been that of storytelling within a web of allusion which undermines and underpins her intuitive ransacking of a private body of anecdotes, experiences and items of history.³¹⁰

Created twenty years after Morgan penned these words, *Star Sifter* becomes a testament not only to the career trajectory of an artist, but to the complexity she continues to court.

Star Sifter is Morgan's web of allusion, but it is also Aycock's safety net, wormhole, tear in the universe, and optimistic receptacle of inquiry. Even more to the point, because of this complexity and the wonderful mess of order and chaos it embodies, *Star Sifter* is a brilliant example of art for the airport. It is the sculptural equivalent of the transitions that happen in this airport space and the promise that can still exist in the minds of all who dare to inquire about where we come from and where we are going.

When it comes to public artists Aycock is among the best. She is a successful, relevant, fine artist whose sculpture and drawings are in countless collections and yet particularly values the creation of art for public places. She also understands the strange

³¹⁰ Stuart Morgan, "Alice Aycock: A House for the Self," in *After Years of Ruminations on the Events That Led Up to This Misfortune...Alice Aycock: Projects and Proposals 1971-1978*, Alice Aycock (Allentown, PA: Muhlenberg College Center for the Arts, 1978).

polemics of the genre and thrives on the dialogue which concurrently challenges and justifies its necessity. Aycock's position as a public artist – a position that one could argue she has occupied since the early days of her career – has been far more steadfast than most. Her work is therefore more symptomatic of the problems plaguing today's public artists, particularly those who would like to remain so. She is different than Acconci in that she hasn't given up on the public art or percent for art commissioning processes altogether, but her frustrations with these projects are similar to his and therefore all too familiar. First vocalized over thirty years ago, Aycock's initial concerns are still sound and relevant today. What sets her apart, however, is the way she ultimately chooses to engage her frustrations. In a 1986 round table discussion at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, Aycock confessed:

I am wary of the public situations now because I don't want anybody to tell me what color to make it, how big to make it. Once I get into those committee situations, I just pull back; I don't want to be democratic since many of the ideas have taken a long time to work out and although some things can be flexible, I'm not going to give much away at that stage of the process. For me that sort of public situation is destructive since I see it as a compromising one. I sometimes feel that the only way I can survive is by cultivating a few supportive, eccentric patrons who will allow me to go on producing my work.³¹¹

With this disclosure, Aycock's lament about the creative limitations of public commissions sounds remarkably akin to Acconci's, but her concession/solution has much more in common with Diller + Scofidio. Diller + Scofidio successfully courted a small but powerful group of dedicated critics, who in turn created a body of literature and promoted their work while never once forcing the artists to compromise their collective vision. After seeing Aycock's words, it appears as though Diller + Scofidio were able to

³¹¹ Alice Aycock, "Round Table Discussions," in Hugh M. Davies and Ronald J. Onorato, *Sitings: Alice Aycock, Richard Fleischner, Mary Miss, George Trakas, Sally Yard*, ed. (La Jolla: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986), 110.

generate the exact situation of which Aycock speaks. But the same would not be true for Aycock. Rather than giving in to her frustrations, temporarily turning her back on this kind of art making, or dismissing it altogether, Aycock scrutinizes them with the same rigor and inquisitiveness that she approaches a cosmic query.

Her desire and resultant commitment to address such issues, along with her no-holds-barred candor, make Aycock a true voice in the field (especially considering that she eagerly shares her practical experience of the commissioning process on countless panels devoted to the intricacies of public art). Despite her continued presence as an art maker and discussant, in recent years Aycock's public artwork has not received the critical attention or assessment that it (or she) deserves. This fact is troubling, so much so that both Hobbs and Rapaport mention this absence in their respective writings.

In his monograph on the artist, Hobbs briefly acknowledges Aycock's recent public projects as an important part of her artistic contribution. But he does so only to explain the reasoning behind his leaving them for another study. The author concedes he passed on the opportunity to address these projects at length because, "although her subsequent public sculptures build on a substantial number of the ideas examined in this study, they open a new and different chapter deserving its own publication."³¹² From an editorial standpoint, Hobbs' decision is honest and understandable. However, while *Star Sifter* and others of Aycock's commissions since the 1990s may have been created under the rubric of public sculpture, they are absolutely a part of her previous works and should not be evaluated or interpreted as completely separate from them. While the invitation to view these works as unique entities more closely enmeshed with their sites and each other (as opposed to their predecessors or non-public art contemporaries) is appropriate, this

³¹² Hobbs 4.

mode of interpretation should not come at the expense of underscoring the presence/importance of Aycock's overall sculptural and thematic trajectory.

This omission on the part of Hobbs, and the general lack of critically substantive dialogue surrounding Aycock's recent projects, becomes even more apparent when considering Rapaport's observations. Aycock's interviewer rightly notes that while the artist continues to be incredibly prolific, "and is teeming with ideas, she has not received as many notable commissions in recent years as might be expected."³¹³ Naturally, this conclusion leads Rapaport to beg the question: "so why the silence about her work?"³¹⁴

In their own ways, both Hobbs and Rapaport insinuate that "public art itself at the present time" might be to blame for this silence.³¹⁵ While a staunch, albeit critical advocate of public art and its vetting process, Aycock's take on her role as a public artist is groundbreaking and forward-thinking. Rather than playing it safe by creating innocuous, background-blending works, Aycock clarifies her calling as a public artist, declaring to Rapaport: "my job is not to give you what you think you want or are comfortable with....My job is to do something that is exciting and interesting and not about the everyday."³¹⁶ As this chapter has proven, *Star Sifter* is a magnificent example of public art, one that engages the intricacies of the airport experience on a multitude of interpretive levels. To that end, the airport—that profoundly unique space which so

³¹³ Rapaport, 33.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ As quoted in Rapaport, 34. However theoretically textured they may be, at the end of the day, Aycock's works are accessible to a wide audience. This availability is due in large part to Aycock's commitment to fostering an open dialogue with viewers. In the words of the artist, communicating with the public is "a way of breaking out of the elitist art world. I don't deal with ideas that are so theoretical that only a graduate student can understand them." Her works just might be a little more unexpected, and slightly more challenging than what the public has been conditioned to look for.

beautifully displays *Star Sifter*'s fruitful merging of sculpture and site—becomes the perfect medium through which to understand Aycock's well-honed public art philosophy.

In Aycock's opinion, public art gets "a bad rap;" it is viewed as "an art form that is not legit and has sprung from the rear end of the government."³¹⁷ While there are kernels of truth in those sarcastic statements, Aycock intimates not all public art need perpetuate those awful stereotypes. Because such commissions have to "play into the powers that be," artists are forced to find a way to be provocative without courting controversy.³¹⁸ The real problem is that only a few artists recognize this dilemma and fewer still manage to navigate it successfully. As Aycock explains, unfortunately the majority of public commissions are eroded by "an absurd literalness."³¹⁹ In order to play it safe, artists get caught in the trap of referencing the "most obvious, literal, cliché things," as is often the case with art in airports.³²⁰ Aycock's works avoid this trap because they lack total transparency: purely literal references are foreign, if not anathema, to the way she creates.

Having said that, Aycock struggles to "develop a strategy" that allows her to create complex public installations and "not dumb down" her ideas.³²¹ For Aycock, being able to rise to that occasion is "an art in itself" and one of the fundamental trials of public artists.³²² Preferring "difficult ideas and eclecticism" to trivial banality, Aycock believes the public needs something that can shake us out of our routines and apathy and

³¹⁷ Aycock, conversation with author, November 4, 2005.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Alice Aycock, *Art Commission Awards for Excellence in Design Winning Projects 2004* (Center for Architecture AIA New York Chapter's Panel Discussion and Exhibition Opening July 18, 2005). Panelists included Leonard Lopate, Vito Acconci, Alice Aycock, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle and Michael Van Valkenburgh.

³²⁰ Aycock, conversation with author, November 4, 2005.

³²¹ Aycock, *Art Commission Awards for Excellence in Design Winning Projects 2004*.

³²² Ibid.

make us think a little differently about ourselves, our experiences and the world around us. She advocates artworks that are neither “benign” nor “bland,” but rather “out of the ordinary.”³²³ While she champions “the alien – something that looks like it came from outer space and landed,” that is not to say she creates works that are totally disconnected from each other or their environs.³²⁴

Aycock’s affinity for “the alien” and subjects that interest her are much like the objects caught in *Star Sifter*’s vortex. Once she gets a hold of a topic she finds intriguing, she fixates on it and never quite lets it go. As a result, her artworks are rich with overlapping themes and metaphors that seem to evolve and take on new meanings all on their own. Aycock’s past works are themselves exercises in discovery and therefore never far from thought. When beginning to think about a new project, Aycock says she asks herself what form the next idea should take “given the context and what I’m [currently] obsessing about?”³²⁵ Thus, even when approaching the creation of a work for a particularly unique space (like an airport), Aycock allows previous pre-occupations and alien forms to take hold and insert themselves in surprising new ways.

When it comes to the airport, Aycock has very definite opinions about both the space and her audience. For Aycock, the airport is a strange, uninhabitable “cyberspace made real” where conceptions of public-ness and community are evasive, if not indeterminable.³²⁶ Unlike most generic public places, “there isn’t the same sense of ‘public’ ownership” at an airport; “it’s not the same kind of contested space.”³²⁷ Because

³²³ Aycock, conversation with author, November 4, 2005.

³²⁴ Aycock, *Art Commission Awards for Excellence in Design Winning Projects 2004*.

³²⁵ Aycock, conversation with author, November 4, 2005.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid.

there is not one single, homogenous group that occupies this space day in and day out, “nobody gets annoyed that this art is on their village green.”³²⁸ For Aycock, “the airport is a nowhere land.” No one is “is going to tell you that because it doesn’t sound good. But it is.”³²⁹ Her impressions of the airport are not far from Pico Iyer who similarly writes:

What makes the airport special...is that it is a gift store with culture shock: the product, in its video arcades, its hotels, and its cocktail lounges, of a mixed marriage between a border crossing and a shopping mall. And the confusions of any shop where people are surrounded by signs they can’t read and people they can’t follow are amplified in this place where so many customers are from somewhere far away, and so many of the shopkeepers are recent arrivals with a shaky hold on English.³³⁰

As though picking up where Iyer leaves off, Aycock believes the airport is a place where “the sense of being local is left to the postcards and souvenirs, but it is a nowhere zone” replete with neon signage and kitschy décor.³³¹ “If anything is 1984 – than it’s [the airport]!”³³²

When tapped to create a work of art for these vast “nowhere zones,” Aycock confesses that the traveler/audience she has in mind is herself. Because she thinks the entire airport experience such an ordeal, she likes to create installations which can be appreciated by a traveler who is constantly on the move; someone who wants to get in and get out without lingering unnecessarily. Thus, the sculpture must be able to hold up to a “walk by experience,” or to travelers who “just happen to turn around for a quick second” as they grab a hot dog or a cup of coffee.³³³ In that moment, the viewer can experience what Aycock calls a “quick hit” or “a little spectacle;” a glimpse of a magic

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Iyer, *The Global Soul*, 49-50.

³³¹ Aycock, conversation with author, November 4, 2005.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid.

element that in her words is “a little scary and a little delicious.” As this chapter has proven, in the case of *Star Sifter* the entire piece is full of rich elements all of which can be credited as being scary and/or delicious, conducive to both quick hits and contemplation alike.

Completed three years later, Aycock’s installation for Philadelphia International Airport offers a strikingly apropos comparison piece for *Star Sifter*, reinforcing all that is innovative and remarkably airport/terminal/site specific about the JFK commission. (Fig. 3.29) Significantly smaller, *What the Traveler Needs for Mechanical Operations on the Stars* was designed to be suspended from the ceiling of Terminal F’s transfer area.³³⁴ Located behind security, the impact of the piece is far more subdued than its JFK counterpart. In fact, those passing beneath the sculpture can go about their airport business without ever having a strong visual encounter with the piece.³³⁵

Though the scale, levels of audience interaction, and physical and visual spaces this work occupies are all quite different than those of *Star Sifter*, there is an incontrovertible similarity in the way these two pieces conflate notions of air and space flight. Containing components that are symbolically related to, if not extrapolated from *Star Sifter*, *What the Traveler Needs for Mechanical Operations on the Stars* uniformly

³³⁴ The project’s description is as follows: “Philadelphia International Airport - US Airways Terminal F, Hub Area 1- Aluminum, Plexiglas, stainless steel, fiber optics, vinyl, motorized parts, approximately 15’ x 15’ x 12’; 2001, Budget \$250,000.” City of Philadelphia Percent for Art Program Files.

³³⁵ According to Aycock, at JFK the roofs hadn’t been designed to hold serious loads – which obviously went a long way to dictating the commission constraints. (Alice Aycock, conversation with author, 4 November 2005). However, in Philadelphia she was lucky enough to be involved with the commission at an early enough phase to ensure the ceilings could accommodate the weight of her sculpture. Oftentimes, Aycock is brought in on a project long after the architectural design has been laid out. The ideal situation, however, is to be involved as early as the construction document phase, so that there is time to address any structural issues that may arise as a result of her ideas. Since Aycock loves the notion of “weightlessness” she likes to be able to do all in her power to best implement that effect. She hates not having enough time to figure out how best to procure that feeling, the worst case scenario would be having to blow the illusion by putting “a fucking pole there.” Ibid.

taps into Aycock's fascination with the blurring of science, technology, alchemy, and astrology. But it does so in the guise of a completely new configuration of forms. As laid out in the project description:

The proposal consists of five major suspended elements: a partial dome, a triangle, a rhomboid with an elliptical cut-out, a spinning 'sifter,' and a slowly rotating archimedian screw...The rhomboid and the dome are covered with star constellations and celestial charts from the northern and southern hemispheres. The triangle is covered with an illustration of a serpent and a bear from the Draco and Ursa Minor constellation which contains the North Star.³³⁶

Speaking to the more interpretive aspects of the work, the description continues:

The sculptural assemblage is a fanciful speculation about segments of the universe which was once thought to run like a machine. The work is also about the celebration and exhilaration of adventure and travel, whether one is going away or returning home.³³⁷

While the basic thematic parallels between *Star Sifter* and *What the Traveler Needs for Mechanical Operation on the Stars* are inarguable, it is fair to say that the Philadelphia work is much less engaged with its site, both physically and metaphorically. This work does not depend on its airport site and as a result doesn't provoke as many interpretive possibilities. Quite frankly, *What the Traveler Needs for Mechanical Operation on the Stars* could be placed in any university science building, NASA gallery, or generic air and/or space museum. In fact, it is hung in much the same way as some sort of spacecraft or navigational tool on display in a gallery would be. While an interesting, thematically appropriate piece, it does not respond to its site nor does it enlist or predict the experiences or imagination of the viewer/traveler with the same overwhelming power of *Star Sifter*. It also fails to capture the same kind of "alien" sensibility. When the basics of these two works are compared, *What the Traveler Needs for Mechanical Operation on*

³³⁶ Aycock, unpublished artist statement, City of Philadelphia Percent for Art Program Files.

³³⁷ Ibid.

the Stars is revealed as a less textured installation; a revelation which in turn effortlessly avows the true genius of *Star Sifter*.

Despite its controversial reception and less than obvious thematic congruity, Aycock's installation for Kansas City International Airport evidences yet another approach to "the alien" and to happenings unique to the airport environment. Located outside terminal walls, *Strange Attractor for Kansas City* (installed in November of 2006) is just as dependent on its site as *Star Sifter*, yet its meanings are far more impenetrable and its existence far more questionable. (Figs. 3.30 & 3.31) Though technically an airport commission, Aycock's Kansas City project was financed by funds from the \$90 million allocated for the consolidation of the airport's rental car facilities.³³⁸ Rather than site the percent for art work directly outside the rental car building, "the selection panel that chose Aycock proposed the economy parking lot...because more people will use the parking facility" and therefore a broader spectrum of the public would get to view and experience the sculpture.³³⁹ As a result, the roundabout adjacent to the

³³⁸ Mike Rice, "KC gets a peak at future KCI art." *Kansas City Star*, April 8, 2005. The following information was reported in a later article about the distribution of funds, "Alice Aycock estimates she will spend the \$270,000 budget for her airport artwork this way: She will pay a young architect in her office to work out fabrication details. She will pay an engineer to review and approve all the details of the artwork's construction. The largest chunk of funds will go to the fabricator, who buys the materials for construction and pays the labor. She will take out contractor's liability and workman's compensation policies. She will pay local firms to install the work – to dig the foundation, man the cranes used to erect it and do the electrical work. She will pay them in accordance with the city's mandated wage scale. The artist's fee is what's left, generally 10 percent to 15 percent of the total budget, about what an architect or general contractor takes. 'Sometimes I get nothing,' Aycock said." "How the money is spent, who's paying for it," *Kansas City Star*, August 7, 2005.

³³⁹ Rice, "KC gets a peak at future KCI art." According to Porter Arneill, the director and public art administrator for Kansas City's Municipal Art Commission, "To develop public art in Kansas City, a stringent selection process is used for each project. Aycock was selected by a volunteer panel made up of Aviation Department staff, arts professionals, art commission members and citizens. The panel chose her from more than 90 artists who responded to a nationally distributed request for qualifications. The selection panel made its recommendation to the Municipal Art Commission, which approved the selection and recommended to the City Council that the artist contract with the city to create the artwork. It should also be noted that the Aviation Department is not taxpayer supported. Its income is generated by tenants

parking garage was deemed a more suitable location for the project, which Aycock describes as “a huge funnel.”³⁴⁰

Fabricated from aluminum, the sculpture takes the form of two large trumpet bells which have been severed from their instruments and fused together at their narrowest points. Each bell is 20 feet around and is illuminated from the inside by “metal halide lights” from which emanates a bright white light beam “surrounded by a ring of blue or neon.”³⁴¹ An odd, otherworldly glow envelops the piece, which is only enhanced by the phosphorescence of 35 foot high, bright orange zigzags placed like antennae on the earth around it. Those driving by the work will no doubt fight the urge to stare, if not stop to climb in and discover the light source, or wonder what strange and wonderful object or creature might crawl out.

For Aycock, the work “has a little bit of the quality of ‘the alien has landed.’”³⁴² As revealed in a 2005 Pratt Institute Lecture, this sculpture fits in well with Aycock’s current attraction to “the idea of flying saucers, aliens, and space travel, ‘or, rather, people’s fantasies about these things.’”³⁴³ It is abstract, visually loud, and seemingly out of place. And, judging from the numerous opinions of the work expressed in the popular press, various members of the City Council felt the alien was landing too. In the words of *Kansas City Star* journalist Alice Thorson:

Like most public art projects, the Aycock commission has generated kudos and condemnation. Taxpayers have complained about the project’s \$270,000 expense, City Council members have both denigrated and defended Aycock’s design, and the artist has faced the brickbats with patience born of 30 years of experience in making

and the operation of the airport.” Porter Arneill, “How KC gets its public art,” *Kansas City Star*, April 22, 2005.

³⁴⁰ As quoted in “About the Artist,” *The Kansas City Star*, August 7, 2005.

³⁴¹ Rice, “KC gets a peak at future KCI art.”

³⁴² As quoted in “About the Artist.”

³⁴³ “Sculptor Alice Aycock Lectures,” *Gateway: The Community Newsletter of Pratt Institute* 15, no. 16, (April 21, 2005).

public art.³⁴⁴

Council comments ranged from the “this looks like something a kid put together” and “I don’t know why we have to have art that everybody has to guess what it means,” to “art is in the eye of the beholder” and “when I first saw this, I didn’t quite get it, but it grew on me.”³⁴⁵ What exactly were these council members picking up on? Perhaps their confusion with regard to the piece had to do with the fact that its site specificity might not be as obvious, innocuous, or innocent as they were expecting.

With this sculpture, Aycock has chosen to exploit the automobile-and highway-restricted monotony of life—equating the banality of strip malls, parking lots, and style-less suburban sprawl with the unfortunate prosaicism of contemporary air travel. Aycock has created an installation in support of her declaration that “the more the world becomes just a franchise, the more imperative it is to go against the grain; to be idiosyncratic and independent.”³⁴⁶ She envisions this work is for the vacation set; a family who has been off on holiday and is returning to their real lives and routines. The plane has landed, the honeymoon is over, and now they must trade in their wings for wheels. With tired, bleary-eyed travelers in mind, Aycock imagined what would jolt them as they made their way in the dark from the airport to collect their car in the long term parking lot. In other words, the artist saw this site as the perfect opportunity to give them the “alien...just to knock them off their mundane asses,” for more so than anywhere else this location, this strange, ugly stretch of land between the terminals, tarmac, and economy parking “needs

³⁴⁴ Alice Thorson, “It’s Kansas City’s next public artwork, and it won’t add a penny to your tax bill,” *Kansas City Star*, August 7, 2005.

³⁴⁵ All quotes excerpted from Rice, “KC gets a peak at future KCI art.”

³⁴⁶ Rapaport, 34.

the alien. It needs a flying saucer that is not trying to prettify it.”³⁴⁷ In Aycock’s opinion, so much of America is about bad design.³⁴⁸ So much so, that when given the opportunity Aycock wants “to provoke you to think about your American landscape,” something that need not be done only when in an airplane, disconnectedly viewing the land from above, but when you are there in it, a part of it.³⁴⁹ Reiterating ideas she communicated in her interview with Rapaport, Aycock shared the following thoughts with Thorson:

I’m an artist. I’m not in business to tell you what you already know. I’m in business to shake you up, make you think about something you haven’t thought about, to look at the world differently than you normally do. That’s my job.³⁵⁰

Aycock accomplishes these goals with this work in Kansas City, more so than in Philadelphia, but in a way that seems to have eluded much of the public. This nuance again points to *Star Sifter*’s remarkable ability to do all of the above and then some, to play off this terminal’s brilliant architecture and encapsulate the dreams and possibilities inherent in this unique place, all the while recognizing its precarious unpredictability.

Star Sifter’s genius and all that Aycock is able to extrapolate from the airport space are even more apparent when considered within the context of other recent site-specific public artworks and the circumstances and press surrounding each. These projects evidence the recycling and renewal of the themes which preoccupy Aycock, as well as the pragmatics and pitfalls of working in the world of public art. As is the gamble with any public art commission, some works are met with contentious debate or negativity, others with widespread acclaim. Aycock’s 1992 *Project for the 107th Police Precinct*, 1995 *East River Roundabout*, and 1996 *Functional and Fantasy Stair and*

³⁴⁷ Aycock, conversation with author, November 4, 2005.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ “About the Artist.”

³⁵⁰ Thorson, “It’s Kansas City’s next public artwork, and it won’t add a penny to your tax bill.”

Cyclone Fragment typify the kind of work Aycock produced in the 1990s; a grouping within which *Star Sifter* occupies a prominent place. It also typifies the varied reception such works received.

Completed in 1992, Aycock's project for the rooftop of the 107th Precinct and Borough Command Center in Queens has been the source of much agitation and is therefore an excellent example of the misconceptions and missed opportunities for dialogue, education and understanding which run rampant in the world of public art. (Fig. 3.32) Perhaps the best and briefest way to describe this piece is to turn to the observations of *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman and former director of New York's Percent for Art program Tom Finkelpearl, who in August of 2005 embarked on a site-seeing adventure to review a sampling of New York City's percent for art commissions. The two men critiqued what they deemed both good and bad public art, prompting Kimmelman to conclude that Aycock's installation "is decent abstract art, but it's not successful public sculpture."³⁵¹ Getting at the heart of Kimmelman's comment requires familiarity with both the work and its relationship to its community.

Formally speaking, there is an interesting relationship between Aycock's sculpture and the architecture over which it presides. The narrow, overwhelmingly horizontal windows, brickwork, white siding and rooftop railing of the precinct have been reinterpreted by Aycock in the round. Circles, cones, and half moon shapes abound and yet references to the rectangular remain. In this regard, it appears that the sculpture truly does belong here atop the building and conceivably could have been part of the original

³⁵¹ Michael Kimmelman, "Risks and Rewards of Art in the Open," *New York Times*, 19 August 19, 2005.

construction. It is not hard to see how observers might equate it with a purpose-serving radar or antennae of sorts.

More specifically, Aycock's installation is a large, hybrid steel structure – part satellite, part astrolabe – which faces the intersection while standing guard over one corner of the building's roof.³⁵² At the center of this strange quasi-mechanical device lies a disk around which are arranged, “fragments of doors, steps, wheels, and a vessel-like form from which light emanates at night.”³⁵³ (I imagine the light emitting from it to conjure associations with the bat-signal – symbolic of a giant, silent but readily recognizable protective presence.) While the work is advertised as viewable from both the sidewalks and neighboring architecture, it doesn't necessarily betray its identity as a work of art. In fact, as Kimmelman reports, locals who noticed the percent for art sculpture didn't know quite what to make of it.

In a neighborhood “where tensions with the police were already high,” many residents were skeptical as to the true function of the metal installation.³⁵⁴ Some thought it a “surveillance device” which in and of itself was an unwelcome addition to the neighborhood.³⁵⁵ Feelings of annoyance and intrusion reached a pinnacle when residents came forward with unfounded complaints that the device “jammed their television reception.”³⁵⁶ Others just thought the piece “ugly.”³⁵⁷ As for the 107th precinct police officers themselves, many had never given the work a second thought (or look). When questioned by Kimmelman about the piece, “one officer scratched his head” and

³⁵² An astrolabe is a medieval astronomical instrument used for viewing a map of how the sky might look at any one place, date and time.

³⁵³ Eleanor Heartney. *City Art: New York's Percent for Art Program* (New York: Merrell, 2005), 171.

³⁵⁴ Kimmelman, “Risks and Rewards of Art in the Open.”

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

confessed that “he had never noticed it. Another officer joked about it being some sort of electronic equipment.”³⁵⁸ Clearly, when noticed, Aycock’s work had not been understood or embraced by the public for whom it was created.

According to Aycock, “the sculpture is meant to represent communication—always an important part of the role of police in any community.”³⁵⁹ Ironically, Kimmelman suggests that one of the major reasons this work is unsuccessful is precisely because there was too little community outreach, or communication, on the part of Aycock or anyone else at New York City’s Department of Cultural Affairs. Adding to the ironic cycle of misunderstanding, because of the time spent dispelling delusions of covert surveillance and/or static, many at the precinct “resented the [unnecessary] stress her work caused them.” This resentment no doubt perpetuated the negative associations the public had with regard to this sculpture.³⁶⁰ Had there been a program in place that introduced the community to Aycock’s art, or perhaps involved them in either its commissioning or installation, the resulting reactions might have been vastly different and far more positive.

The dilemma surrounding this work does not necessarily begin and end with the sculpture, but rather an obscured site-specificity that hindered the community’s interaction and acceptance of it. Created three years later, Aycock’s *East River Roundabout* produced a drastically dissimilar public response, the kind that would be the envy of any artist working in the genre. (Figs. 3.33 & 3.34)

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ The quote is Aycock’s from 1992 and can be found on the NYC percent for art web pages <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/panyc/aycock.shtml>.

³⁶⁰ Kimmelman, “Risks and Rewards of Art in the Open.”

In 1993, when New York Hospital, the Hospital for Special Surgery and Rockefeller University embarked on a series of expansions and renovations to their respective buildings, they promised the city they would sponsor a similar renovation to the nearby waterfront. The resulting commissions, a \$2.5 “waterside viewing pavilion and passive recreational space” designed by landscape architects Quennell Rothschild Associates and Aycock’s accompanying *East River Roundabout* (1995), transformed what was an abandoned Sanitation Department transfer station into a now beloved stretch of Manhattan riverside.³⁶¹ Shortly after its 1995 unveiling, Aycock’s “exuberant” installation, whose look is often associated with an amusement park rollercoaster, was dubbed among “the best outdoor public sculpture in New York” by *New York Magazine*.³⁶²

Located just off the 60th Street exit of Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive, *East River Roundabout* is a “giant, looping aluminum spiral” whose form is meant “to echo all the movement that surrounds it: the helicopters that fly overhead, the water traffic on the East River, the cars driving over the Queensborough Bridge and the Roosevelt Island tramway.”³⁶³ Amazingly in tune with its site, Aycock’s installation distills the chaos, cacophony, and “clamorous visual environment” of its immediate location, offering

³⁶¹ The above information can be found on the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation webpage <http://www.nycgovparks.org>. At the time of this dissertation, the information on the website last had been updated on Thursday, Dec 20, 2001.

³⁶² “Leisure: Best Outdoor Public Sculpture,” *New York Magazine* <http://nymag.com/nymetro/bony/features/713>.

³⁶³ Carol Vogel, “Beyond Museum Precincts, the City as Gallery,” *New York Times*, January 22, 1996. According to information on the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation webpage, <http://www.nycgovparks.org>, this work’s swooping, swirling aluminum abstractions also were influenced “by the weightlessness of Fred Astaire’s dancing.”

passersby a three dimensional interpretation of an eclectic waterfront plaza the likes of which could only exist in New York.³⁶⁴ Aycock approached this project as:

[an] opportunity to galvanize this extremely dynamic situation, calling attention in a dramatic way to the visual forms of movement inherent in this very active place. The *Roundabout* is a theatre around which New York City enacts itself. And the viewer becomes a spectator in the play of the city as well as an actor in the spectacle.³⁶⁵

With the surrounding architecture, activity, and ever-changing public in mind, Aycock proposed a sculpture that she believed could address all possible aspects of this charismatic site. However, because this project was not to be built without the approval of the Municipal Arts Society, the Parks Council, or the East River Waterfront Conservancy, there were ample opportunities for the public to be made aware of the piece and communicate their opinion of the work. As Carole Vogel points out, “Gone are the days when public art projects were simply decided by decree; indeed, residents now have a voice in most of them,” and Aycock’s *East River Roundabout* was no exception.³⁶⁶ The commissioning process was a success from Aycock’s point of view as well. For, while “there are always a lot of issues involved when you are creating something like this,” Aycock confesses how, “fortunately, this [sculptural installation] was not watered down for the public or for budget reasons. It is what I envisioned.”³⁶⁷ Aycock’s vision, which in this instance manifested itself in a seamless, almost effortless marriage of sculpture and site, is even more intertwined with architecture and environment in her commission for the San Francisco Main Library just one year later.

³⁶⁴ <http://www.nycgovparks.org>.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Vogel, “Beyond Museum Precincts, the City as Gallery.”

³⁶⁷ As quoted in Vogel, “Beyond Museum Precincts, the City as Gallery.”

In her 1996 *Art In America* article on the elaborately refurbished San Francisco Main Library, author Joan Simon proclaims the entire venture “an example of a successful percent-for-art project,” one, “that resulted from a long-term collaboration between artists, architects, librarians and the larger community.”³⁶⁸ As is clear from the discussion of Aycock’s piece for the 107th police precinct, so-called successful public art projects are those that involve the community in some way, not the least of which consists of introducing them to the work or making them a part of the process. As a result, the art installations commissioned and completed as part of the library’s new construction are not only physically embedded in their site, but are also very much valued by the community which had a hand in the entire facility’s planning. These “are provocative works which, in different ways, engage the building’s formal strengths, its contents, indeed its civic ambitions. Moreover, they are works fully integrated with the library’s structure and were, in fact, developed in tandem with it.”³⁶⁹ Aycock’s 1996 *Functional and Fantasy Stair and Cyclone Fragment* is a perfect example of just this integration. (Figs. 3.35 & 3.36)

Selected by the San Francisco Art Commission, the artists were chosen through a unique and protracted process that judged finalists on the basis of their interviews and their prior works as opposed to an elaborate commission-specific proposal. In Aycock’s estimation, the entire commission experience “was far different from other public projects, where an artist is asked to do a proposal and if it’s rejected, that’s it. This was a

³⁶⁸ Joan Simon, “Art for Tomorrow’s Archive – the New Main Library in San Francisco, California,” *Art in America* 84 (November 1996): 41.

³⁶⁹ Ibid. “These commissions were part of the architectural concept from the beginning, though just how the artists would work with the architects emerged only during the building’s design process. Thanks to a city ordinance mandating up to two percent of the project costs of new buildings be allocated for art, the total budget designated for the New Main’s public art commissions was \$1.5 million, including administrative costs.” Ibid, 42.

much better process. When the choice was made it was a vote of confidence in the artist. And then there was time to work out an idea.”³⁷⁰ Once selected, the artists and architects together speculated which areas of the library would be most conducive to large scale artworks.

This collaboration disclosed several suitable areas within the library, and it was decided that Aycock would create something for the main staircase in the two-story space devoted to the library’s periodicals. Aycock’s resulting *Functional and Fantasy Stair* offers fanciful permutations of chutes and ladders while a second component, *Cyclone Fragment*, extends the installation to the ceiling. The functional portion of Aycock’s installation is just that, a staircase which slowly curves its way up to the second floor. Within and around the curved, spatial void left between the stair and wall, Aycock has fashioned several crooked, magical, flying “fragments of false or imaginary stairs.”³⁷¹ The pieces of structural steel through which these fantasy stairs weave in and out are deliberate “echoes [of] the structure of a nearby atrium skylight.”³⁷² The companion piece, *Cyclone Fragment*, hovers like a tornado just below the atrium ceiling where it coils, twists and turns in ways that could only be possible through some extreme force of nature.

Together, the two are very much in line with elements present in Aycock’s previous works. Stairways, flying metallic fragments, allusions to cosmic forces, and impassable if not dangerous passageways – all can be traced to earlier and oft-recurring themes, fascinations and forms. In this instance, in the context of this library space, the two suggest that though the body may be limited to the practical stair, the mind, through

³⁷⁰ As quoted in Ibid.

³⁷¹ San Francisco Public Library webpage, <http://sfpl.lib.ca.us/librarylocations/main/artmain.htm>.

³⁷² Ibid.

the magic of reading, knows no bounds. This interpretation is very much in line with what Aycock shared with the audience at the library's inaugural symposium. According to Simon:

Aycock spoke of the work as being about 'opening doors'—evoking an intimate, familial sense of closed rooms glimpsed from staircases and how one attempts to access what is felt to be hidden within them. More specifically, and in a manner more closely tied to the library's mission, she writes in her project description: 'If the spiral stair suggests knowledge unfolding, the Cyclone suggests knowledge in its most dynamic and transitional state.'³⁷³

It is here in this architectural space devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, to fostering inquiring minds and a life-long love of learning that Aycock is able to synch up her own artistic, emotional, and cognitive passions and create a work true to both her oeuvre and to the site. With the support of the public and the architect, Aycock was able to find a perfect venue to come full circle.

In her concluding remarks about the public art works at the main library, Simon acknowledges how, "in different ways, each of the commissioned public artworks speaks to a sense of promise, one that encompasses both tradition and changing understandings of how knowledge is accessed, valued and reevaluated over time."³⁷⁴ That embracing of "both tradition and changing understandings" of knowledge is particularly appropriate to this artist and this library site. As so thoughtfully acknowledged by Alice Thorson, "Aycock's freewheeling interaction with science, history, religion, psychology and art is not just a romp. Her work relies on the same crucial give-and-take between knowledge and the imagination on which the advances of civilizations have depended."³⁷⁵ Or, to put

³⁷³ Simon, 45.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Alice Thorson, "Whimsical reincarnations: Aycock embellishes her sculptural ideas," *Kansas City Star*, March 7, 1993.

it another way, when commenting on the core mission of Aycock's oeuvre Howard

Risatti writes how the artist urges:

the visitor to operate the sculptural machine, not by physical power or magic, but by an intelligence that employs the rational, logical mind as well as the emotional, intuitive faculties....the rational and transrational must come together to resolve the dilemmas of the modern world. Neither pure believe nor pure science can be the sole guide. It will take both together to reaffirm the humanity of the earth's people.³⁷⁶

Aycock's career-long focus on the co-mingling of learning and creative thought, so fitting for a book repository, is in its own way also exceedingly apropos for the airport environment. By staying very much within her own style and using the immediate physical site to its greatest potential, the artist was able to create works for the San Francisco Main Library and JFK's Terminal One that are both quintessential Aycock and at the same time a commentary on the unique purposes of their facilities.

Put simply, *Star Sifter* is a seductive work by a calculating artist and intellect; a brilliant, inquisitive scholar on a never-ending quest to discover new ways to stimulate herself and her audience. It is a call for viewers to value asking intelligent, probing questions and to understand how everything in our lives may well be more connected than we realize. Through her sculptural spectacles, Aycock jolts the public out of their humdrum daze, gives them a challenging dose of reality, and invites them to see the world around them, including their immediate spaces, both for what they are and what they could be.

A reaffirming combination of faith, science, magical hopes, and concrete facts and physics, *Star Sifter* is about invention and the inventive mind; catapulting ideas and cataclysmic consequences. (Fig. 3.37) It is an explosive comment on the banality of

³⁷⁶ Risatti, 37.

franchise and the importance of both asserting individuality and being aware of one's surroundings. As a result, Aycock's sculpture and her proven fascinations with space, free fall, time travel, slippages between reality and delusion, between movements of the mind or spirit and movements of the body – are all a natural match for the airport and the culture that has emerged around it. Because of the distinct artistic lineage from which it originates, *Star Sifter* can be interpreted as being full of promise; a kind of “I told you so” about the wonders of flight, imagination, fantasy, astronomy and technology.

In the words of historian Robert Wohl, “as airspace is more and more controlled, as airports become increasingly congested, as security concerns constrict the air traveler and undermine the equation of airplanes with speed, the idea of flight as liberation seems remote, the utopia of a distant past”³⁷⁷ Aycock takes this distant past and makes it both our present and our future. After all, despite all the inconveniences and fears built into the contemporary air travel experience—all the security screenings, delays, long lines, testy travelers, vile food, cramped seating, overcrowded overhead storage bins, stale air and jet lag—with the help of our airplanes, we are able to fly. Aycock revels in this ability, and through *Star Sifter* reinforces the fact that while certainly not as glamorous as it was once advertised to be, our ability to fly is still in many ways a miraculous event. As though tapping into the very utopian, apocalyptic fervor which historian Joseph Corn asserts was a pivotal part of the culture of aviation in pre-World War II America, this work becomes an invitation to reassess how far we've come and where the future of flight might lead us.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁷ Robert Wohl, “Messengers of a Vaster Life,” in Paschal and Dougherty, *Defying Gravity: Contemporary Art and Flight*, 28.

³⁷⁸ Joseph Corn, *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

When evaluated as a work of public art, Aycock's sculpture is successful not only for its appropriation of the architecture or psychology of its airport site (a location which itself caters to a historically extraordinary and bewildering technology), but for its lasting power. In other words, *Star Sifter* is successful public art because its meaning is multifaceted, malleable, anticipatory and therefore enduring. Because of the unique ways it relates and responds to both its site and to flight related phenomena, and because it is an exciting, encouraging sculptural expression of "what air travel might lead to," *Star Sifter* will continue to take on new meaning for as long as it is a part of Terminal One.

CHAPTER FOUR

Keith Sonnier: Creating a World-Class City

In Kansas City, Missouri, there is a firm belief that a strong civic identity is predicated upon, and in fact synonymous with, exemplary public art. In the words of Porter Arneill, the city's Municipal Art Commission director, to be "world-class" and to be considered an exciting, vibrant, and memorable metropolis, "a city has to create its' own identity."³⁷⁹ Arneill believes character formation should begin at the airport, where first impressions are forged and all who pass through part of a built in, captive audience ready to be lured downtown by the promise of great art, great culture, and urban life at its best. According to *Museum News* contributor Marjorie Schwarzer, the use of art in airports to this end is perfectly logical. After all, "many cities proclaim in the same breath that they have an international airport and world-class museums. Both are gateways to a metropolis," and "both are symbols of civic status."³⁸⁰

In recent years in fact, Kansas City International Airport has amassed, "a museum-like collection of quality art," by inviting some of the art world's top contemporary artists to create site-specific works for their airport landscape.³⁸¹ While the use of art in airports is certainly not new, the ways and extent to which those at KCI use art to perpetuate a positive image of place is worth noting. No art work better illustrates that point, or the fact that the airport is an intrinsically fascinating venue through which to promote high art to the masses, than Keith Sonnier's *Double Monopole* (Fig. 4.1)

³⁷⁹ As quoted in Mike Rice, "Sculptor foresees KCI work as 'beacon.'" *Kansas City Star*. October 31, 2004. At the time of this article, Porter Arneill was the Kansas City public art administrator and the director of the Municipal Arts Commission.

³⁸⁰ Marjorie Schwarzer, "Now Boarding: Airport Museums and the Global Audience," *Museum News* (May/June 2001): 62.

³⁸¹ Rice, "Sculptor foresees KCI work as 'beacon.'"

Installed in 2005 *Double Monopole* is quintessential Sonnier with a few twenty-first century surprises. His first work for Kansas City and first to incorporate water, Sonnier's gateway responds to the city, the airport, its site on the KCI grounds, the artist's own "form language" and career long preoccupations in ways that should dazzle both longtime fans and those new to his work. Standing tall in the center of the airport's main thoroughfare, *Double Monopole* is best experienced in the evening, when its naked, neon-accented armatures fill the nighttime sky with the light for which Sonnier is famous. In the daytime, when neon is barely discernable, the emphasis on light is replaced with water, for all who drive into or out of the airport complex will see a continuous shower flowing from each of the two billboard structures into a small pond on the median below.

Double Monopole is indeed what Sonnier calls "a persistent beacon" for the airport; for, in my opinion, it is a lightening rod for all the technologies at play here, all the advertising and communication housed here, all the journeys which begin and end here, all the speed and glitz of the world-class metropolis served here, and all the subtle, beautiful, natural simplicity of the dream of flight made manifest here.³⁸² As such, it is yet another outstanding example of site-responsive art for the airport and one which should make future airport art commissioners take note.

As with that of each of the artists profiled in this dissertation, Sonnier's distinguished oeuvre, and all of the experience and insight that goes along with being a fine-artist of international renown, obviously informs his current work. While appreciation of *Double Monopole* is not contingent upon an in-depth familiarity with the artist's career or prior installations, it is dramatically, intensely magnified by it. His

³⁸² As quoted in Rice, "Sculptor foresees KCI work as 'beacon.'"

choice to work with neon light is carefully calculated and culturally loaded. However, although he is most associated with his neon works, there is much more to them than a simple discussion of how colored light occupies space. Light is a means to opening a dialogue about speed, boundaries, darkness, salvation, inspiration, technology, sound, music, and exchange. Working with neon is but one way Sonnier has chosen to exorcize, in the words of Patricia Rosoff, “his fascination with the very notion of interchange—electrical, perceptual, and global;” a notion that, “has for over 40 years generated a body of work that leaps continents and genres, time and space, language and notational systems of meaning.”³⁸³

More so than any other artist working within this medium, the way that Sonnier manipulates neon light is particularly sensitive to and representative of contemporary culture. Understanding the complexity and interpretive potential contained within his unique light source enhances any reading of his works, especially those for airports.

When writing about a 1989 Sonnier exhibition at The Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin, critic Donald Kuspit reflected upon what exactly is so moving about Sonnier’s art. Speaking to the subtle, almost intuitive allure of Sonnier’s works, Kuspit writes, “Sonnier’s sculptures attract our attention, like semaphore signals from a strange zone of feeling.”³⁸⁴ His comments capture the dualities present in any Sonnier light installation; for the works are at once attracting and attractive, their impact immediate and stunning. The obvious, early effect these works have on the viewer is but one of their many

³⁸³ Patricia Rosoff, “Electrifying the Inert: A Conversation with Keith Sonnier,” *Sculpture* 25 (January/February 2006): 52.

³⁸⁴ Donald Kuspit, “The Sculptures of Keith Sonnier,” in *Keith Sonnier: Interim Shrines*, Keith Sonnier (Dublin: The Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1989): 8.

redeeming qualities. Once recognized, their impact becomes much deeper; the works not merely seen, but sensed. Such shades of reception are both a product of the artist's vision and the medium of light he so adeptly employs. Sonnier says of this sensation, "I draw this line at the point where the object subliminally feeds you back another kind of response. I think that my works are very sumptuous....They seem very appealing; but, once you are confronted with them, they begin to function on other levels as well."³⁸⁵ These other levels are also the result of the predetermined associations that viewers bring to a work. For just as one cannot separate vision from sensation in a Sonnier light installation, one cannot begin to examine the powerful aura of Sonnier's light without acknowledging the symbolic weight of the medium itself.

Perhaps more so than those of any of the artists discussed in this dissertation, the public commissions of Keith Sonnier have received a great deal of critical attention. Not surprisingly, each critic makes an effort to trace a general cultural and historical context for light before commenting upon Sonnier's appropriation of and/or spin on the medium. Looking at these tracings en masse affords a more complete understanding of how Sonnier's contributions to public art and the airport are part of a legacy of light in the public realm.

While some critics reach into the annals of history to provide an interpretive foundation, others concentrate on more specific twentieth century reverberations. Writing about the ways in which "light seems to have fascinated humanity from time immemorial," Konrad Bitterli wants Sonnier's audience to be conscious of how light

³⁸⁵ Keith Sonnier, interview by Hubertus Raben, in *Keith Sonnier: Lightway/Lichtweg*, Keith Sonnier (Ostfildern bei Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1993), 31.

“illuminates” and “emits warmth;” how “it transcends life or casts a luminous glow over the idea of the hereafter” and “allows us to perceive the surrounding world and serves as the actual foundation of human reason.”³⁸⁶ Advocating an approach more rooted in the history of technology, Walter Zschokke focuses instead on how light, more specifically the “incandescent, rapidly changing lights of the metropolis,” were loaded beacons of twentieth century industrial and commercial society.³⁸⁷ Pushing this idea one step further, one can say that indeed, “artificial light, especially neon and fluorescent light, is as much a part of the twentieth century as are cars and planes. It is a symbol of unbroken modernism, of hectic urbanism, of round the clock service and fun.”³⁸⁸ In more recent decades in fact, neon light has become synonymous with slick, if not sleazy advertising, flashy, in your face signage, and 3 AM, ‘what happens here stays here,’ illicit temptations from New York to Las Vegas.

Whether created for a temporary gallery show or a permanent public place, Keith Sonnier’s neon light installations are both products of, and in conversation with, the medium’s practical and symbolic roles within the twentieth century; roles which carry with them a textured past of metaphor and meaning. This duality is not at all surprising. As the artist reveals, he “has always been very drawn to materials that have a lot of psychological baggage;” materials like neon, “which are already loaded.”³⁸⁹ In that sense, Sonnier’s light is much more than an artistic tool. It is a found object - both energy

³⁸⁶ Konrad Bitterli, “Traces and Interfaces: Sonnier’s oeuvre between everyday function and artistic autonomy” in Sonnier, *Keith Sonnier: Sculpture Light Space*, 19.

³⁸⁷ Walter Zschokke, “Twilight of Colors: Light Installation by Keith Sonnier in an Architectonic Context,” in *Keith Sonnier: Public Commissions in Architecture 1990-1999*, Keith Sonnier (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000), 8-9.

³⁸⁸ Unsigned text on back cover of *Keith Sonnier: Public Commissions in Architecture 1990-1999*.

³⁸⁹ Keith Sonnier, “In the Cosmos of Colors: Keith Sonnier in conversation with Joachim Jäger,” in *Keith Sonnier Neue Nationalgalerie*. Keith Sonnier (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin: Dumont, 2002), 62.

and “a kind of chemical matter.”³⁹⁰ Because of the ubiquitous presence of light in our lives, and all the contemporary associations tied to neon, Sonnier’s works are accessible to the masses whether educated in art or not. However, a more thoughtful critique of his work will push beyond these wonderful, widely approachable universals to expose the artist’s unique fascination with light and explore what exactly makes his employment of this medium so singular and so tailor made for the airport.

Sonnier’s choice of neon is multi-dimensional; it is at once artistically hi-brow and culturally base. When consulted, Sonnier cites his memories of Louisianan late nights and last-calls as particularly vivid and among the first instances where neon lights, figured prominently in his sub-conscious. Sonnier confesses:

About the most ‘religious’ experience I’ve ever had in Louisiana: coming back from a dance late at night and driving over this flat land and, all of a sudden, seeing these waves of [neon] light going up and down in this thick fog. Just incredible! Much better than any kind of Immaculate Conception or Ascension scene I have ever viewed in church!³⁹¹

Using Sonnier’s words various critics have chosen to retell, read into, or embellish aspects of this basic origin story for themselves. Again, familiarity with their writings affords a particularly vibrant, sensual picture of the connotations inherent in Sonnier’s neon.

In the words of Klaus Kertess, “Sonnier remembers frequently being impressed, on his way home at night, by a large neon sign advertising the pleasures of a local club and tinting the vapors of the night with its electric El Greco glow. This memory was to

³⁹⁰ This quote is from the Jäger interview. In the course of the dialogue, Jäger references Sonnier’s previous statement, “Light can be presented not only as energy, but also as matter,” and goes on to suggest to the artist that “light as something which already exists, which you have found.” Sonnier’s reply includes his agreement that, “yes, light is a kind of chemical matter.” Ibid.

³⁹¹ As quoted in Judith Zilczer, *Keith Sonnier: Neon August 2 – October 20, 1989* (Washington D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1989), un-paginated.

be translated into rainbows of spindly calligraphy that tempered neon's torrid beauty with a cool and casual restraint."³⁹² For Kertess Sonnier's neon light has an undeniable—but perhaps not-so-innocent—pleasure inducing quality whose allure is so glorious, it transcends earthly temptations and belongs instead, in the realm of the spiritual.

For Linda Yablonsky however, Sonnier's neon tempers nothing. Yablonski points out point-blank that, "the part of Louisiana that Sonnier came from was chock-a-block with cathouses; God only knows what went on in them. We can guess: somebody had a really good time."³⁹³ Forsaking the spiritual for the blatantly sexual and seedy, Yablonsky goes on to ask,

What is neon, after all, but a compressed gas forced through a tube?...It has a history in the signage that speaks of the tawdry but its presence in Sonnier's oeuvre takes on more intimate connotations, illuminating not just his sculpture but also its viewers, bathing them in an exotic, other-worldly glow. My guess is he likes it because it's kinky.³⁹⁴

And then there is Paul Richard, who—a decade prior to Yablonsky—chose instead to look past the tacky, "tawdry," and "kinky" associations inherent in the medium.

Asserting Sonnier's "hand-bent tubes of neon no longer force us to recall honkey-tonks or EAT signs or city streets at night," Richard chose to equate Sonnier's neon with something far more classical and iconic.³⁹⁵ Referencing the strange 1980s art market saturated with works by such novel artists as Nam June Paik and Jeff Koons, the critic's column suggests how, "in 1989, with television sets and basketballs-in-fishtanks on view

³⁹² Klaus Kertess, "Picturing Language: The Work of Keith Sonnier" in *Keith Sonnier Exhibition* Organized by the Foundation ARC-EN-CIEL, Tokyo, Keith Sonnier (Tokyo: Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), un-paginated.

³⁹³ Linda Yablonsky. "It's All About Sex: Keith Sonnier Then and Now," in *Keith Sonnier: Sculpture 1966-1998* January 14-February 13, 1998, Keith Sonnier (New York: Marlborough Gallery, Inc., 1998), 3.

³⁹⁴ Yablonsky, 4.

³⁹⁵ Paul Richard, "Sonnier's Signature," *Washington Post*, August 13, 1989.

in art museums, [Sonnier's] once-startling materials have begun to seem [as] acceptable as chipped marble or cast brass.”³⁹⁶

Stressing distinctive qualities, associations, and ramifications of the artist's use of neon, the critical views of Kertess, Yablonsky, and Richard each have merit. They reinforce the fact that there is no one right way to interpret the symbolism behind Sonnier's neon; all interpretations are welcome and his works are the richer for it. This nurturing of various critical interpretations, and the lack of privileging one reading over another, is a direct result of the artist's being so true to his materials. Audiences are able to entertain such disparate conclusions with regard to neon's perceived symbolic weight simply because Sonnier's neon is what it is, materially speaking. Though Sonnier uses neon as an instrument, and pushes its properties to their physical limits, he never pretends it is something that it's not, or can do something other than it can.

In the words of Dietmar Elger, “the process of [Sonnier's] work never infringes on the integrity of any single material used,” any manipulation is conducted, “with respect, unpretentiousness, and an exceptional sensibility for the material.”³⁹⁷ As was the case with the artist's neon origin story, critics of Sonnier's work make much of his reverence for the characteristics unique to this medium and his adherence to the mantra, “contemporary sculpture has to be made out of contemporary materials.”³⁹⁸ In fact, according to Judith Zilczer, “Sonnier's deliberate use of exposed wires and unconcealed transformers,” is precisely what sets him apart from other artists working with light.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Dietmar Elger, “Material as a Process: Keith Sonnier's Works of the 1960s,” in *Keith Sonnier Werke/Works*, Dietmar Elger, trans. William A. Mickens (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1993), 13.

³⁹⁸ Sonnier, interview by Raben, 31.

³⁹⁹ Zilczer.

Critic Lucius Grisebach expands upon Sonnier's approach to the materiality of his neon and his unabashed desire to expose its innards when commenting, "However immaterial light may appear to be in Sonnier's neon works, it...is never withdrawn from its physical and technical working context."⁴⁰⁰ Patricia Rosoff observes how, "neon, in its 'real-world' application, is...most gorgeous when you can't see all the guts and wires that make it work," and yet conversely, the artist actually has chosen to "shine the light of day onto the whole thing, making sure that viewers see the machinery."⁴⁰¹ For Sonnier, the working elements of neon tubing are a crucial part of the medium; the artist purposely makes these parts visible because their display is another way to involve the viewer. The artist confesses:

...the fact that the works had to be physically plugged in—that they had to be energized—is very important. Neon forces you to see into its energy source.... You can see how energy is pumped in.... Neon is a trapped gas, and there is a power element: once you plug it in, it gets fired up."⁴⁰²

So too, can the viewer.

As Glen O'Brien so wittily remarks, "[Dr. Timothy] Leary said turn on, tune in, drop out, blow your mind. Sonnier says turn on, tune in, please hold, Om."⁴⁰³ O'Brien's "Om" is a play on the buzz of the plugged in piece, the sound that the pumping energy of Sonnier's trapped gas emits when it's radiantly operating at full throttle. Hearing this sound is yet another way the viewer can experience the guts of the material, the multi-sensory qualities that make Sonnier's neon, neon and nothing else. O'Brien goes on to point out that "when it's not turned on, these art words may not be art at all – just art

⁴⁰⁰ Lucius Grisebach, "From 'BA-O-BA' to 'El Globo': Keith Sonnier's Work since 1969," in Elger, *Keith Sonnier Werke/Works*, 28.

⁴⁰¹ Rosoff, 54.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Glenn O'Brien, Essay in *Keith Sonnier: Leo Castelli Gallery, New York April – May 1992*, Keith Sonnier (New York: Leo Castelli Gallery and Gagosian Gallery, 1992), 3.

waiting to happen. Cold they are hardware; plugged in they radiate art waves modulated in rhythm and harmony.”⁴⁰⁴ Quite simply, for neon to glow, it must be plugged in. As Carter Ratcliff explains, this unique technology requires the artist, “to turn his luminous forms back on themselves.”⁴⁰⁵ In other words, “the neon tubing and its electrical source must form a closed circuit.”⁴⁰⁶

In a strange way, that closed circuit is much like the one a person completes when traveling through an airport; for, more often than not, when a passenger flies away it is usually either the beginning or end of a journey, one whose circuit will be made complete by flying home and returning via the airport. This closed circuit journey is especially true for frequent fliers and business travelers like those represented by *Up in the Air*’s narrator, Ryan Bingham. When not in the air, Bingham spends most of his time in airport lounges and nearby hotels awaiting his next flight. In the words of Bingham:

Fold certain itineraries in the middle and the halves are mirrors of each other. I’ve taken such trips, a yo-yo on a string, staying in the same places on my way back that I stayed in, the other day, on my way out. At the outermost point of such journeys, before the pivot, there’s a moment of stillness, of poised potential energy. To begin the rewinding all I have to do is pick up my change and wallet from the nightstand, tuck in a shirttail, sign a credit card slip.⁴⁰⁷

The fact that Walter Kirn’s protagonist acknowledges this “pivot” and uses the language of “poised potential energy” to do so, is significant. It illustrates, through the medium of popular contemporary satire, how the properties of Sonnier’s neon are particularly primed for display in an airport, where so many divergent circuits likewise are completed.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Carter Ratcliff, Untitled Essay in *Lynda Benglis - Keith Sonnier: A Ten Year Retrospective 1977-1987* October 9 – November 25, 1987, ed. Audrey Hammill (Alexandria, LA: Alexandria Museum of Art, 1987), 8.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Kirn, *Up in the Air*, 179.

While neon has become Sonnier's language of choice, it was not the first material with which Sonnier chose to work, nor was it even the first in the genre of light. The artist says the idea of working with neon quickly won out over other kinds of light simply because, 'it was just an easier kind of light to handle.'⁴⁰⁸ In addition to its illuminating properties and physicality, neon can saturate a site with color in ways far more thorough and seductive than other kinds of light. Thus, in terms of both guts and glow, Sonnier could cover more ground with neon, transform a space or "alter a situation much quicker than [with] other [incandescent] lights."⁴⁰⁹ Similarly, neon offered Sonnier a perfect synthesis of two dimensional painting and three dimensional sculpture. In the words of Linda McGreevy, "Neon allowed complete fusion—of light and color (painterly propositions) and form and interval (sculptural concerns)."⁴¹⁰

In many ways, this synthesis has left Sonnier in an artistic class all by himself, quite happily so.⁴¹¹ For, the ways in which Sonnier capitalizes on color is in a realm far beyond the strictly painterly. Kuspit describes how Sonnier's "neon light does not so much shine on the sculptural object of which it is a part but emanates from it....It is like the light of an invisible inner halo," one that glows with the fire of whatever hue it foolishly attempts to contain.⁴¹² Color is not applied then; it is emitted from within and therefore treated not as a surface addition, but as a sculptural volume. After all, neon's

⁴⁰⁸ As quoted in Zilczer.

⁴⁰⁹ Zilczer.

⁴¹⁰ Linda McGreevy, "Keith Sonnier's Cross-Cultural Symbiosis," in *Keith Sonnier: Neon Sculpture* The Chrysler Museum October 28 – December 24, 1988, Keith Sonnier (Norfolk, VA: The Chrysler Museum, 1988), 10.

⁴¹¹ Ibid, 5.

⁴¹² Kuspit, 7.

color is “literally a gaseous volume...it begins to fill the space as the air in a balloon does” until, before a person knows it, “the color is all over you.”⁴¹³

Treating “color as volume” became part of Sonnier’s unique “form language” and thus forever altered the way the artist employed neon light.⁴¹⁴ With this conceptual shift, Sonnier says color:

...became a solid in a way, and all of a sudden I had to think of it in very different terms. When I first used light, it was very intriguing because I discovered color as a gas, which opened up a whole other principle, because color could be dissipated into space. This in turn opened up a whole other realm of color usage for me—a whole other chemistry. The chemical and psychological use of color expanded my use and perception of color.⁴¹⁵

No discussion of color, or its powers, can really begin without turning to Sonnier’s ongoing *Ba-O-Ba* series and the attention to light, color, and their effects as embodied in both title and concept. (Fig. 4.2)

Over the course of his career, Sonnier has gone into various levels of detail describing the origins of the term *Ba-O-Ba*. Piecing together comments revealed in a few in depth interviews unveils a more complete narrative. The story begins with Sonnier recalling a trip to the beach in Jacmel, Haiti where he encountered a tiny fishing boat christened *Ba-O-Ba*. When he asked the fisherman about the vessel’s name, the fisherman replied, “he had named it *Ba-O-Ba* because he always went out at night to fish by moonlight.”⁴¹⁶ Enthralled by this romantic image of the lone fisherman at sea in relative darkness, the fact that the name, though a slight “corruption of a Haitian term” originated in a patois so similar to his own Louisianan patois, and the stirring, sexy

⁴¹³ As quoted in Kathryn Dean, “Behind the Green Door,” in *Keith Sonnier – New Work 2000* April 29th – June 3rd, 2000, Keith Sonnier (New York: Marlborough Gallery, Inc., 2000), 14.

⁴¹⁴ Keith Sonnier, interview by Patricia Rosoff, *Sculpture* 25 (January/February 2006): 57..

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Sonnier, “In the Cosmos of Colors: Keith Sonnier in conversation with Joachim Jäger,” 61-62.

symbolism behind it all, Sonnier soon adopted the term to describe his own works.⁴¹⁷ He loved the way it so exotically “describes the effect of light on skin and body – something like the way in which moonlight is perceived – as a physical and suggestive attractive force emanating from natural or artificial light.”⁴¹⁸ After all, the light and color of his neon emanates in a similar way, or should at least be thought of as doing so.

Sonnier began his *Ba-O-Ba* light explorations in earnest in 1969. Channeling the sensual aura he imagined in Jacmel, Sonnier sought “to make visual experiences and physical phenomena perceptible as manifestations.”⁴¹⁹ He wanted his audience to experience his neon installations as seductive zones of light and color to be observed and physically traversed. But more than that, Sonnier wanted the viewer to have no choice but to be conscious of how “his way of looking at things,” could be “modified by what *colors come off* on his own person.”⁴²⁰ Thus, like the translucent appearance of moonlight on the skin, Sonnier’s neon colors transform both how a body sees and how a body looks. (Figs. 4.3 & 4.4) Here’s how...

In terms of a more literal, visual analysis, the *Ba-O-Ba* series are permutations of a basic light, glass and/or mirror configuration. In the majority of these installations, variously colored tubes of neon are attached to a wall, their glow directed outwards toward the rest of the room. The neon tubes, the wall on which they hang, the light that emanates from them and the spaces in between the room’s walls are all reflected in the mirrors and glass which back the neon. To experience the work is not just to see the neon, or how its light bounces from one wall to another with the aid of mirrors and glass.

⁴¹⁷ Keith Sonnier, interview by Robert T. Buck, in Sonnier, *Keith Sonnier: Sculpture, 1966-1998*, 47-48.

⁴¹⁸ Sonnier, as quoted in Grisebach, 24.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

Truly experiencing the work requires the viewer enter the space, put herself between the original light source and its second and third generation reflections, allow herself to be drowned in light, to see its saturation, ultimately becoming part of the installation in the spaces in-between. As so eloquently phrased by Linda McGreevy, the overwhelming sensuality present in a *Ba-O-Ba* installation “comes directly from the glowing color that permeates the space,” but also from the viewer, “who, lured by the warmth, becomes the image in and of the work, locked firmly within the pulsing hues framed by light and reflected in the encased mirrors.”⁴²¹

Akin to the *Ba-O-Ba* works, Sonnier’s *Mirror Acts* (first created in 1968) was an on-going series left in place in the studio for almost a decade and similarly explores the spaces in between neon light and its reflection (Figs. 4.5 & 4.6). In fact, for the artist, these works are all “about designing space” and further exploring “how color can become volume.”⁴²² *Mirror Acts* take the use of glass and mirrors to a heightened sophistication. As Sonnier says, “When the mirror pieces are facing each other they create a fourth dimension, meaning that you are in another dimension, in a ‘channel’ so to speak.”⁴²³ This quality of the work, the fact that the viewer physically enters this arbitrarily delineated, in-between space and becomes part of the light, part of the volume, is pivotal.⁴²⁴ It is also what helps make the ethereal space of *Mirror Acts* and *Ba-O-Ba* akin to that of a non-place. As such, the artist’s desire that viewers be immersed in neon’s volume primes this medium—and Sonnier’s deft employment of it—for the spaces of the

⁴²¹ McGreevy, 5.

⁴²² Sonnier, “In the Cosmos of Colors: Keith Sonnier in conversation with Joachim Jäger,” 60.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Sonnier, “In the Cosmos of Colors: Keith Sonnier in conversation with Joachim Jäger,” 61.

airport, itself one of the most iconic non-places of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Without question, the original *Ba-O-Ba* works were significant for the ways they allowed Sonnier to explore more fully his interest in color as volume. They also acted as catalysts for explorations in audience participation, and video and satellite technologies. Sonnier recalls that “because the pieces could exist in so many variations of form and color combinations” he introduced video to preserve those changes and the various effects they could produce for/on the viewer.⁴²⁵ Thus, the spaces within and between neon and natural light, and the documentation of the viewer’s involvement with those permeable spaces over time, became a new fascination. While Sonnier’s videoing of his own art installations was certainly a step in a new direction, his subsequent transition from light to communication, television, and satellite technology was rooted in a pre-existing broader concern with the role of mass media in society and how someone could, in effect, be in two places at the same time.⁴²⁶

Though often costly and cumbersome, using such media allows Sonnier to demystify their inner workings for the viewer making them as familiar and un-intimidating as they were for the artist. Doing so also allows him to make transparent the degree to which society relies upon the technologies of mass media and subtly question

⁴²⁵ Keith Sonnier, “On Working in Germany,” in *Ba-O-Ba, Sel Series: Argon-und Neon-Arbeiten* Ausstellung, 8. April bis 20. Mai 1979, Museum Huas Lange Krefeld, Keith Sonnier (Krefeld: Kaiser Wilhelm Museum der Stadt, 1979), un-paginated.

⁴²⁶ It’s possible that Sonnier’s “media madness” was inherited, for the artist fondly cites his father’s hardware store—known for having up to seven TV sets on simultaneously—as a place where his interest in the intricacies of television were taken to an extreme. The “madness” continued with the artist’s hearing impaired grandmother, whom Sonnier warmly remembers as always having “a portable radio pressed to one ear.” Suzanne Muchnic, “Sonnier: Setting the Dial for Art,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 1978.

the implications of that reliance.⁴²⁷ Ultimately, this new line of experimentation led to an investigation of how video “signals were actually sent and received,” and how Sonnier could artistically toy with their transmissions.⁴²⁸

First unveiled in 1972, *Channel Mix* is a room-filling installation which mixes the large-scale projections of various television programs and “live on-site images” on two opposing walls of the gallery.⁴²⁹ Though they don’t physically overlap or stream together, the images are hard to separate from one another. Despite a viewer’s best efforts, it would be difficult to take in one projection without allowing the neighboring projection into her field of vision, thereby allowing it to inform the way she perceives or interprets the first. As so insightfully explained by Klaus Kertess, experimentation with the language of television is not a stretch for Sonnier:

The pulsing, grainy mosaic of light that forms television imagery is not unlike the non-material energies made palpable and resonant in the neon pieces. Television and video, of course, present a more sophisticated level of electronic technology and information. The performance (participatory) nature of much of Sonnier’s work, his interest in dance, and his attraction to tactile light coupled with the new availability and portability of video hardware made television a natural medium for him.⁴³⁰

As with his adoption of neon, Sonnier’s seamless appropriation of television as a found object in *Channel Mix* “marks a shift to a more abstract focus on modes and codes of information transmission;” a shift he continues to pursue throughout the decade.⁴³¹

Shortly after *Channel Mix* came *Air to Air* (1975), an installation which spanned the country, touching down in both New York and Los Angeles. (Fig. 4.7) Leo Castelli’s

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Keith Sonnier, “Artist Statement,” in Sonnier, *Keith Sonnier Exhibition* (Organized by the Foundation ARC-EN-CIEL, Tokyo). This trajectory culminated in projects involving the unprecedented use of a NASA Communications Technology Satellite (CTS) for non-NASA purposes and the broadcasting of both sounds and images through two-way video.

⁴²⁹ Bitterli, 26.

⁴³⁰ Kertess.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

gallery in New York City provided an east coast venue which found its west coast complement at the ACE gallery in L.A. With *Air to Air*, the video projections of *Channel Mix* were replaced with audio sound, and viewers in one locale picking up a telephone receiver and blindly communicating with those in a gallery clear across America. It was a borderless, transcontinental work that yet again situated the viewer as “not simply a passive consumer at this media banquet of communicative interfaces, but an active participant.”⁴³² Instead of creating volume through color, in the words of Sonnier, “this concept brought distant places into one ‘volume,’ as it were.”⁴³³ Sound became volume, a space whose reverberations linked three thousand miles and created a new dimension.

Sound and image came together in Sonnier’s next project, *Send/Receive* (1979), which once again creates a bicoastal connection this time replacing the city of angels with that of the golden gate. A telephone wire replaces that of a complicated satellite “so tightly controlled by political and military power,” that it had never before been used for any other purpose.⁴³⁴ In *Send/Receive*, the transmissional possibilities Sonnier experimented with in *Air to Air* were “now expanded with the more complex visual and verbal dialogue and feedback made possible by satellite technology.”⁴³⁵ The goings on of a San Francisco gallery were transmitted via satellite to a gallery in New York and vice-versa, allowing action and communication to be divorced from location and a voyeuristic surveillance of said activities to occur from clear across the country. But the actual video and sound transmissions of this installation, and the technological ground it broke, are less important than the behind the scenes negotiations that made it possible, the

⁴³² Bitterli, 31.

⁴³³ Sonnier, “In the Cosmos of Colors: Keith Sonnier in conversation with Joachim Jäger,” 61.

⁴³⁴ Jean-Pierre Criqui. “Neither Inside Nor Out,” in *Keith Sonnier* June 6 – August 30, 1987, Jean-Pierre Criqui (Kerguehennec: Centre d’art Contemporain, 1987), un-paginated.

⁴³⁵ Kertess.

cultural questions it prompted, and what the entire experience meant for Sonnier's future art endeavors.⁴³⁶ In all of these mass-media/transmission based technological works, there is an engagement with the audience, with the rules and governance of the art world, with the mediated and the spontaneous. It is in these works, "these moments in which the public and private, the picture and the real, interpenetrate," where one can begin to see, "a continuous thematic thread that foreshadows the installations" and airport works which are the real focus of this chapter.⁴³⁷

To fully grasp Sonnier's predilection for breaking down borders, or exploiting those which are permeable, it helps to understand how else the artist has chosen to dissipate borders throughout his career – geographical and otherwise. The transmissioned works provide a wonderful segue for introducing Sonnier's own travels and profound interest in world cultures, particularly those that are Non-Western. In fact, throughout his oeuvre of satellite based works and neon installations alike, Sonnier has stressed the ways technology can be used as a positive means through which a viewer can see, interpret, and/or reacquaint herself with both the spaces in the world around her and her place within them.

As so eloquently phrased by curator Roger Clisby,

Sonnier is a man whose enthusiasms encompass the world....By combining and synthesizing ideas and materials in a manner that challenges the concepts and materials as well as the viewer, he has pushed the understanding of our modern world and distilled various essences from cultures and objects across the board.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Bitterli, 27.

⁴³⁸ Roger D. Clisby, "Forward," in Sonnier, *Keith Sonnier: Neon Sculpture* The Chrysler Museum October 28 – December 24, 1988, 3.

It is for these reasons that his biography and globe-trotting travels are worth discussing for Sonnier's past is not just in the past. As Paul Richard agrees, "you feel his travels in his art;" a sentiment which rings true regardless of where in time you commune with one of his works and is perhaps most present and palpable in his public installations - particularly those for airports.⁴³⁹

As mentioned earlier, Sonnier was born and bred in Louisiana. His first European sojourn, and really his first time beyond the state lines, took place in 1963, shortly after his college graduation. Upon finishing with a dual focus on painting and anthropology, Sonnier took off on a post-undergraduate semester of artistic and self discovery sponsored by his parents who, according to the artist, "wanted me to see France, to somehow get my roots intact."⁴⁴⁰ When he returned to the states in the mid 1960s, Sonnier accepted a post as a graduate student and teaching fellow at Rutgers University under the tutelage of Robert Morris and his ground breaking, avant-garde, art world colleagues.⁴⁴¹

Located in New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers is teasingly close to New York City and its proximity and faculty offered crucial access to the most vibrant arts scene this side of the Atlantic. Sonnier's works, which at this time were combinations of cloth, latex, and various tactile, fleshy, sensual materials, were shown first in New York by Richard Bellamy and subsequently, Leo Castelli. Sonnier credits Bellamy with being "instrumental" in fostering a relationship in Germany with Rolf Rieke; a connection

⁴³⁹ Richard, "Sonnier's Signature."

⁴⁴⁰ Sonnier, interview by Robert T. Buck, 46.

⁴⁴¹ For more information on the legacy of the art community at Rutgers University (of which both Sonnier and Aycock were a part) see Joan M. Marter ed., *Off limits Rutgers University and the Avant-Garde, 1957-1963*, Newark, N.J.: Newark Museum; New Brunswick, N.J.; London: Rutgers University Press, 1999 and Ferris Olin ed., *Artists on The Edge: Douglass College and the Rutgers MFA*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 2005.

which resulted in Sonnier's "working out of the studio and on location in several countries in Europe," not to mention a career long affiliation with various German fine arts institutions.⁴⁴²

Sonnier says his experiences working in Germany, "made traveling an important and necessary part of the working process."⁴⁴³ This conclusion was only reinforced as Sonnier continued to fill his passport visiting various corners of the world. The actual journey then, infused with the local colors and culture of his location, and the materials made available there (indigenous and otherwise) went a long way in informing both the process and the resulting product. Sonnier's experience in India is the perfect encapsulation of this ability to embrace and be amenable to the culture and conditions inherent in a given site. It also predicts the sensitivity he would bring to Kansas City decades later. (Fig. 4.8)

India presented many challenges for an artist involved with technology, for "when you bring high-tech to India, there are always going to be problems. In India, the physical realities of life are all real close, they're not something distant...there's no iconographical distance, as we have with art and with culture in America."⁴⁴⁴ As a result, Sonnier decided instead to work with what the location could provide in abundance: bamboo. He procured local artists, themselves talented bamboo craftsmen, and thus found himself in a strange, full-circle moment whereby his Indian 'found material' was paradoxically "a material charged with memories of his sub-tropical Louisianian past."

⁴⁴² Keith Sonnier, interview by Alanna Heiss, in *Keith Sonnier: P.S.1 (Project Studios One)* April 10 – June 5, 1983, Keith Sonnier (New York: The Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Inc., 1983), unpaginated.

⁴⁴³ Sonnier, "On Working in Germany."

⁴⁴⁴ Sonnier, interview by Robert T. Buck, 49.

⁴⁴⁵ As Carter Ratcliff points out, by “fleeing New York” and by extension the Western artistic tradition, “the artist made an oblique approach to his origins.”⁴⁴⁶ Grisebach asserts this kind of amenability on the part of Sonnier, “shows the lack of inhibition of this cosmopolitan American for whom East and West, Europe and Asia are equally close and equally accessible and available to a modern, mobile artist.”⁴⁴⁷ It is this attention to the local, and the ability to be in touch with so much of the world and the universal experiences which can be experienced throughout, that makes Sonnier so perfect for creating works for public spaces, but also the airport. He infuses his work with the traditions and happenings of a specific site and is somehow able to make them simultaneously personal and universal, local and international.

Sonnier’s upbringing surrounded by Southern Democrats also effected his social and political conscience. It is not at all surprising that he told interviewer Alanna Heiss, “I would like what I do to have some sort of moral responsibility. I want my work to affect and change culture.”⁴⁴⁸ One way he affects this change is by invoking a decidedly non-western approach to the art object. Artworks shouldn’t just be revered and kept at a distance; they should be consumed, visually and physically. Good art will seep into culture, altering perspectives and changing the way viewers see themselves and the world around them. Bringing the concept back to his experience in India, Sonnier says:

If I had not been to the East...and had chosen to remain only in the West, I would have had a much more conservative take on my work. When you go to a temple in India, art does not have the iconographic distance that it does in the West. In a European Church you are here and the crucifix is over there. In India you are immersed, and art is literally used to death. It’s used, it’s washed, it’s fed, it’s moved around, it becomes so humanized. This was a very interesting concept for me to think

⁴⁴⁵ Ratcliff, 10.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Grisebach 22.

⁴⁴⁸ Sonnier, interview by Alanna Heiss.

about in contemporary terms.⁴⁴⁹

It's a concept that relates directly back to that of the *Ba-O-Ba* neon works. But it's also one that translates into Sonnier's public commissions—particularly those for airports—where art, architecture, and the traveler's experience can be connected in ways more intimate than many artists dare to admit.

As evidenced by Sonnier's working process in India, and his general philosophy towards materials, location and culture, there is a kind of total environment created within and around his installations that compound any basic notion of site-specificity. Establishing a history for the ways in which Sonnier approaches his commissions helps lay the foundation for how to interpret his airport works; which themselves are among the most symbolically loaded within the genre. Sonnier's *Ba-O-Ba Berlin* for the Neue Nationalgalerie is a wonderful way to begin that discussion. (Figs. 4.9-4.12)

Built in 1968, Berlin's New National Gallery is a Mies Van Der Rohe "temple of light and glass."⁴⁵⁰ The museum is home to twentieth century European painting and sculpture with a spectacular emphasis on the master's of German Expressionism, many of whom painted haunting scenes of city life which would have played out near this very spot during World War I. More than just a repository for its permanent holdings, the Neue Nationalgalerie commissions artists to create temporary installations for its highly unusual space. On its most basic level, this invitation-only process allows twenty-first century artists an invaluable opportunity to be in conversation with, and/or comment upon, an icon of twentieth century architecture.

⁴⁴⁹ Sonnier, "In the Cosmos of Colors: Keith Sonnier in conversation with Joachim Jäger," 64.

⁴⁵⁰ <http://www.neue-nationalgalerie.de/>

Installed in 2002, Sonnier's temporary installation was a triumph of urban light, line, color and structure. Keeping the streamlined simplicity of Mies' architecture in tact, Sonnier placed a subtle but stunning neon grid on the building. His delicate lines of horizontal light thinly trace the border of the windows, washing them and all who approach their volume in a glow of red, yellow, or blue. The breathtaking installation was best experienced in the evening, when Sonnier's colors would "radiate beyond the stringency of the linear scaffolding" as though dissolving the spaces within and around the museum.⁴⁵¹ Mies' glass walls thus became even more transparent, making it difficult to tell inside from outside. Much like the ambiguous reflections in a photo-realist painting, the perceived reflections in the glass could blend together, rendering the viewer powerless to determine whether what she saw in the glass was really a duplicate of the space behind her, that of the interior, or that located clear on the other side of the building.

Sonnier's light installation transforms a once clearly delineated space into something infinite and within that infinity, "space becomes a spiritually charged domain."⁴⁵² This charged energy - so applicable to Sonnier's neon and the radiant, saturated, color rich atmosphere it creates – indeed may be spiritual. But the spirit invoked and perpetuated here is that of the vivacious, dynamic city of Berlin which makes possible the entire visual scenario. This collaboration evidences how Sonnier's work is rooted in its surroundings, whatever they may be. He does not take any pains to eliminate references to the natural world, or in this case, the buzz, hum and chaos of city life, but welcomes them. Bringing the outside world in—and vice versa—is but another

⁴⁵¹ Joachim Jäger, "Spherical Modernism," in *Keith Sonnier: Neue Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*, Keith Sonnier, trans. Ian Pepper (Köln: DuMont, 2002), 21.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

way Sonnier can facilitate his art's total consumption. Because of Mies' gloriously transparent walls of windows, viewers in the museum are not isolated from the city and viewers on the streets of Berlin are still privy to the interior goings on of the galleries. Here, Sonnier's desire to insert art in culture, in the words of the artist, "is still more valid. In that the art and the viewer become part of the same cosmic circle;" one becomes inseparable from the other against the backdrop of a city's cycle of activity.⁴⁵³ And, Sonnier's choice of colors renders that coalescence even more complete.

Red, yellow and blue are signature Sonnier colors. They are the primary three, and the artist frequently uses them for public projects, particularly if the building with which he is working has a lot of black in it.⁴⁵⁴ In this case, though, Sonnier cites that "there is also something about Berlin," and the character of the city itself which steered him towards red, yellow and blue.⁴⁵⁵ Because Berlin is, "a tough no bullshit town – it's a much harder choice of a color palette. The city has a great toughness and resilience," and these qualities could be reflected in these strong, pure, simple and yet unmistakable colors.⁴⁵⁶

Given this brief analysis of *Ba-O-Ba Berlin*, it becomes clear that Sonnier's installation is sublimely sited. It speaks to the city, to the museum, to the architecture, to the viewer, and to Sonnier's own form language. In fact, it seems that Sonnier's oeuvre, when understood within his own artistic philosophy, travels, and larger body of work, is

⁴⁵³ Sonnier, "In the Cosmos of Colors: Keith Sonnier in conversation with Joachim Jäger," 64.

⁴⁵⁴ For more on color, see Jäger, "Spherical Modernism," 21 & 25.

⁴⁵⁵ Sonnier, "In the Cosmos of Colors: Keith Sonnier in conversation with Joachim Jäger," 62.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid. William Zimmer similarly writes about Sonnier's sensitivity to color with regard to some of his relief sculptures. In the words of Zimmer, "Keith Sonnier improbably uses shades of all-green neon tubing to achieve what resemble relief sculptures. 'Saule Pleurer' and 'Palm Blatt' both refer to plants in Mr. Sonnier's native Louisiana." Here, the works are meant to convey something more natural and organic and are very deliberately linked to indigenous vegetation in both title and color. William Zimmer, "Show Turns a Spotlight on Light Itself in All Forms," *New York Times*, February 17, 2002.

predisposed to glow and thrive in certain kinds of public spaces The Neue Nationalgalerie one of these sites. But in this case, Sonnier's installation is more of an anomaly: it is both temporary and created for a museum (and thus a more arts oriented public). Equally site-responsive and perhaps even more site-sensitive are his permanent commissioned works for the church and the airport. The happenings within these spaces, the quiet psychology of them, the moods, contemplation, ennui, etc. of the purpose behind their architecture make Sonnier's installations all the more effective and relevant. There is an altogether different kind of spiritual energy which charges these spaces, making Sonnier an artist profoundly in tune with their purpose, their culture, and how his art can enliven both.

Because of all the connotations and "baggage" neon as a material and found object brings to each of the artist's works, it seems Sonnier's employment of it is pre-ordained to thrive in certain spaces. After all, as Carter Ratcliff points out, for Sonnier, "luminosity isn't so much a subject as [it is] a purpose."⁴⁵⁷ As an artist so adept at working with light and technology, it seems that "public art" was destined to be one of the many sites Sonnier would illuminate and take into the twenty-first century - a point driven home by his unique sculptural contribution to a unique Austrian church. (Figs. 4.13-4.16)

Commissioned by the Catholic Church of San Franciscus, in Steyr, Austria, *Tears for St. Francis* (2002) was the artist's first for a religious institution. Though Sonnier – who was raised Catholic and was in fact an altar boy at his local parish– had been incorporating religious and spiritually derived concepts from cultures across the world for

⁴⁵⁷ Ratcliff, 10.

decades, he had not created one for a religiously affiliated patron. That Sonnier loved the idea of being able to bridge science, technology, contemporary art and religion in such an immediate way is no surprise. But, according to Conrad Leinhardt, “what, in the end, tipped the scale in favor of Sonnier’s acceptance of the commission was – along with the thematic challenge – the quality of the architecture.”⁴⁵⁸

Situated in a neighborhood of bland 1970s apartment complexes, the church really did not have a charming, or inspiring, architectural vernacular from which renovating architects Reipl & Reipl could borrow. The architects took advantage of this situation by combining that freedom with a break from more traditional ecclesiastical building types. Gone are the steeple, classic accoutrements, stained glass windows and conservative crucifix. In their place, a simple, modern design full of natural light and novel configurations of space conducive to the varied demands of a vibrant, contemporary parish.⁴⁵⁹ Reipl & Reipl’s austere yet approachable building succeeded in affecting the culture of worship in this congregation, but the affectation was made complete and perhaps even more pointed, through the incorporation of Sonnier’s interior sculptures.

Sonnier’s contribution to the new St. Francis, comes in the form of two distinct yet complementary installations: one directly over the baptismal font and another encased in walls of glass askance the main space. It is the latter installation which is of particular import, for the ways it punctuates the main space get at the heart of what Sonnier tries to

⁴⁵⁸ Conrad Lienhardt, “Tears for St. Francis: A light installation in the parish church of St. Franciscus in Steyr/Upper Austria,” in Sonnier, *Keith Sonnier: Sculpture, Light, Space*, 63.

⁴⁵⁹ In his interview with Patricia Rosoff, Sonnier shares a hysterical behind the scenes story with regard to the parishioners and their attachment to their crucifix. “We did have a little problem—they didn’t want to get rid of their old crucifix. The architects had a very beautiful, simple, metal crucifix, but the congregation only wanted to use the old one; they kept trying to sneak it back. The architects (Reipl & Reipl) kept trying to get rid of it, and in every architectural photograph they would run by and make sure it wasn’t in there, but, as soon as they left, the parishioners would roll it back.” Keith Sonnier, interview by Patricia Rosoff, 59.

accomplish through much of his commission work. In keeping with the desire to do something new with their church's refurbishment, "the congregation was very consistent in its orientation away from conventional ideas of prettifying the church interior." But, their input did not go much beyond the choice to work with Sonnier, an artist they knew would infuse their building with light in a most impressive, but not ostentatiously pretty way.⁴⁶⁰ According to Sonnier, the pastor was well versed in contemporary art and became a kind of voice for the parish, and really the only one involved with the project. It was largely because of that affinity that he green lighted the use of more abstract concepts.

In keeping with the post 1960s ecclesiastical trend of forgoing the steeple, artist and architect collaborated on creating a different kind of focal point. While Sonnier jokingly admits that parishioners "really wanted a bell in the bell tower" instead they inherited a breathtakingly beautiful piece of original artwork ensconced in glass; one which could act as a beacon for all who come in contact with the church, whether praying inside or just passing by.⁴⁶¹ As described by Conrad Lienhardt, "twelve neon loops in three different colors are spanned in the glass cube, like the freely floating, luminous tracks of a drawing in air."⁴⁶² In place of bells, Sonnier reached back into his trove of imagery, language, and forms, and created a suspended installation of delicate, yet dazzling multicolored neon tubes which appear to loop, dance, intertwine and explode all at once. Here then, the sounds one hears are not the ringing of the Angelus, but the silent aftermath of the fireworks one imagines caused this brilliant burst of light; a visual

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid, 63.

⁴⁶¹ Keith Sonnier, interview by Patricia Rosoff, 58.

⁴⁶² Lienhardt 63-64.

cacophony which magically remains fixed in the air, frozen in time, and, much like the light and love of Christ for those who believe in him, will never dissipate.

Again, though met with some skepticism on the part of the congregation, who probably would have much preferred “recognizable imagery” or “would much rather have electrified crosses,” they soon warmed to the installation, with a little creative prodding from the artist and architect.⁴⁶³ When one looks close enough at the abstract forms, any number of shapes and symbols can be said to emerge. Those familiar with Sonnier’s public commission work will recall swirling, looping, abstractions akin to those found in other site specific projects. But, when interpreted with respect to this particular site, the forms can take on a whole new level of association. In the words of Patricia Rosoff, Sonnier’s main installation was very much an amalgam of dualities: “East/West; ancient rites/modern forms, spare/resplendent,” and a viewer can read any number of signs in this work, especially given the religious context.⁴⁶⁴ As Lienhardt rightly points out, “references to number symbolism and numerology can hardly be overlooked,” for both twelve and three are potent numbers in Catholicism and very obviously and purposefully used here.⁴⁶⁵

Depending on the angle at which one views the work, it is possible to see forms ascending, others embracing. When pressed to discuss the specific abstractions, Sonnier suggested that some of the loops may replicate a pair of “hands raised in the air over a flame as a link to a very early gesture of prayer (orant).”⁴⁶⁶ Despite these general associations, however, it wasn’t until Sonnier pointed out one form’s resemblance to a

⁴⁶³ Keith Sonnier, interview by Patricia Rosoff, 58.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Lienhardt 63-64.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

specific Christian symbol that the parishoners' fears were allayed. As the artist remembers:

The Early Christians used abstract images. They had to employ an abstract image of the fish to get around persecution. That's all the congregation needed. They said, in effect, 'Oh, this is the symbol of the fish.' They just bought it, and we had no problem. Luckily, being an ex-Catholic, I had that in my repertoire. I pulled it out of the hat, and it worked like a charm.⁴⁶⁷

As the quote reinforces, "this reframing of available forms of expression into Christian symbols via the ecclesiastical context is more part of the field of interpretation than of artistic intention."⁴⁶⁸ Sonnier's connection of the abstract loop to an abstract fish was an afterthought, but a relevant, completely viable association to make. And, his confession helps us understand why this work is so amazingly appropriate for this space. It both solicits and welcomes a wealth of interpretations even though the artist's original impulse may have been slightly different.

To that end, one need not have any interpretation at all, either; a viewer can take this work at face value, use it on its most basic level. It can be a light source, divine or practical, actively interpreted or passively appreciated as ornament. Yet, because it is all of these things, it can be something to everyone; criteria under which all good, site responsive public art should submit. The associative properties unique to neon, combined with the synthesis of art and architecture and the specific brand of spirituality inherent in the space all come together in a project which affects the culture in ways both physical and transcendental. What Sonnier does with color, light, line and his arrangement of all three is possible not only because of the physical structure and site, but also because of the nature of the building. *Tears for St. Francis* exists within a

⁴⁶⁷ Keith Sonnier, interview by Patricia Rosoff, 58-59.

⁴⁶⁸ Lienhardt 63-64.

progressive, well funded parish with a distinct idea of what worship can be. Sonnier recognizes, too, that he is able to implement his seemingly simple, but loaded concepts because his collaboration with the architect was so seamless.

Here in Steyr, “architecture and art” combine to “convey an atmosphere that could blaze new trails to the church’s future,” at St. Francis and beyond.⁴⁶⁹ The congregation can worship here, perform masses, baptisms, marriages and funerals and have Sonnier’s work as the backdrop to some of the most important moments of their lives. As such, it becomes part of their world, part of their religious and familial culture and can be visually consumed until the building gets adopted and renovated by the next generation.

Like the church of St. Francis, airports are also locations for some of the most joyous, painful and/or life-changing moments a person will experience. One need look no further than the blissful reunions and homecomings shown at the beginning of the 2003 hit film *Love Actually* for evidence of the profound emotion which can be on display at airports. In the opening credits of the movie, couples, families, and friends greet each other and embrace as Hugh Grant narrates:

Whenever I get gloomy about the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport....seems to me that love is everywhere. Often it’s not particularly dignified, or newsworthy – but it’s always there – fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends, old friends....If you look for it, I’ve got a sneaking feeling you’ll find that love actually is all around.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁹ Lienhardt 64.

⁴⁷⁰ <http://www.loveactually.com> The website also says the following about love’s hold on a person, “igniting laughter, wreaking havoc, breaking hearts, daring commitments, forcing choices, catapulting spirits, forging inroads, creating risks—ecstatic, exciting, unexpected, unwelcome, inconvenient, inexplicable, inelegant, unequalled.” It’s rather ironic that much of the same adjectives can be used to a traveler’s experiences at the airport.

Pico Iyer seconds that emotion when noting that incredibly “intimate encounters” happen at the airport, “that girl closing her eyes as she kisses her lost love, that child comforting the mother just widowed, that group of dark-suited worshipers gathering around a departing missionary with their prayers,” each takes place in public, out in the open, at the airport.⁴⁷¹ In this way, the church and the airport have much in common; with aspects of the transformative experiences a person has in one site grafted on to the second and vice versa. This concept is not new. In *The Winged Gospel*, historian Joseph Corn brilliantly disseminates the early twentieth century phenomenon of conflating religious terminology and fervor with that of aviation.⁴⁷² Historian David Brodherson builds on this concept and its specific application to the airport when referencing how, throughout the first century of flight, “commercial airports became our altars of aviation.”⁴⁷³

Even today, despite all of the frustrations and fears built in to twenty-first century flying, Fuller and Harley maintain, “the airport is still the site of take-off, a dramatic ascent into the vertical realm, with all its attendant tropes of power and transcendence.”⁴⁷⁴ Because these sites—the church and the airport—are equally synonymous with “tropes of power and transcendence,” it is markedly apparent that Sonnier’s neon, which brings with it similar tropes, is provocatively suited to both.

Before there was *Tears for St. Francis*, there was *Lichtweg* (1989-1992), or *Lightway*, a splendidly ambitious project for the Munich airport; one whose effect on Sonnier’s subsequent commission work is profound and undeniable. (Figs. 4.17 -4.21)

⁴⁷¹ Iyer, *The Global Soul*, 44.

⁴⁷² Joseph Corn, *The Winged Gospel*.

⁴⁷³ David Brodherson, “What Can’t Go Up Can’t Come Down: The History of American Airport Policy, Planning and Design” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1993), 3.

⁴⁷⁴ Fuller and Harley, 41.

According to interviewer Robert Buck, this work truly is “a summation of who [Sonnier] is as an artist,” for in it you can see Sonnier “drawing on everything old, and yet moving in future directions,” in so many wondrous, open-ended ways.⁴⁷⁵ To that end, it was on this project that Sonnier first recognized the importance of working directly with an architect (Hans-Busso von Busse), and came to the conclusion that in the world of public art commissions, there really is no other way to go.

Sonnier came to the project by way of “an international ideas competition” sponsored by the Munich Airport Authority.⁴⁷⁶ With much of the airport’s monumental construction in place, Von Busse and his fellow architects came together to ponder which of the airport’s many spaces could be set aside for a signature public artwork and what form that work should take. Their inquiries were answered when they saw Sonnier’s submission.⁴⁷⁷ Sonnier’s, “original twelve meter long simulation convinced the committee that the artwork should not spread over various sites but concentrate within a striking area, allowing its effect to be undisturbed.”⁴⁷⁸ But that is not the only thing on which artist and architect would agree.

Von Busse’s airport is white, very white. Dubbed “the ‘white’ airport” for its brightness and the absence of chromatic architectural details, it is a blank canvas for the

⁴⁷⁵ Buck, 50.

⁴⁷⁶ Renate Puvogel, “Keith Sonnier: Flughafen München,” in Sonnier, *Keith Sonnier: Lightway/Lichtweg*. 81.

⁴⁷⁷ As it happens, Von Busse was familiar with Sonnier’s work long before their paths crossed in Munich; a familiarity facilitated by Sonnier’s longtime affiliation with German museums and exhibition spaces and Von Busse’s attendance at Sonnier’s exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington DC. (Rosoff) Thus, when he reviewed Sonnier’s submission, he already had a sense of what the neon installation would look like in situ.

⁴⁷⁸ Puvogel, 81. This decision to preference a single artistic statement over a smattering of smaller artworks scattered throughout the building is a choice that many of the best public art consultants would advise and one that allows the artist the location and budget to be impressive. It makes perfect sense that the architects of Munich’s new, innovative airport would subscribe to the same point of view.

colorful dramas which only could play out in an airport.⁴⁷⁹ The architect's claim that, "light is the artistic subject of our architecture," makes sense, for his interest lies in the ways natural and artificial light, and their unnatural coupling, can affect and enhance a piece of architecture and the public's experience of it.⁴⁸⁰ For Sonnier, Von Busse's approach "is very much like the old German theater, which used light to create an atmosphere."⁴⁸¹ To that end, the two conspired to create an installation in which all the building's light could come together and take center stage while simultaneously providing a soothing backdrop. The result is "an artificial light channel in the lower area of the airport."⁴⁸² Given Von Busse's architectural predilections and Sonnier's specialty, this collaboration seems predestined.

The airport's lower level is certainly a high traffic area – monopolized by hoards of travelers scrambling to enter or leave the airport and make their way to the metro, parking lot, airline check in desk, baggage claim or transfer gate, accordingly. With little else but an expansive corridor and moving walkways, the space was ripe for a large scale artistic statement. Even before Sonnier signed on to the project, Von Busse's firm realized they would have to find creative ways to break up the kilometer long passageway. Their solution? Enliven the traveler's "monotonous journey" by switching the moving walkways from one side of the corridor to the other at four different intervals.⁴⁸³ At the point of switch, "the corridor itself, becomes wider offering space for cafes, stairs and toilet facilities. In these areas, daylight comes in from the hallways

⁴⁷⁹ Busso von Busse, interview by Hubertus Raben, in Sonnier, *Keith Sonnier: Lightway/Lichtweg*, 15.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Sonnier, interview by Hubertus Raben, 27.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Puvogel, 81.

above, enjoyed both by the passengers spending time in these areas and those gliding past them as if on a train.”⁴⁸⁴

Because much of the airport had been designed when Sonnier was tapped for the project, there were a few structural components, like the alternating moving walkways, about which there was no room for compromise. According to Barbara Knopp, the consulting architect for the permanent installation, Sonnier had to work around several pre-existing constraints, including an insistence that “the wall paneled heating system had to be integrated within the light system.”⁴⁸⁵ This integration would not prove problematic, because Sonnier chose to fabricate his installation from “the same kind of material as the rest of the building. The panels of the heating system become part of the design. All along the walkway, there are these rectangular heating panels that now become a decorative element in the work.”⁴⁸⁶

Aluminum, for example, is all over this building. According to Sonnier, “it is a soft, conductive metal which works extremely well with light.” The material itself also happens to be “very light” and easy to work with and for all of these reasons and more was used by Von Busse throughout the airport.⁴⁸⁷ Sonnier, too credits his affinity for working with aluminum with the way it absorbs light, particularly neon, and acts as a conduit for its diffusion.⁴⁸⁸ Thus, the choice to encase his neon tubes in aluminum was as much about the way the two materials symphonize one another as it was a deliberate effort to incorporate the architect’s materials.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Barbara Knopp, interview by Hubertus Raben, in Sonnier, *Keith Sonnier: Lightway/Lichtweg*, 19.

⁴⁸⁶ Sonnier, interview by Hubertus Raben, 27.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid, 31.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid, 27.

Additionally, because of the lack of natural light in this passageway, the architects outfitted the space with an incandescent auxiliary safety light system; a system Sonnier had to take into account when choosing his light colors and sources.⁴⁸⁹ Thus, while red and blue colored neon are used throughout, “fluorescent light is used as back lighting to fuse the two lighting systems into the architecture.”⁴⁹⁰ According to the artist, “the choice of neon and fluorescent and the choice of colour were practical. I wanted the installation to function; I wanted it to be serviceable; I wanted it to be safe as well as economical.”⁴⁹¹ And, one could add, he wanted it to integrate seamlessly into the architecture and become an extension of it into the space of the traveler.⁴⁹²

When describing this work, it is most helpful to think of the piece the way Sonnier does: in terms of neon “zones or visual acts.”⁴⁹³ The entire passageway consists of alternating zones: five zones in which the dominant color is red (neon gas) and four zones in which the dominant color is blue (argon gas). While there are several colors present in every zone, “including yellow, orange, green, violet and turquoise,” it is the hue of the unbroken horizontal line of light in each area that dictates whether a zone is

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid

⁴⁹¹ Ibid. On the choice of colors: “The choice of red and blue as a basic chord makes sense for financial reasons alone: red-glowing neon in pearl-glass and blue-shimmering argon in clear glass are the most economical. Both are the most cheaply manufactured coloured gases and they last the longest – qualities that should not be taken too lightly as in this case as the lighting system is used uninterruptedly.” Puvogel, 85.

⁴⁹² This uniform melding of art and architecture was facilitated by Knopp who, in addition to acting as liaison between Sonnier and the architectural firm, played a pivotal role brokering deals of mutual benefit for the artist, the architect and the airport. Knopp ensured this hallway would be void of advertising by instead promising floor to ceiling space in lounges, waiting areas, and other densely populated parts of the airport. As a result, Sonnier’s *Lichtweg* has the appearance of being both continuous and endless, an impression aided by the neon, its colors, and the mechanics behind the installation’s construction. Knopp, interview with Hubertus Raben, 19.

⁴⁹³ Keith Sonnier, “Munich Airport,” in Sonnier, *Keith Sonnier: Lightway/Lichtweg*, 39.

red or blue.⁴⁹⁴ To obtain the desired effect, Sonnier purposefully mounted the tubes “before and behind glass plates, beams and mirrors,” in the seam where the corridor’s wall and ceiling come together. Doing so “provides a sculptural dimension and at the same time acts as a device of refracted light.”⁴⁹⁵ The configuration also goads the light into “bathing the area in a wash of colour, flooding the ceiling and the walls down to the moving sidewalks.”⁴⁹⁶ According to Renate Puvogel, the installation does not disappoint. “The colours completely eliminate the whiteness of the walls and ceiling, transforming the space into a setting that is aglow with brightly-coloured metal....At the same time, the coloured light intensifies the area so that the experience of the space becomes something quite magnificent.”⁴⁹⁷ Not only does the space become something magnificent, with the help of Sonnier’s installation, it becomes manageable too. Just as the architects purposefully built in subtle breaks for the relentless monotony of the corridor so, too, did Sonnier.⁴⁹⁸

Before the space could become more manageable for the public, it had to be manageable for the artist. To say “scale was an important issue” here would be an understatement.⁴⁹⁹ Even speculating the work was a complete challenge. Sonnier’s recollections of the process are frustrated and funny. How can anyone possibly begin to “think of a work of art that you can’t see the end of?” - trial and error and countless exploratory drawings.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁴ Sonnier Studio press release given to author on August 30, 2005.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid

⁴⁹⁶ Sonnier, “Munich Airport,” 39.

⁴⁹⁷ Puvogel, 83.

⁴⁹⁸ Although despite their combined efforts, the breaks of artist and architect ironically still seem to call attention to the monotony while supposedly offering a bit of relief.

⁴⁹⁹ Sonnier, interview by Robert T. Buck, 50.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

Because Sonnier wanted to find a way to create subtle subdivisions for his audience, he began to think of his work and the space which would absorb it, in more abstract terms. The only way this piece would “not become entangling to the spectator,” or, for that matter, overwhelming for the artist himself, was if it had “an almost musical cadence.”⁵⁰¹ Thus, Sonnier began “to work in a musical sense,” to think like a composer and “go back somehow to the idea of music where things are scored, and how the beginning and the end are not conscious of the middle.”⁵⁰² Fascinatingly, the appropriation of a musical score could not be a more evocative metaphor. Not only does it offer Sonnier a way out of his conceptual conundrum, it makes his installation all the more specific to the goings on at an airport.

Understanding this remarkable parallel requires an acknowledgement that there is a kind of selective editing that happens on any journey. Time spent at the airport, in the air, and/or en route, often is considered separate from time enjoyed at the destination. In a sense, the flights to and from and the airport are extraneous bookends that could have no bearing on what happens to a traveler in the time between flights. Take, for instance, the following scenario: when discussing the discrepancy between the anticipation and reality of a trip, Alain de Botton writes, “A travel book may tell us, for example, that the narrator journeyed through the afternoon to reach the hill town of X and after a night in its medieval monastery awoke to a misty dawn.”⁵⁰³ While the reader is told what happened upon this traveler’s arrival at X, she is not made conscious of the middle journey; she has no way of knowing the traumas and travails the narrator encountered that afternoon en route to X (which, presumably included hiking up hill.) Instead, the

⁵⁰¹ Sonnier, interview by Hubertus Raben, 27.

⁵⁰² Sonnier, interview by Robert T. Buck, 50.

⁵⁰³ Alain De Botton, *The Art of Travel* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 14.

account places all emphasis on what happened at the destination, implying everything that came before is secondary and/or unrelated. As with Sonnier's musical score, a traveler's experience of his destination need not be dictated by what happened at the airport, in the air, or en route.

Sonnier's novel compositional approach is successful on many levels.

Contextualizing it in terms of this corridor's practical role within the airport and how the public uses this space allows additional variations of its application to emerge. While the entire corridor is a frequently filled with people moving in various directions, only on the rarest of occasions would its length be experienced in its entirety. Oftentimes, only a segment of the corridor is used. A person will pass through the red zones (akin to a song's verses) while assessing which of the blue zones (akin to the chorus) is the one she needs, for each blue zone demarcates where travelers may leave the passageway and follow stairs up to the airport's main spaces (and vice versa). Dividing the corridor this way allows Sonnier to fill it with a vibrant and engaging installation while treating the viewer to a satisfying snippet regardless of where she gets on and off.

For Sonnier there is much with which a passenger has to grapple in this particular airport space and much that his work takes into account. First and foremost, it was the intention of artist and architect alike to "create a calming environment."⁵⁰⁴ A calming artwork is one that will "affect the viewers on a personal level as it guides and soothes them in their passage through" one place to the next.⁵⁰⁵ After all, airports are tense enough; they don't need jarring art and/or architecture to thicken the tension!

⁵⁰⁴ Sonnier, interview by Hubertus Raben, 27.

⁵⁰⁵ Sonnier, "Munich Airport," 39.

In the case of *Lichtweg*, calm exists in the ways color coded neon lighting helps take the guessing game out of finding one's way within a potentially foreboding and lengthy hallway. Calm is also found in the way neon "bathes the pedestrian in soft light, creating an ambience which soothes the hurried traveler."⁵⁰⁶ (In this sense, *Lichtweg* is a throwback to earlier *Ba-O-Ba* installations, and quite deliberately so). But Sonnier goes further in his assessment of how a traveler experiences this work, especially when acknowledging the role that mirrors play in tandem with the more frequently focused upon effects of light.

As Sonnier theorizes, "when you travel, you are very self-contained."⁵⁰⁷ You go from being a confined and somewhat solitary—but surrounded—airplane passenger to being "released from that vacuum, that almost canned space you experienced on board the aircraft."⁵⁰⁸ You make your way to the moving sidewalk, which, like the airplane, does all the work for you. You look around the blue zone where, "you see yourself as well as the other pedestrians in the mirror, and the space becomes much more expansive."⁵⁰⁹ Here again, as in the airplane, you are in public but alone – more so than in any other area of the airport.

As Barbara Knopp puts forth, what sets *Lightway*'s site apart and makes it conducive to such contradiction, "is the 'unoccupied' character of this space. [On the moving walkway] One person is carried behind another one; yet he is able to be all by himself."⁵¹⁰ This is Augé's non-place at its most pure. A liminal space that "creates

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷ Sonnier, interview by Hubertus Raben, 27.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ Knopp, 19.

neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude.”⁵¹¹ In the opinion of artist Martha Rosler, who similarly has observed and commented upon the airport as an uncanny non-place, the airport “is not organized as a signifying space that creates a public.” If anything, “the internal spaces of airline terminals preclude collectivity or immanence,” for, “rushing and waiting is the pattern of travel.” Taking this premise one step further, Rosler asserts those passing through the airport are only “a ‘public’” if ‘public’ is defined “as a regulated flow.”⁵¹² According to Knopp, Augé, and Rosler’s combined logic, *Lightway* is the perfect work to shed light on the solitary yet public nature of the airport and the shared isolation felt here.

With *Lightway*, Sonnier uses the expansive space, mirrors, and moving walkway to capitalize on the “deeper psychological effect” of light.⁵¹³ Here, in this lengthy airport corridor, Sonnier paradoxically places his “emphasis on the drama of the passage,” something a traveler, like de Botton’s narrator, often edits out.⁵¹⁴ Doing so underscores the more “introspective” qualities of the work, their connection to literal, spiritual, and metaphorical life journeys, and their perfect placement within the airport.⁵¹⁵ It also renders this work much more than razzle-dazzle decoration, a fact which justifies Knopp’s penetrating assertion that, “All of the city’s museums combined are not able to offer such a self evident synthesis of everyday life and art.”⁵¹⁶

⁵¹¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1995), 103.

⁵¹² Martha Rosler, *In the Place of the Public: Observations of a Frequent Flyer* (Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1998), 63.

⁵¹³ Sonnier, interview by Hubertus Raben, 27.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

⁵¹⁶ Knopp, 19.

Though he is perhaps the most high profile fine artist creating light installations for airports, Sonnier is by no means the only sculptor illuminating the world of public art; Christopher Janney, James Carpenter and Michael Hayden are just a few of the many artists also doing so. In fact, it is difficult to have a meaningful conversation about public art in airports without mentioning Hayden and his crowd pleasing, whimsical kinetic light way at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport.

Located underground in the United Airlines transfer corridor, *Sky's the Limit* was completed in 1987 and thus predates Sonnier's *Lightway* by just a few years. (Fig. 4.22)⁵¹⁷ The installation consists of roughly 23,600 square feet of what has to be one of the largest mirrored ceilings in the Windy City. Directly below the mirror, Hayden suspended a 744 foot tangle of multicolored neon squiggles; below the squiggles, four moving walkways. When a person sets foot on the walkway, he triggers a fantastic rainbow light show as the walkway carries him to the concourse of his connecting flight. To top it off, this carnival-esque spectacular is paired with a specially commissioned, sixty minute looped soundtrack of electronic music.

There is no doubt that Hayden's work is glittery and entertaining. It is certainly a work that the public enjoys and remembers fondly. And, there are several parallels to be drawn with Sonnier's installation. Both are in a long corridor, both use neon light and mirrors, and both require viewer interaction to complete them and extend them into the main space. In his interview with Hubertus Raben, Sonnier cites *Sky's the Limit* as one with which he and von Busse were familiar but one that, in their collective opinion,

⁵¹⁷ For more information, see the artist's website:
<http://www.thinkinglightly.com/portfolio.cgi?item=HA07>.

“functions on a more decorative level.”⁵¹⁸ Given this discussion of *Lightway*, and all that Sonnier has said about the work, its site and his intentions, it is not hard to see why he and von Busse categorize Hayden’s work as vastly different.

Again, Sonnier believes creating works of art for public spaces is all about “creating the ambiance that is right for the situation.”⁵¹⁹ The O’Hare installation doesn’t operate under the same principles, or doesn’t approach ‘the situation’ of the airport in a like-minded way. Its light and sound bombard the traveler creating an inescapable, roller disco atmosphere that, while cool, is the antithesis of the calm, introspective, site-responsive experience Sonnier strove to design in Munich. Sonnier’s installation for San Francisco International Airport drives home this discrepant point still further.

As any fine artist who has negotiated the tricky terrain of percent for art commissions can attest, public art has the awful tendency of getting so watered down it’s not even really art anymore.⁵²⁰ Discussed in Chapter 1, Acconci’s installation at SFO (his candid dissatisfaction with it and the process leading up to its installation, specifically) is a prime example of this dilemma. Though he was not subjected to the same rigorous rounds of revision that Acconci was, Sonnier, too, is less than excited about his own SFO contribution. (Fig. 4.23) When asked to comment on the final product, Sonnier’s exact words were: “it’s fine, but not great.”⁵²¹

Like many percent for art installations throughout the country, *Ceiling Flood* began as a proposal designed in response to a general, nationwide call for artists.

⁵¹⁸ Sonnier, interview by Hubertus Raben, 31.

⁵¹⁹ Sonnier, Lecture at Cooper Union, New York City, April 6, 2005.

⁵²⁰ Sonnier, conversation with author, August 30, 2005.

⁵²¹ Ibid.

Sonnier's winning submission was selected by both the San Francisco Art Commission and San Francisco Airport Commission. The design was chosen largely because the Airport Art Steering Committee felt it best addressed their three basic requirements: it was intelligible to the airport's diverse audiences, it was conducive to "the fleeting nature of people's encounters with [it]," and it was easy to maintain.⁵²² In keeping with his philosophy that good public art is about "creating the ambiance that is right for the situation," Sonnier set about to do his best with what the sterile corridor and limited budget had to offer; circumstances that were very different from the near-perfect working conditions and creative collaboration that produced *Lightway*.⁵²³ Realizing the limits of these parameters, Sonnier made every effort to create an installation that could pace viewers and help set a mood.⁵²⁴ The result: "a simple corridor piece" above the moving walkway.⁵²⁵

Fabricated from neon, argon, and fluorescent light, *Ceiling Flood* irradiates the hallway of the airport's Boarding Area G; a location where only ticketed, screened passengers are permitted. A line of moving walkways runs the length of this sterile corridor, on either side of which Sonnier placed colorful neon-accented niches where the ceiling meets the walls. Whether riding along or walking beside, travelers will notice evenly spaced boxes of blue light on their left, matched by evenly spaced boxes of red on their right. To break up the thousand foot long space, the artist switches the colors roughly half way down the hall signaling the near end of the corridor. But that is not all he does to manipulate the mood in this passageway; Sonnier also toys with the main

⁵²² Kenneth Baker, "San Francisco Terminal's Art Has Its Ups and Downs," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 27, 2000. <http://archives.californiaaviation.org/airport/msg09550.html>.

⁵²³ Sonnier, Lecture at Cooper Union.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

ceiling light itself, which dips down and forms a slight “V” directly above the walkway. A line of neutral fluorescent light fixtures punctuates the point of the “V,” above which a line of the artist’s strategically placed—yet relatively hidden—neon tubing provides a subtle “yellow glow” down the length of the ceiling.⁵²⁶ Like in Munich, the goal in San Francisco was to enable en route travelers to calm down, compose themselves, and chill out for a minute. After all, as Sonnier wittily quips, you “don’t want to be frazzled when you get to your flight; you’re already frazzled and you haven’t even had your drink yet!”⁵²⁷

Though created with sensitivity to the existing architecture and to the transitions that happen in this airport space, *Ceiling Flood* doesn’t really take into account its civic home, nor does it make the strong, saturated statement of which Sonnier is clearly capable. Munich spoiled him and the artist knows it. It is not at all surprising then, that as a result of his experience at SFO, Sonnier insists he’s “done with sterile corridors!”⁵²⁸ While he still gets offers to do them, he refuses. According to the artist, when he is brought in on a project after the architecture phase already is complete, there is only so much he can do to remain true to the space, the materials, and himself, before the work becomes a watered down type.⁵²⁹

To reinforce Sonnier’s apprehensive misgivings for such scenarios, one need look no further than the consummate representation of the airport’s moving walkway in popular film. According to *Naked Airport* author Alastair Gordon, it’s hard to discuss airport moving walkways without recalling the iconic, “opening scene of *The Graduate*

⁵²⁶ Baker, “San Francisco Terminal’s Art Has Its Ups and Downs.”

⁵²⁷ Sonnier, Lecture at Cooper Union.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

when Dustin Hoffman rides the Astroway at LAX in the fluorescent glow of airport lighting.” Hoffman has no choice but to endure that awful, unflattering yellow-tinged light as “a robotic voice drones across the loudspeaker system, repeating its message over and over again: ‘Please hold the handrail and stand to the right....’”⁵³⁰ For Gordon, this scene was an allegorical encapsulation of “all that was dehumanizing in modern life,” and as such, “made the perfect background for a tale of youthful alienation.” While filmed in the 1970s, the scene is a classic, and resonates with viewers today if for no other reason than the airport, despite the best efforts of municipalities across the country, is itself a type and still a rather alienating place. And within the airport’s walls, the sterile corridor is the most potentially alienating (non-)place of all. It’s no wonder Sonnier soon washed his hands of the space, jumping at the opportunity to shake things up in Kansas City.⁵³¹

In more ways than one, Sonnier’s installation in Munich set a standard for how he wished to conduct his commission life in America. He could not replicate *Lightway* in San Francisco, nor did he want to, but the entire *Ceiling Flood* experience made him realize that the kind of statement he was able to make in Munich is now better served with commissions like the one he would go on to do in Kansas City. Only through chasing his own passions and/or entering a genuine collaboration with an architect would Sonnier have the freedom to create truly site-responsive, mold breaking, public works. Little did the artist know that by going international, he would hone his ideals and yet again recognize the importance of going local.

⁵³⁰ Gordon, *Naked Airport*, 229.

⁵³¹ Sonnier, Lecture at Cooper Union.

In Munich, Sonnier was asked to make a strong sculptural statement; a statement that would go on to become an enduring emblem of the airport, its city, and the valued role contemporary art plays within the cultures of both. Thrilled with the final outcome of the installation, the airport's managing director thanked the artist for succeeding "in shedding the correct light on a central area of the airport, showing imagination and sensitivity."⁵³² Sonnier continues that legacy of imaginative, site-sensitive illumination in Kansas City by moving out of doors and creating a gateway worthy of the countless comings and goings that happen at the airport in yet another remarkably arts conscious metropolis. (Figs. 4.24 – 4.29)

The term gateway is not used lightly here, for rare is the work that is a gateway for a gateway. Historian Mark Gottdiener devotes much time to teasing out the interrelation of the airport and gateway, often preferring the term "transition space" for the latter. He says that, "because they represent the transcendence of space and time, airports function as gateways and as transition spaces; they personify the 'great escape.' Precisely for this reason, air transportation possesses the aura of romance and exoticism, of possibility, difference and a new chance for daily living."⁵³³ This definition fits well within Sonnier's desire that his works become part of a culture and affect it for the better, making his gateway sculpture for KCI all the more appropriate.

Though his commissions for the Munich and Kansas City airports are distinctive, together they authenticate Sonnier's fundamental approach to an airport's civic obligation. Because the airport is "the first and last place seen by all travelers" to a given

⁵³² Willy Hermsen, "Forward," in Sonnier, *Keith Sonnier: Lightway/Lichtweg*, 9.

⁵³³ Gottdiener, *Life in the Air*, 11.

city, Sonnier is adamant that it should “make an enduring first and last impression.”⁵³⁴

While the artist feels his work in San Francisco was not able to fulfill that mantra, he all but out does himself in Kansas City. In the process, he puts a new spin on how an airport’s commissioned pieces can help make impressive first impressions happen.

Sonnier’s commission is one of the many Kansas City arts initiatives sponsored by the Municipal Art Commission’s percent for art program.⁵³⁵ As is the case with such commissions, Sonnier was asked to submit a proposal to be vetted by a jury made up of local artists, aviation personnel and members of the Kansas City community.⁵³⁶

However, Sonnier’s decision to propose a piece was prejudiced, in large part by the efforts of Blair Sands, the city’s former public art administrator. One of *Lightway*’s many admirers, Sands approached Sonnier about the possibility of creating a signature piece for KCI. At the time of their conversation, Sonnier’s focus had been on indoor projects primarily, with only a smattering of outdoor works on his resume. For this and a number of other reasons, Sonnier found the conversation and its timing intriguing.

As *Kansas City Star* journalist Mike Rice reports, Sonnier’s interest was peaked by “the location near the entry to the airport’s three terminals and the reservoir, which collects storm water from the airport;” a suggestive location which gave the sculptor a novel idea. After chatting with Sands, Sonnier “began to think about a work that would serve as both a water aeration system and a lighted entryway,” and submitted a proposal

⁵³⁴ Sonnier, “Munich Airport,” 39.

⁵³⁵ Because this project is sited at the airport, the Aviation Department served as co-sponsor.

⁵³⁶ “The \$800,000 artwork is funded through Kansas City’s One Percent for Art program, which requires 1 percent of the cost of a city-financed project to be set aside for public art. In this case, the money comes from the airport’s \$258 million terminal renovation project. Several other projects, including the blue terrazzo flooring in the terminals and lighted sculptures in the parking garage stair towers, are part of the projects allotment for public art.” Rice, “Sculptor foresees KCI work as ‘beacon.’”

that could do just that.⁵³⁷ With this winning scheme, Sonnier began a new chapter in his public commission work; one of which he is incredibly proud. To use the language and description from the artist's own press release, "this new sculpture gives Sonnier's public work a scale and dimension that competes with both highway signage and hotel marquees as pretentious as Bellagio and Versailles and in doing so re-addresses his outdoor sculpture and works within the public sector."⁵³⁸ What does not come across in this press release, however, is the artist's absolute, unpretentious love of the piece, the city and the airport; a tripartite affinity which shines through in the work itself.⁵³⁹

Sonnier's "big-deal piece," to quote journalist Tim Engle, was completed in 2005, after over five years of pre-installation engineering preparations.⁵⁴⁰ Rising 60 feet from the ground, *Double Monopole* is comparable in looks to "the skeletons of two billboards" whose naked bones are lit with abstract lines of neon.⁵⁴¹ This skeletal scaffolding brings new meaning to the idea that Sonnier makes visible the guts and wires of his plugged in works. Anchored to the ground by a single beam (or monopole), the billboard armatures are irregular rectangles, modified 'L's whose horizontal is slightly longer than the vertical. The 'L' shape predicts the linearity of Sonnier's neon tubes, which light up various 'bones' of the scaffold grids. When compared to the network of systems in play at the airport and the directional signage along the roadway, the grid-ed armatures can be understood as predicting far more.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ *Keith Sonnier: Public Commission Works*, press packet given to author, August 30, 2005.

⁵³⁹ Sonnier, conversation with author, August 30, 2005.

⁵⁴⁰ Tim Engle, "Look! Down to the Ground! Harried Travelers might not notice, but KS's airport is also an art museum," *Kansas City Star*, February 20, 2005.

⁵⁴¹ *Kansas City Star*, February 20, 2005.

As analyzed by Fuller and Harley, airports are actually nodes in a complex aviopolis system. “The aviopolis,” is a “networked and dispersed city of the air,” one that, “turns mobility and connection into a productive force that produces value and in the process reshapes a city and its infrastructure. Strange geometries emerge at the crossroads of multiple systems of movement as cross-platform axes of movement create structures and shapes that breach previous logistics of space.”⁵⁴² Those familiar with the language used to describe the aviopolis might well interpret Double Monopole as a three-dimensional rendering of its “strange geometries.” If nothing else, this sculptural billboard surrogate certainly signals a crossroads, one that publicizes the transitions awaiting all who pass by.

Comparatively, the reds, yellows and blues of Sonnier’s neon tubes are an artistic substitute for the catch phrases and quick hit imagery of traditional roadside advertising. Their glow is picked up and extended beyond its limits not by glass or mirrors—as so often is the case with other Sonnier installations—but by the reflections made possible in a pool of water directly beneath the billboards.⁵⁴³ This small lake catches the lights and bleeding colors from the sculpture above. It also receives the spray of side by side, thirty foot waterfalls that continuously cascade from each billboard and, like the monopolies themselves, connect the lights of the billboards to the landscape below.

Here, in Sonnier’s “light and water tower,” the flow of pedestrian traffic so integral to the Munich work has been replaced by that of falling water.⁵⁴⁴ This substitution makes sense since the sculpture’s location on the outskirts of the airport

⁵⁴² Fuller and Harley, 140.

⁵⁴³ This pool is one of many small lakes scattered throughout the airport landscape. *Keith Sonnier: Public Commission Works*, press packet.

⁵⁴⁴ The phrase ‘light and water tower’ is Sonnier’s as quoted in the *Kansas City Star*, February 20, 2005. The bit about pedestrian flow comes from, Sonnier, conversation with author, August 30, 2005.

grounds diminishes the likelihood that travelers will walk up to the work and physically experience its saturating glow. Water replaces skin, bringing Sonnier's *Ba-O-Ba* fascinations full circle in Kansas City, where the effects of his neon-and-water coupling recall that of the Haitian dark seas and moonlight that inspired him so many years ago.

When considered in light of Puvogel's observations, *Double Monopole*'s shallow pool can be likened to the floor of the Munich corridor where Sonnier's neon colors make "the moving walkway glow mysteriously and transparently...as though it was a crossing point to distant galaxies, bathing the floor in a pellucid reflecting bath, as if it had been raining."⁵⁴⁵ While applicable to *Lightway*'s highly polished and thus incredibly reflective tile flooring, the comment is even more appropriate here in Kansas City, where the waterfalls rain perpetually into an endlessly reflective pool. (Fig. 4.30) Here, at the airport's outer-most threshold, Sonnier's neon again signals a crossing point; a point of conversion between citizens of Kansas City and citizens of the world, between earth and air transport; passengers and planes. And, because viewers experience the work from afar (usually from moving vehicles while entering or exiting the airport premises) their removed, fly-by participation reinforces the ephemeral characteristics intrinsic to its siting at a non-place.

Rather than rely on a wall or backdrop to help diffuse his neon light, at KCI, Sonnier leaves his work airy and transparent so that viewers can look through it—beyond it, even—allowing the land and sky behind to provide the backdrop. In this way, Sonnier takes the relationship between environment and electronic art to new heights. This coalescence fits perfectly with the artist's prior admission to being "fascinated by how

⁵⁴⁵ Puvogel, 87.

nature and technology in the modern world exist together.”⁵⁴⁶ Not only does *Double Monopole* light up the night time sky, it is a reminder of ever-present twentieth and twenty-first century tensions between the natural and the technological, tensions which are never more in your face than at an airport.

If the analysis of *Double Monopole* stopped here, Sonnier’s gateway installation might be understood as suitable for any number of airports. But Sonnier’s work is neither generic, nor aloof. It is conceived with extreme consideration to site and all the variants the term ‘site’ implies. As a result, those familiar with the artist’s work will anticipate that *Double Monopole* connects with its location in ways both subtle and surprising. Without question, these connections owe much to the introduction of water, which, when paired with Sonnier’s trademark neon, intensifies both the impressiveness and site-specificity of the work while setting it apart from others within the airport art genre.⁵⁴⁷

In his 1998 interview with Robert Buck, Sonnier eagerly confessed an urge to incorporate water—flowing water in particular—in future projects; neither Buck nor the artist could have known that in just a few short years, the Kansas City commission would present Sonnier with the perfect opportunity.⁵⁴⁸ Sonnier’s anomalous use of water not only fulfills one of the sculptor’s persistent artistic desires, it goes a long way towards making *Double Monopole* more site specific than most might realize. Kansas City is, after all, the City of Fountains. Yet despite the city’s identity being predicated on an abundance of them, there were no fountains at the airport; a fact which made the timing of Sonnier’s proposal even more fortuitous. Apparently, local leaders had spent years

⁵⁴⁶ Sonnier, in Dean, 6.

⁵⁴⁷ Sonnier, conversation with author, August 30, 2005.

⁵⁴⁸ Sonnier, interview by Robert T. Buck, 50.

pushing for one to be installed at KCI—the place where first impressions and civic identity so easily can be formed and/or marketed—but the construction of an airport fountain remained elusive.⁵⁴⁹

Double Monopole remedies that problem, solidifying “Kansas City’s distinction as the “City of Fountains” to thousands of visitors entering through Kansas City International Airport.”⁵⁵⁰ It also affords Sonnier the opportunity to use water in its actual, liquid form and to elaborate upon, or bring full circle, the implications of his choice of neon as a material. Take for example the following comment about Sonnier’s neon found in the Neue Nationalgalerie catalogue: Sonnier’s “industrially manufactured, truly ‘cold’ neon light functions here as a fountain of life, as energy, which streams into the building from without.”⁵⁵¹ The essayist’s choice to equate Sonnier’s neon with an elixir akin to that of a fountain of life—or perhaps even youth—cannot be overlooked, for it invites Sonnier’s fulfillment of the desire to work with water to be interpreted as a logical outgrowth of prior concerns; a literal and metaphorical perfecting of neon’s conceptual capacity. For, both light and water can flood, wash, flow, spray, saturate, cascade, and stream. This synonymy is a new and fitting – if not fated—nuance; one implemented most effectively here at the Kansas City airport where its virtues are both accessible and abundant.

In addition to reinforcing a desired civic reputation, Sonnier’s installation “is an environmentally-friendly artwork” whose energy is edgy and earth conscious.⁵⁵² The light fixtures he employs are “low-wattage neon” and thus save quite a bit of

⁵⁴⁹ Rice, “Sculptor foresees KCI work as ‘beacon.’”

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁵¹ Jäger, “Spherical Modernism,” 22.

⁵⁵² *The Fountain Pen: The Newsletter for City Employees*, City of Kansas City, Missouri.

<http://www.kcmo.org/cco/PDF's/06Augweb.pdf>

electricity.⁵⁵³ And, with the aid of “a plumbing system from the primary reservoir at KCI,” the twin waterfalls actually aerate the reservoir into which they flow.⁵⁵⁴ Thus through the use of a unique water recycling system, Sonnier is able to make this cascading neon fountain eco-friendly, hi-tech, and local all at the same time.⁵⁵⁵ As such, it fits well within the overall emphasis of the airport itself, which stresses a commitment to promoting the region, its inhabitants, and its burgeoning arts scene.

Like many of the percent for art projects at the airport, other airport refurbishments collude in creating an atmosphere full of local flair. Sonnier’s installation is but one of many additions and renovations brought to fruition under the rubric of the KCI Terminal Improvement Project. The multimillion dollar project called for significant remodeling of the airport’s infrastructure as well as an updating of passenger amenities, “including the addition of new restaurants and shops with a Kansas City flavor.”⁵⁵⁶ Adding to the local-ness of the improvements, according to a KCI press release, “Many local firms played a part in the renovation of the terminals at KCI, with more than 3,000 people employed as a result of the project.”⁵⁵⁷

While “it will never rival the Nelson or the Kemper,” the airport has become quite the repository for major commissions of public art and a subtle advertisement for the surprising, yet superlative arts scene for which Kansas City is becoming famous.⁵⁵⁸ And, in the opinion of public art administrator Porter Arneill, the artworks commissioned for the airport are of so high a caliber, they are “a remarkable collection for any city,

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁴ David Eulitt, *Kansas City Star*, February 9, 2005.

⁵⁵⁵ Sonnier, conversation with author, August 30, 2005.

⁵⁵⁶ Joe McBride, “KCI Terminal Improvement Project Comes to an End,” November 17, 2004. <http://www.infozine.com/news/stories/op/storiesView/sid/4409/?vo=21>.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ Engle.

frankly.”⁵⁵⁹ It just so happens that, by signing on such excellent artists devoted to site-responsive sculpture as Sonnier and Aycock, and having their works act as beacons at the airport, the artworks wind up serving the city in countless ways.

Coincidentally, around the same time these major airport artworks were finalized, the downtown arts scene was the recipient of a fair amount of critical acclaim. According to Alice Thorson, word was getting around, and fast, “that Kansas City has one of the most vibrant visual arts cultures not on a coast.”⁵⁶⁰ And, it wasn’t just the local journalists and critics who were responsible for the buzz. “As visiting arts professionals and tourism experts talk up the city as an arts hub, individual Kansas City artists are spreading the word by racking up appearances in national publications and big-city exhibits.”⁵⁶¹ Thus, through the art that’s at the airport, the art it promotes, and the fact that it provides the services that allow these visiting arts professionals and tourism experts to do their jobs, KCI plays a vital role in facilitating (and perpetuating) a positive, aesthetically pleasing civic image. According to Iyer, that’s as it should be, for airports, “are both a city’s business card and its handshake; they tell us what a community yearns to be as well as what it really is.”⁵⁶²

With *Double Monopole*, Sonnier showcases an extreme sensitivity to his environmental surroundings and to the myriad of outdoor spotlights and strategically lit control towers, runways, and planes which make this site like no other. The work, then, also seems to respond to Zschokke’s prior assessment of Sonnier’s public commissions,

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁰ Alice Thorson, “Raised Profile PRIME TIME ART SCENE,” *Kansas City Star*, March 13, 2005.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² Iyer, 46.

the majority of which he asserts “relate directly to strands and nodes of contemporary traffic systems and to movement and change through motion in space. They also take into account neighboring light sources and reflecting surfaces as well as the changes of natural life.”⁵⁶³ Given Zschokke’s comments, and Sonnier’s successful exploration of how interior spaces can extend outward to converse with a city’s patterns of movement and light, creating an outdoor work for the airport landscape allows the artist to push this conversation still further, if not bring it to its logical end.

Critic Jean-Pierre Criqui wrote in 1987, “What runs through the whole of [Sonnier’s] work, is a persistent concern for an awareness of the space extending between art and spectator.”⁵⁶⁴ Today, that statement holds strong; for in all of his installations—especially those for airports—Sonnier gently forces his public to “share an intermediate space,” an area in-between themselves and the work.⁵⁶⁵ With *Lightway*, that mutual space is the in-between zone of the airport’s main corridor. Within that space Sonnier ingeniously taps into what Kathryn Dean calls “the visceral experience of the airport;” allowing his neon “to penetrate the skin” of all who pass through “with the sensation of airport.”⁵⁶⁶ In doing so, Sonnier not only conjures, admits, and channels neon’s many virtues; he jointly locates the essence of his site and fuses the lot of them together in a cavalcade of light.

In the case of *Double Monopole*, that shared, liminal space is one that encompasses the entire airport landscape, a fact about which the traveler is made aware as soon as she enters the KCI grounds. Here, Sonnier’s spectacular semaphore billboards

⁵⁶³ Zschokke, 9.

⁵⁶⁴ Criqui, “Neither Inside Nor Out.”

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁶ Dean, 2.

salute the traveler as she crosses the threshold from known space to non-place and vice versa. In both instances, Sonnier demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the relevance of the airport as a social, cultural, and civic construct, and the split identities, contradictory experiences, and uncanny encounters it provides for all who pass through.

Whether incorporating moving walkways, moving water, or simply moving electricity, Sonnier's works, like the operations of an airport, are never static.⁵⁶⁷ What better (non-)place to continue to probe our use of light, industrial materials, innovative technologies, environmentally friendly efforts, evaporating borders and ever-changing social and cultural dynamics than the airport, itself just a node in the complex circuitry of the twenty-first century aviopolis? Indeed, with *Double Monopole*, Sonnier takes his inquiries to unprecedented heights. His light and water beacon stands tall; a symbolic summation of the cultures that collide on this site, and the interests and aspirations of a world-class artist who, through the creation of a superbly site-responsive work of public sculpture, has done his part to ensure its city can claim the same.

⁵⁶⁷ Brodherson, 2.

CONCLUSION

Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion, Travelogues, Star Sifter, and Double Monopole—all were created by a top contemporary artist or architectural alliance and yet none have received the critical attention they so deserve – until now. Unafraid of inconvenient truths, Acconci, Diller + Scofidio, Aycock, and Sonnier purposefully fix their attention on the duplicitous characteristics of contemporary flight, both those acknowledged and unspoken, favorable and damning. Using their signature artistic vocabularies, these astute, creative minds have given us works that capture the essence of the airport and the experiences sustained there, while showcasing the often overlooked discrepancies between our twenty-first century certainties, dreams, denials, and desperations.

With his Studio's subtle yet sinister approach to the ticketing lobby of PHL Terminal B/C, Vito Acconci succeeds in maintaining his own artistic interests while giving the public an installation full of clever, thought-provoking paradoxes. At once organic and unnatural, protective and quasi-threatening, *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion* encapsulates so many of the dualities bound up with our experiences of flight. After all, no matter how unsettling a notion, fear and flight often go hand in hand and Acconci knows this. Whether it is a fear of lost luggage, a middle seat, pilot error, airplane engine malfunction, or terrorism, feelings of apprehension are ever-present at the airport. With his upending architectural simulation, Acconci takes our fears, be they out in the open or bubbling under the surface, and forces us to face them head on.

It is only fitting that Acconci, a visual artist with origins in poetry, would conceive a project that seems to embody “the very language of flight,” a language which,

in the words of Iyer “seems made for tricky liberties: red-eye, fly-by-night, transit-lounge, duty-free.”⁵⁶⁸ As an airport commission, *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion* works because it recognizes just these “tricky liberties” and then some. We may confuse his sculpted references to permeable borders and disorientation for those of ‘hide and seek’ or jungle gym slides, but therein lays the significance of this work. Because it validates the often phantasmagorical goings on within this space it can be something to everyone, a quality that is essential for good public art.

The same unequivocal statement can be extended to the *Travelogues* of Diller + Scofidio. For while the commission operates at a very high level of cultural critique it also doubles as hip, interactive post-flight entertainment. To those attentive or interested enough to process its fragmented narratives, inconclusive photographic couplings, and ingenious references to its liminal site, the interpretive rewards are incalculable. It is the perfect visual affirmation of, if not antidote for, the fractured, irritating disruptions many feel when flying. But again, what makes this installation work is that it is equally conducive to casual observations, to viewers marveling at the shifting travel themed images, as it is to more informed or enlightened introspection. *Travelogues* is both a one hit wonder and a work with longevity – one whose complicated commentaries and codes are most likely to be revealed slowly to repeat international flyers who find themselves viewing it time and time again.

Accessible to both frequent travelers and those on once-in-a-lifetime adventures, *Travelogues* contains visual and conceptual details which, like those of *Flying Floors*, can be used or ignored at the discretion of its audience. But the sophisticated implications

⁵⁶⁸ Iyer, “The New Business Class,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1998.

are there, embedded within its screens, silently encouraging all who do take note to look further, to look deeper within both the work and themselves.

Though executed on a much more conspicuous scale, the works of Aycock and Sonnier invite similar self-rumination. Despite their large size and more obvious placement around the airport, these works are just as complex and just as open to layers of thoughtful interpretation as those of Acconci and Diller + Scofidio. Invoking the endpoint observations of Kirn one last time evidences the degree to which these final two installations help round out a portrait of contemporary air travel:

By the time the average traveler has driven to the terminal, parked his car, stood in line to check his bags, displayed his ID, removed his shoes, put his shoes back on and ridden the moving walkway to his gate (only to confront a video screen informing him that his gate has just been changed to another gate on a distant concourse), he feels that he ought to be wherever he's going, among the people he wants to see, instead of in the place he's trying to leave, surrounded by strangers he doesn't care about.⁵⁶⁹

The exasperations of Kirn's average traveler are palpable and no doubt mirror emotions we've all felt when preparing for a trip to the airport. Travelers rarely relish the thought of what will happen at the airport or in flight and would gladly skip that part of their journey (or take a train) if they could.

The simple wish to arrive where you are going even before you have left is but one part of the possible reveries Aycock's *Star Sifter* validates and enables. Like each of the artists in this dissertation, Aycock is in on the joke. She understands exactly how strange, banal and bland waiting at the airport can be and offers the public a way out, if not a reason to smirk at our complacency, our false sense of security and our increasing inability to demand big dreams, big discoveries and big thoughts from ourselves and those around us. With *Star Sifter* she poses a variety of fundamental questions and does

⁵⁶⁹ Kirn, "Flying Alone."

so in a venue which continues to facilitate the fulfillment of one of humanity's most primordial desires – that of flight.

Aycock's *Star Sifter* may tap in to more than even she realized. As reported by *New York Times Magazine* contributor Julie Earle-Levine, there really is something otherworldly that happens to people, particularly men, and their emotions when they are in flight. In the words of frequent flyer/interviewee Jim Muldoon, "there is something in the air that triggers it—a certain freedom to be emotional." According to Earle-Levine, "a plane is one of the only places he can let go."⁵⁷⁰ Muldoon is not alone. Filmmaker Nathaniel Hunt thinks he is pre-disposed to react more emotionally to films he screens in-flight because, 'If you respond to a film up there,' he says, 'it is touching on the primal issues that saturate you when you fly.'⁵⁷¹ As these accounts support, there is something psychologically different that happens to a person when in the air; something primal, something universal. In many ways, *Star Sifter* indicates that difference. So too does Sonnier's *Double Monopole*, a work that foreshadows the extraordinariness of what happens at an airport at the very moment when those on the ground find themselves on the threshold of that difference.

Signaling the transition between landscape and air space through a grid of neon light and falling water, Sonnier calls attention to ever present juxtapositions of nature and technology while pushing the limits of his own artistic form language. His billboards are symbolic beacons of airport power; that of the strong, cultivated civic identity that begins here and that of the intelligent aviation and air transport engineering put to use here. True to the peculiar binaries of the airport however, Sonnier's seemingly stable,

⁵⁷⁰ Julie Earle-Levine, "The Ticket; Carrying On: Why do Men Get Emotional at 35,000 feet?" *New York Times Style Magazine*, March 20, 2005: 91.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid.

commanding neon grids also serve a diametrically different purpose. Barely dressed in the essential elements of water and light, the grids are a sculptural expression of extreme vulnerability – a feeling never far from any air traveler’s heart.

Considered in this way, *Double Monopole* becomes yet another reminder of our airport insecurities: our utter dependence on the basic—but complicated—mechanics of flight; the technical instruments, training, and good sense of the pilots who operate the plane just a few seats in front of us; and the air traffic controllers who push tin and watch our plane blip across their own computer screen grids somewhere on the ground thousands of feet below us. Exposing the airport’s human and computer driven networks, *Double Monopole* electrifies the airport landscape and plugs us all in to the unique, if not strange, happenings, comings, and goings of this non-place, in effect rendering it a twenty-first century non-place par-excellence.

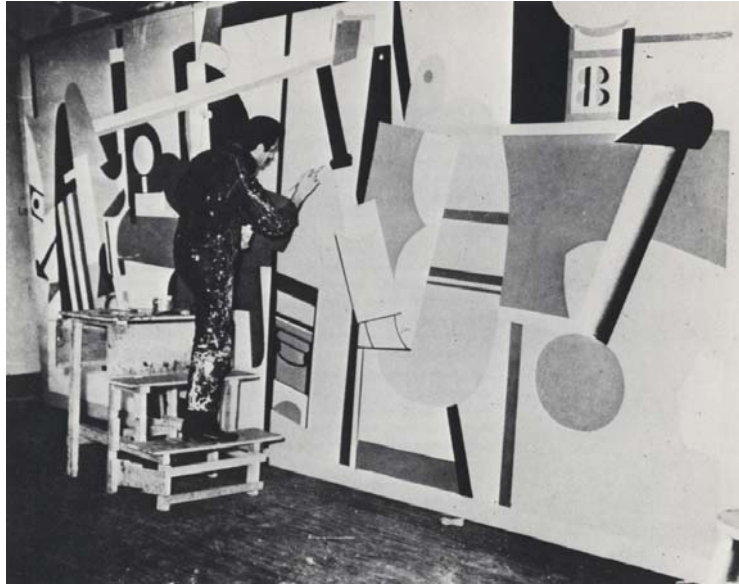
Whether fabricated from the trappings of the terminal itself, digitized photographs and lenticular screens, steel and wire mesh, or water and neon light, *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion*, *Travelogues*, *Star Sifter*, and *Double Monopole* prove that site responsive public art indeed can be smart, provocative, evocative, roguish, ambitious and aesthetically appealing. Better understood at the airport than anywhere else, these works evidence the myriad of ways flight – with all its ramifications and twenty-first century reverberations – can be expressed through art. It is precisely because of the ways Acconci, Diller + Scofidio, Aycock, and Sonnier unflinchingly explore, exploit and expose the sensations synonymous with this exceptional site that their works can be considered among the very best permanent public art installations of the past two

decades. These are the commissions and artists from which to learn, for it is only by following their genre-ennobling, site responsive lead that future projects of merit can hope to garner critical attention and begin to redefine public art standards in the new millennium.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figs. Intro.1 & Intro.2. Eero Saarinen, TWA Terminal, Idelwild Airport (now John F. Kennedy International Airport), 1962.



Figs. Intro.3 & Intro.4. Arshile Gorky painting
Activities on the Field, Newark Airport, 1936 & *Study for Aviation*, 1935-36.



Fig. Intro.5. James Brooks, *Flight* (detail of Marine Terminal mural at La Guardia), 1940.

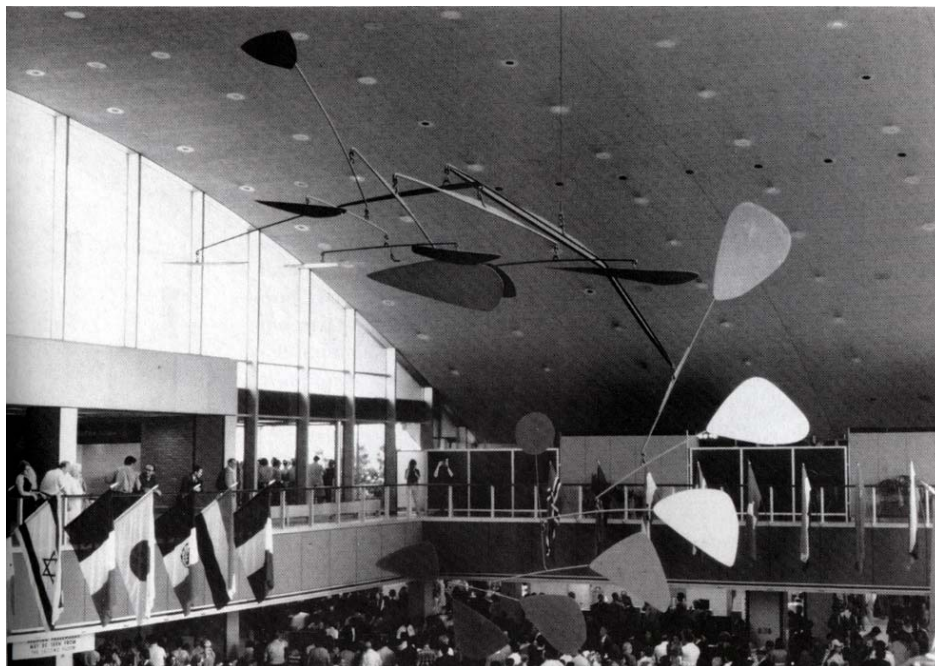


Fig. Intro.6. Alexander Calder, *J25*, 1957,
(When located in Idlewild's International Arrivals Hall).

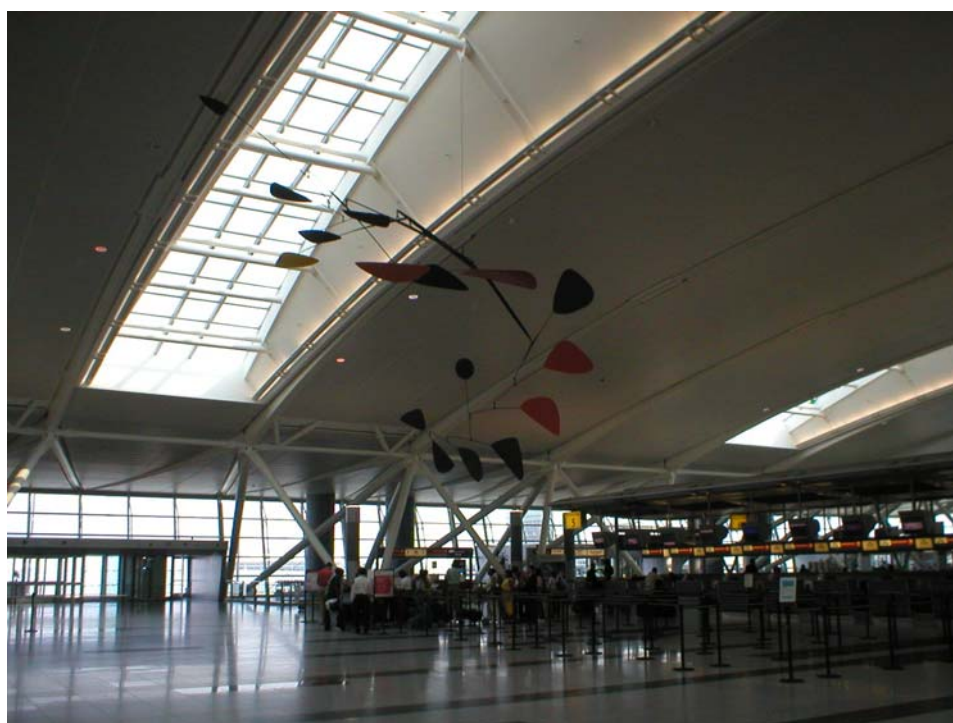


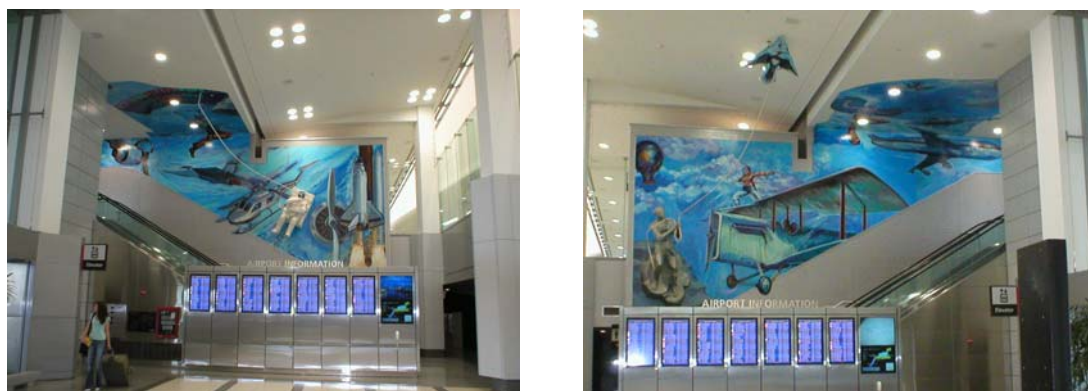
Fig. Intro.7. Alexander Calder, *J25*, 1957,
(In its current location in the Departures Hall of JFKIAT).



Fig. 1.1. Promotional Drawing of Philadelphia International Airport Terminal A-West.



Figs. 1.2 & 1.3.
Ralph Helmick and Stuart Schechter, *Impulse*, 2003, PHL Terminal A-West.



Figs. 1.4 & 1.5. Marcus Akinlana, *Flyventures*, 2003, PHL Terminal A-West.



Fig. 1.6.
Acconci Studio, *Flying Floors for Ticketing Pavilion*, 1998, PHL Terminal B/C.

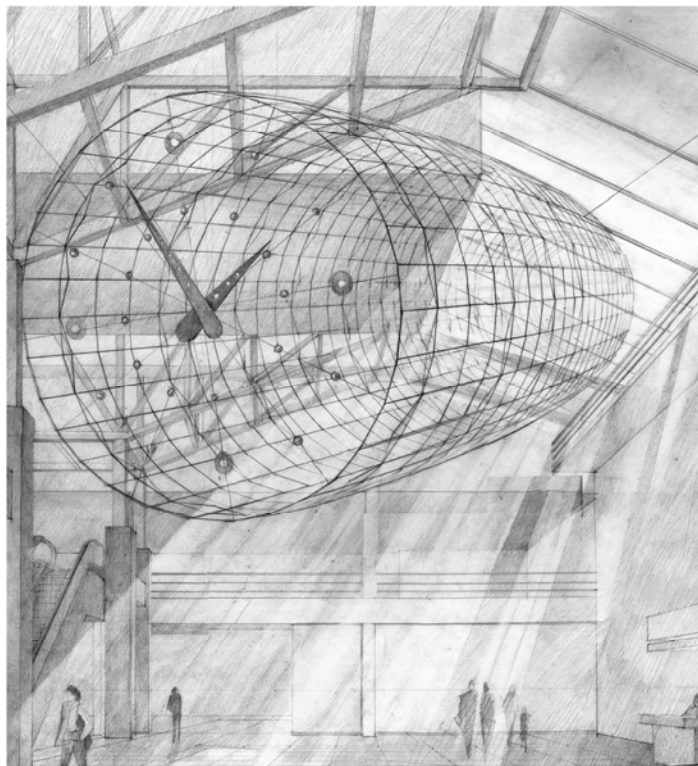


Fig. 1.7. R.M. Fischer, PHL Terminal B/C design proposal, 1995.



Figs. 1.8 & 1.9. Vito Acconci, *Following Piece*, 1969.



Figs. 1.10 & 1.11. Vito Acconci, *Seedbed*, 1971.



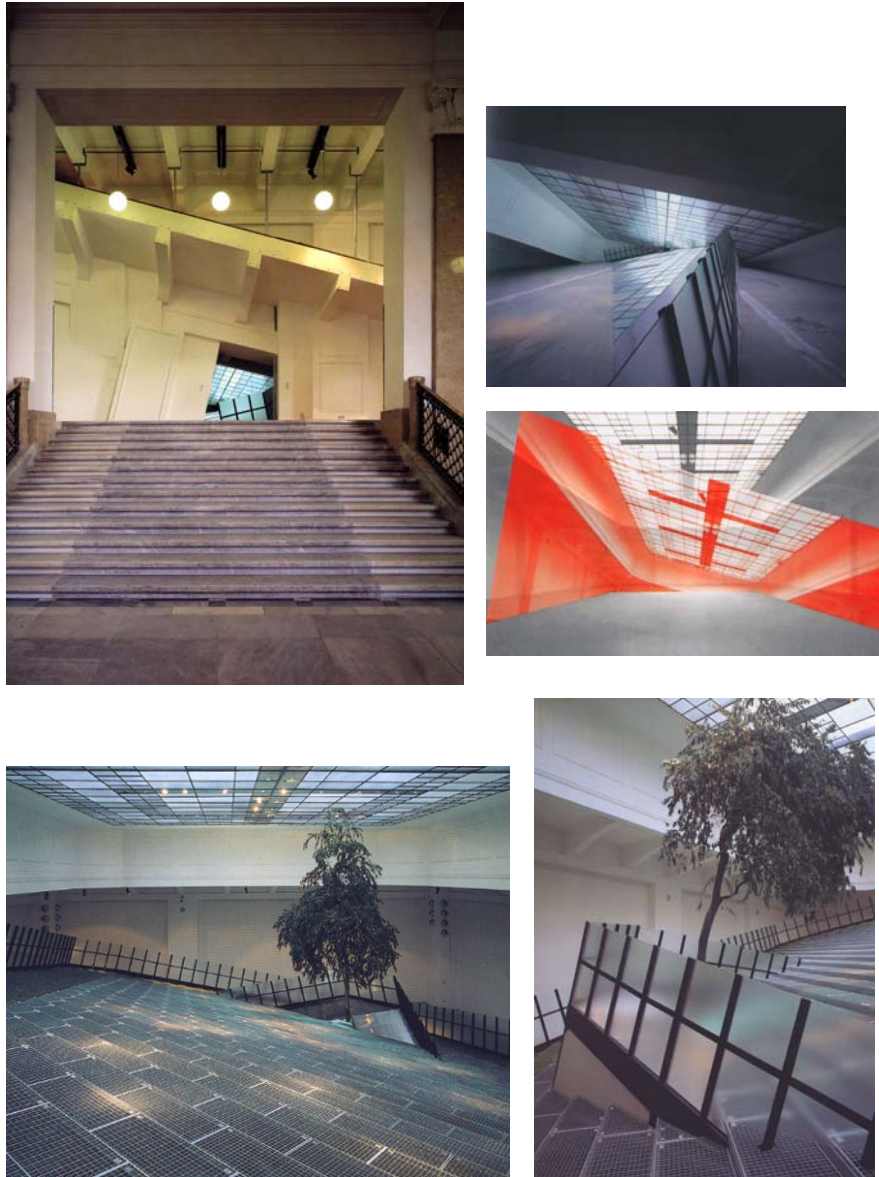
Fig. 1.12. Vito Acconci, *Peplemobile*, 1979.



Fig. 1.13. PHL Terminal B/C (viewed from the left side of the ticketing area).



Figs. 1.14 & 1.15. Views of *Flying Floors*.



Figs. 1.16 – 1.20.
Acconci Studio Temporary Re-renovation of the MAK Central Exhibition Hall, 1993,
Austrian Museum of Applied Arts (MAK).



Figs. 1.21 & 1.22. Views of *Flying Floors*.



Figs. 1.23 – 1.30. Exasperated airline travelers
(Taken from A&E's reality television series *AIRLINE*).



Figs. 1.31 & 1.32.
Acconci Studio, *Temporary Re-renovation of the MAK Central Exhibition Hall*, 1993
Austrian Museum of Applied Arts (MAK).



Figs. 1.33 & 1.34.
Acconci Studio, *Dirt Wall*,
Project for the Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities, 1992.



Figs. 1.35 – 1.37. Acconci Studio,
Walkways through the Wall, 1998, Midwest Airlines Center, Milwaukee, WI.



Figs.1.38 – 1.40. The Niches of *Flying Floors*.



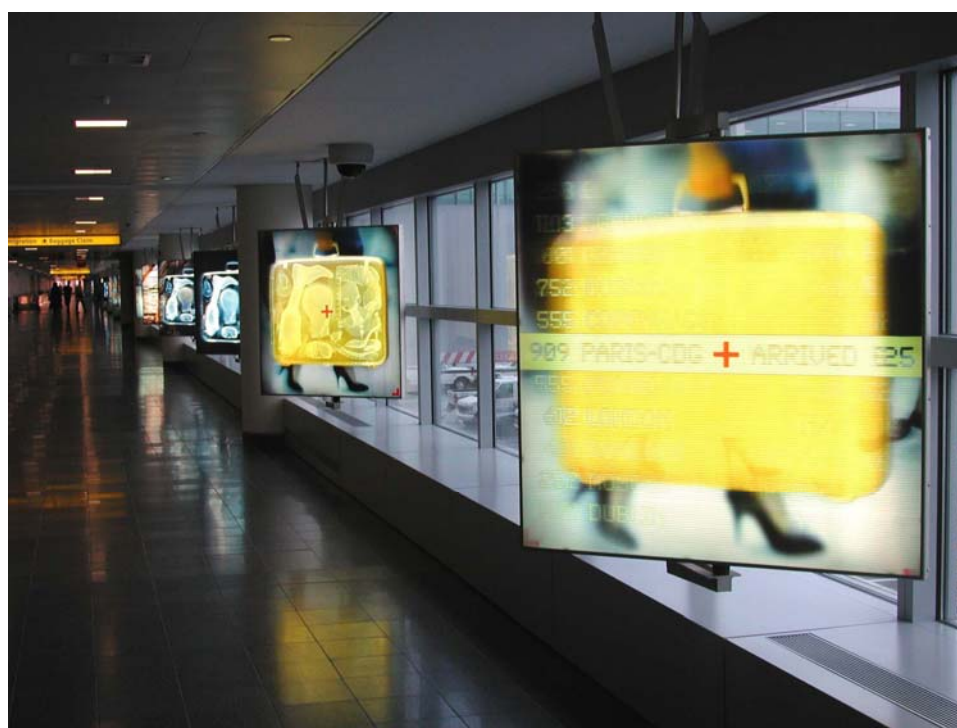
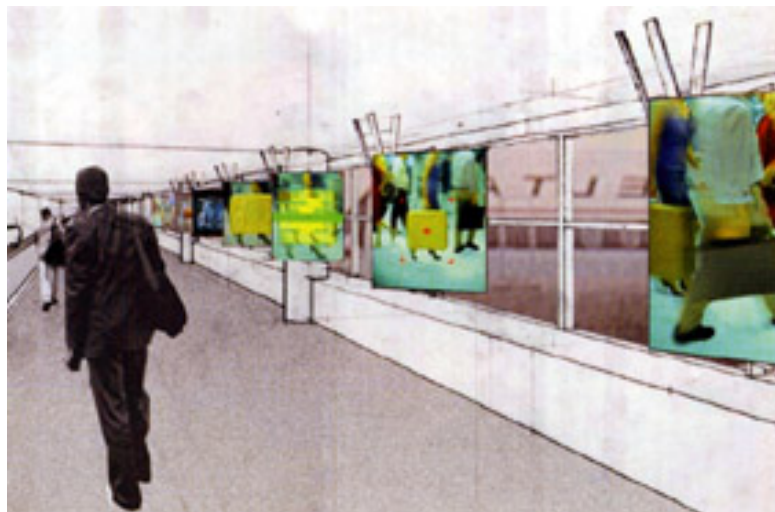
Fig. 1.41
Acconci Studio, *Light Beams for the Sky of a Transfer Corridor*, 1997-2001,
San Francisco International Airport



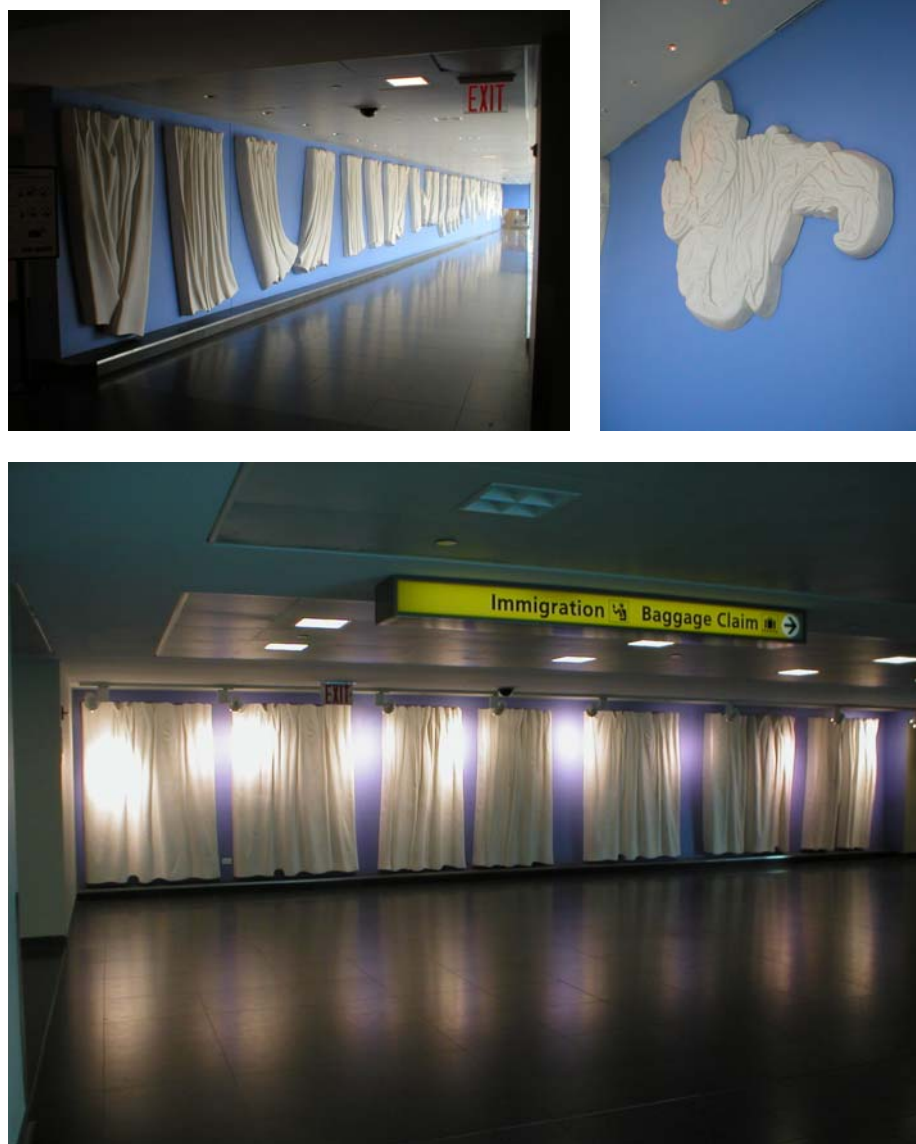
Figs.1.42 & 1.43. Acconci Studio, model of *Flying Park*, 1994, Dayton, Ohio.



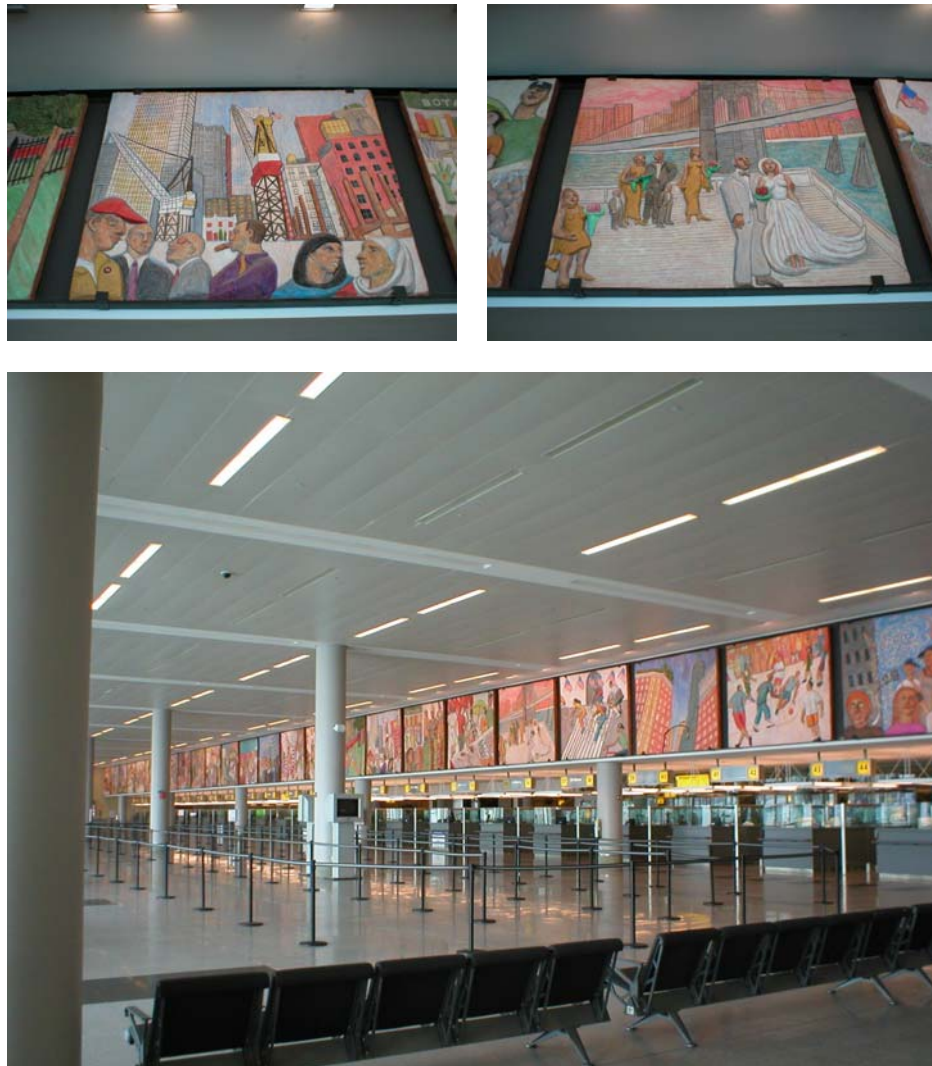
Fig. 1.44. Acconci Studio, model for *Spanish Landing*, 1987, San Diego, CA.



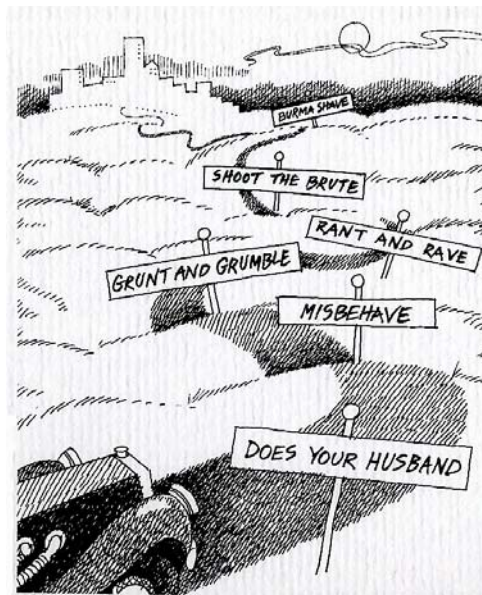
Figs. 2.1 & 2.2.
 Diller + Scofidio, *Travelogues*, 2001,
 John F. Kennedy International Airport Terminal 4.



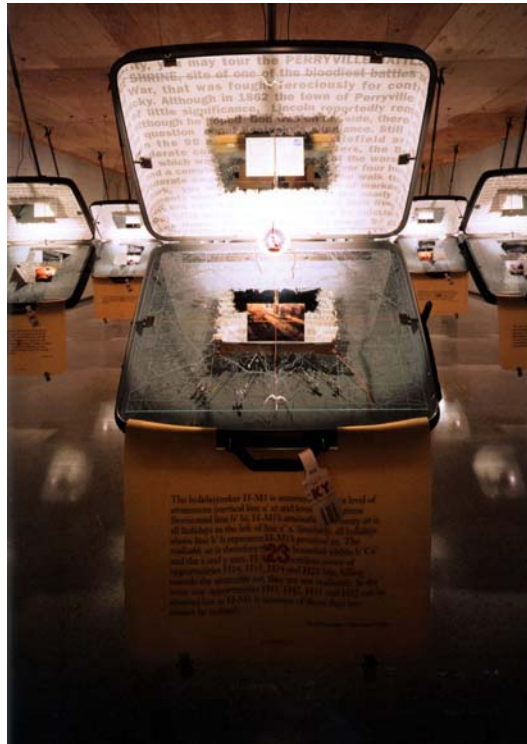
Figs. 2.3 – 2.5. Harry Roseman, *Curtain Wall*, 2001.



Figs. 2.6 – 2.8. Deborah Masters *Walking New York*, 2001.



Figs. 2.9 & 2.10. Examples of Burma Shave Advertisements.



Figs. 2.11 & 2.12. Diller + Scofidio, *Tourisms: suitcase Studies*, 1991.

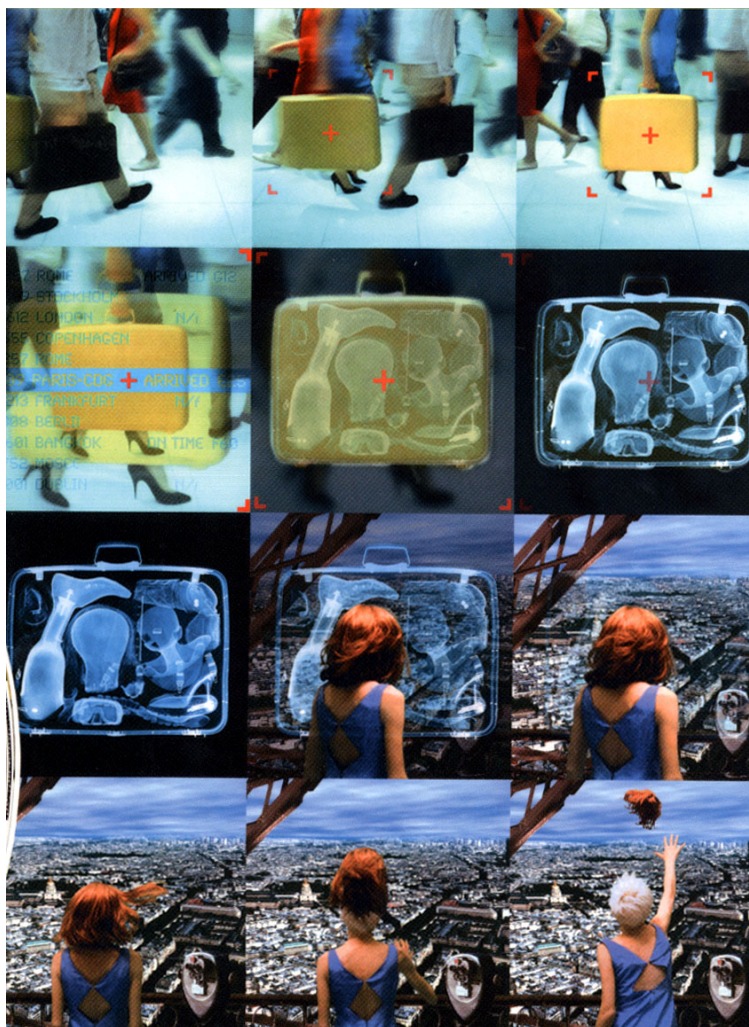


Fig. 2.13. Stills from Vignette #1.



Fig. 2.14. Aimee Mullins, photograph by Lynn Johnson, 1997.



Figs. 2.15 & 2.16. Stills from Vignette #2.



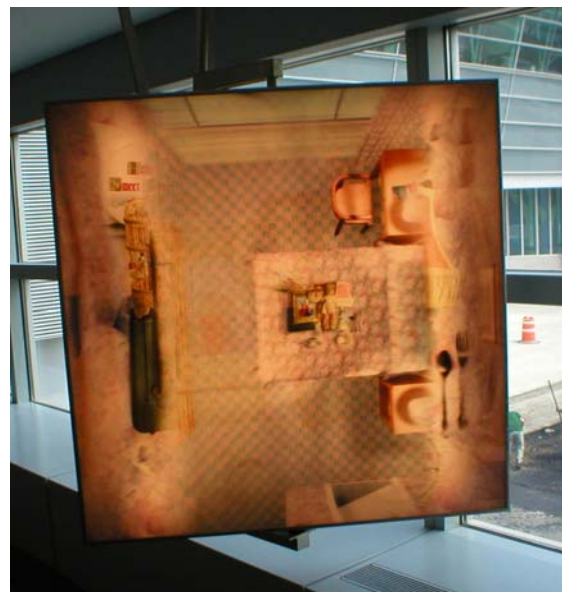
Figs. 2.17 & 2.18. Stills from Vignette #2.



Figs. 2.19 & 2.20. Stills from Vignette #2.



Figs. 2.21 & 2.22. Stills from Vignette #2.



Figs. 2.23 & 2.24. Stills from Vignette #2.



Figs. 2.25 & 2.26. Stills from Vignette #2.

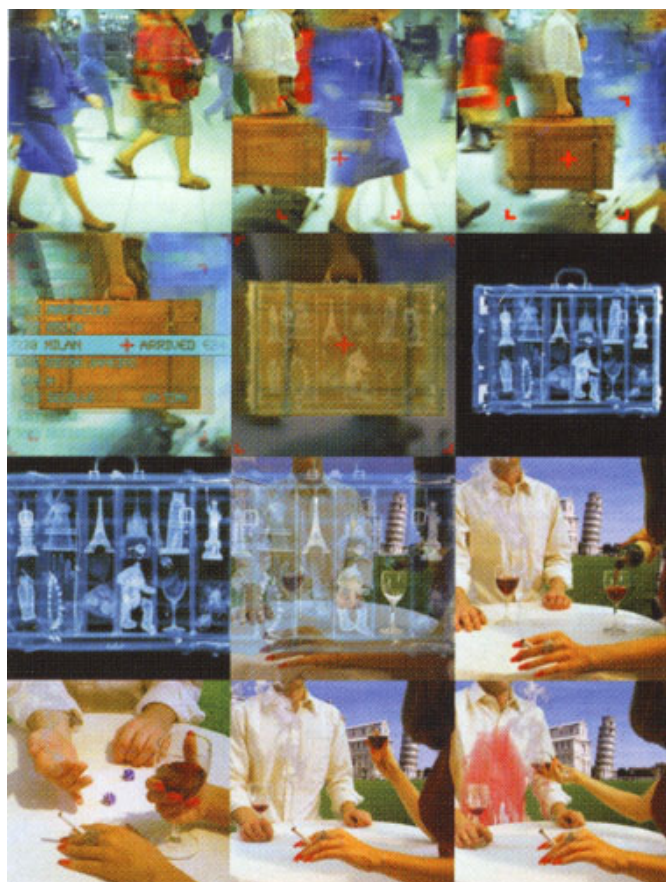
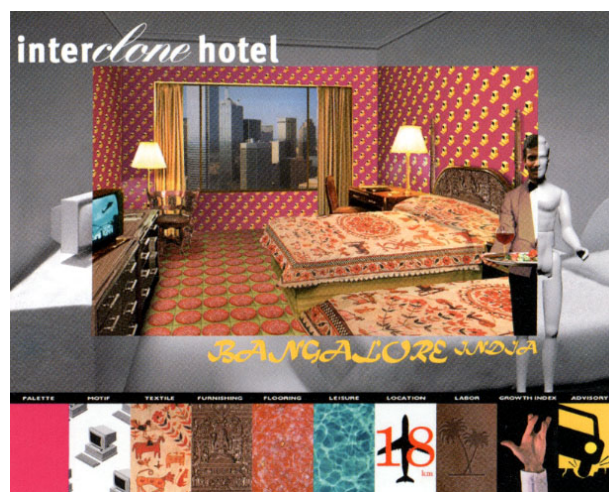
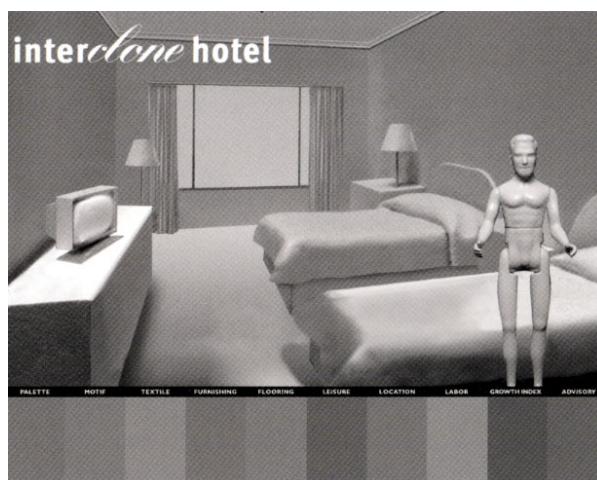


Fig. 2.27. Stills from Vignette #3.



Figs. 2.28 & 2.29. Stills from Vignette #3.



Figs. 2.30 – 2.32. Diller + Scofidio, *InterClone Hotel*, 1997.



Fig. 2.33. Diller + Scofidio, *Jet Lag*, 1998.



Figs. 2.34 – 2.38. Stills from *Jet Lag*, 1998



Fig. 3.1.
Alice Aycock, *Star Sifter*, 1998,
John F. Kennedy International Airport Terminal One Rotunda.

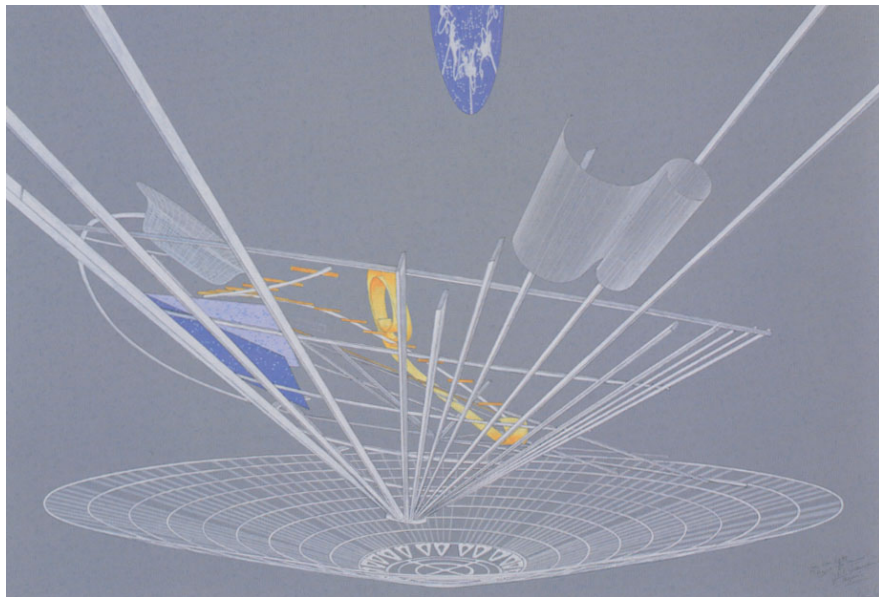


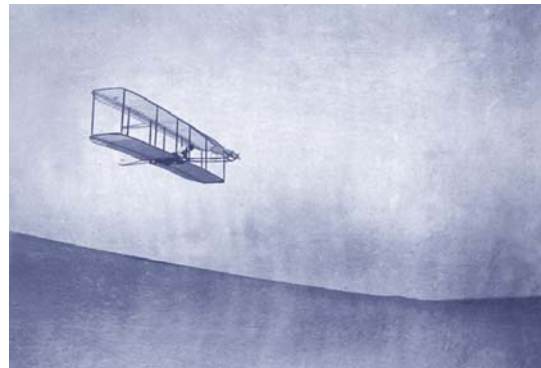
Fig. 3.2. Alice Aycock, *Star Sifter* proposal drawing, 1998.



Fig. 3.3. Looking up at *Star Sifter* from beyond the first floor security checkpoint.



Figs. 3.4 – 3.6. Looking down through *Star Sifter* from the mezzanine.



Figs. 3.7 – 3.10.
 Aycock's collection of postcards (Clockwise from top left):
 Sano di Pietro's *Annunciation to the Shepherds*,
 Horse diver Eunice Winkless, 1905,
 A Wisconsin Dells jumper, 1887,
 Wilbur Wright, Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, October 10, 1902.

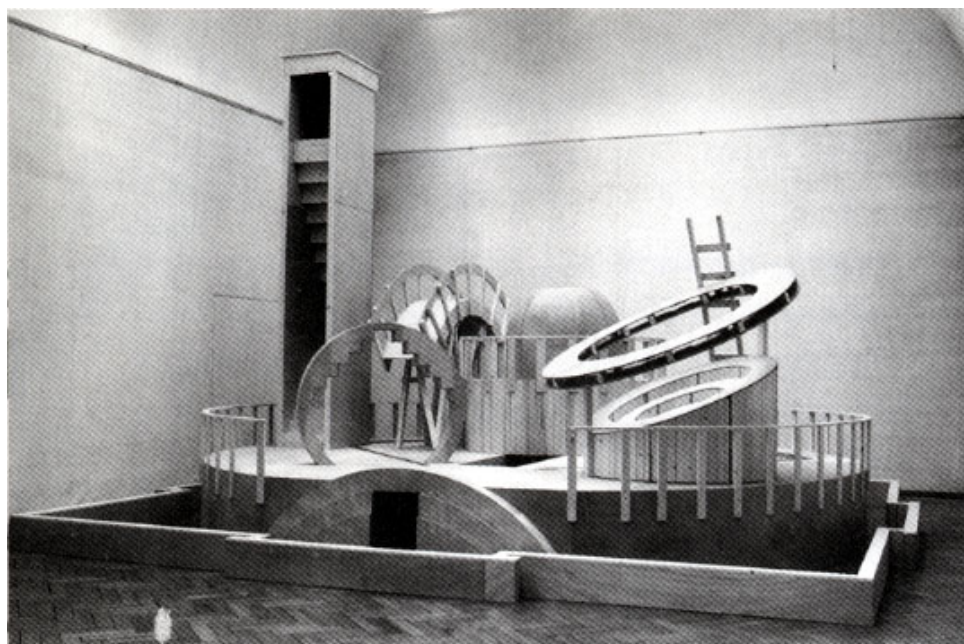
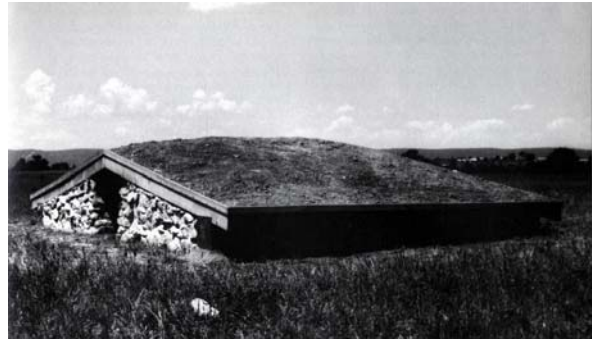


Fig. 3.11.

Alice Aycock, *The Angels Continue Turning the Wheels of the Universe Despite Their Ugly Souls: Part II, in Which the Angel in the Red Dress Returns to the Center on a Yellow Cloud above a Group of Swineherds (It was a Pseudo-World of Love-Philters and Death-Philters)*, 1978.



Figs. 3.12 – 3.16.
 (Clockwise from top left):
Maze, 1972,
Low Building with Dirt Roof (for Mary), 1973,
A Simple Network of Underground Wells and Tunnels, 1975,
Circular Building with Narrow Ledges for Walking, 1976.



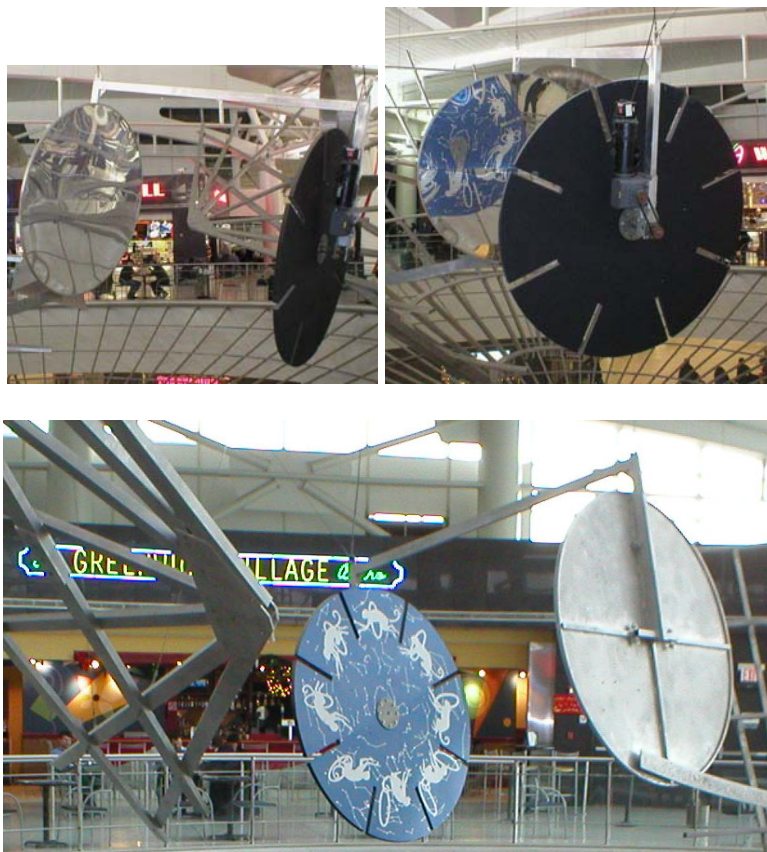
Figs. 3.17 & 3.18. Interior Views of Terminal One Architecture.



Figs. 3.19 & 3.20. Views of *Star Sifter* from above and below.



Figs. 3.21 & 3.22. Details of *Star Sifter*.



T. H. McALLISTER, OPTICIAN, 49, NASSAU STREET, N. Y.

ZOETROPE.

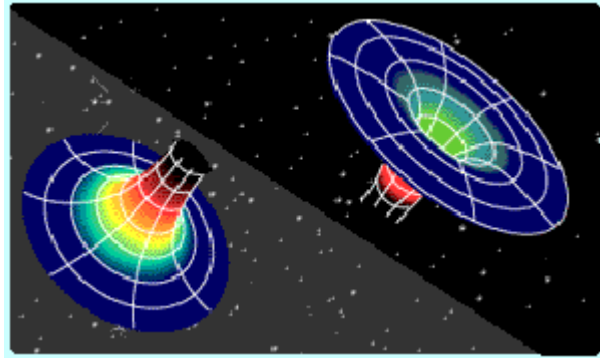
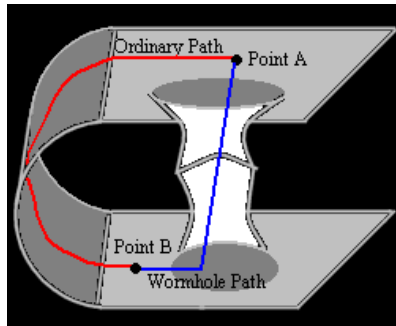


The **ZOETROPE**, or "Wheel of Life," is an instructive Scientific Toy, illustrating in an attractive manner the persistence of an image on the retina of the eye; it consists of a card-board cylinder, about 12 inches diameter, and 8 inches deep, with 19 equidistant narrow openings, each about 3 inches long, arranged near the top as shown in the engraving. The lower end rests on an iron shaft, rising from a substantial wood base; on strips of paper, about 3 1/4 inches wide, 36 inches long, are printed figures of men, animals, etc., in different positions, which are placed in the cylinder. By revolving the cylinder by the hand, and looking through the openings, the images passing rapidly before the eye are blended, so as to give the figures the motions of life in the most natural manner. As many persons as can stand around the Zoetrope can see the movements at the same time.

PRICE OF THE ZOETROPE, \$2.50.

Including following series of 12 amusing pictures: Base-ball Player, Chewing Gum, Dolphin Swimming, Donnybrook Fair, Gymnast, Ha-h Machine, Jig Dancer, Johnny Jumper, Keep the Ball Rolling, Kick her up, Old Dog Tray, Raining Pitchforks.

Figs. 3.23 – 3.26. Details of *Star Sifter* & Illustration of a Zoetrope.

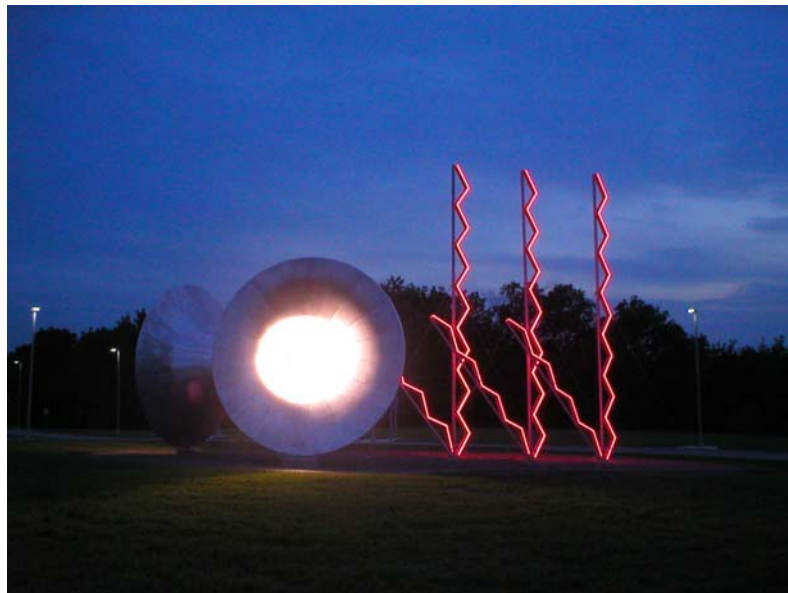


Figs. 3.27 & 3.28. Wormhole Diagrams.



Fig. 3.29.

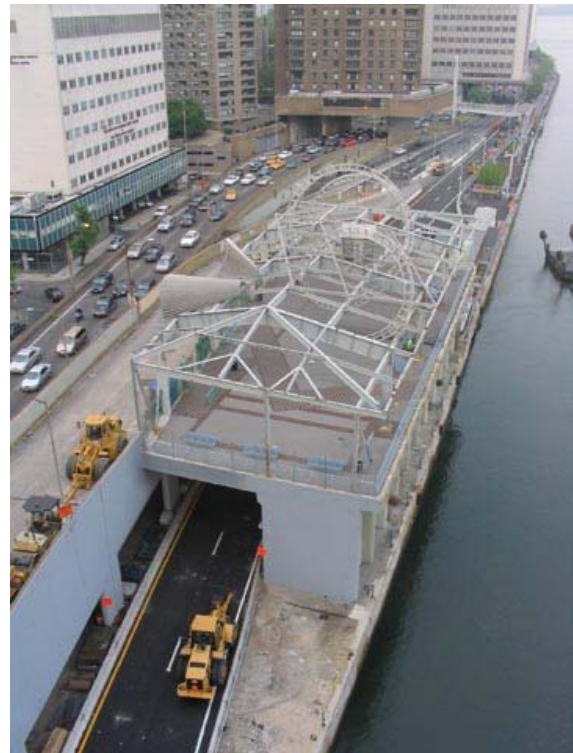
Alice Aycock, *What the Traveler Needs for Mechanical Operations on the Stars*, 2001.



Figs. 3.30 & 3.31. Alice Aycock, *Strange Attractor for Kansas City*, 2006.



Fig. 3.32. Alice Aycock, *Project for the 107th Police Precinct*, 1992.



Figs. 3.33 & 3.34. Alice Aycock, *East River Roundabout*, 1995.



Figs. 3.35 & 3.36.
Alice Aycock, *Functional and Fantasy Stair and Cyclone Fragment*, 1996.

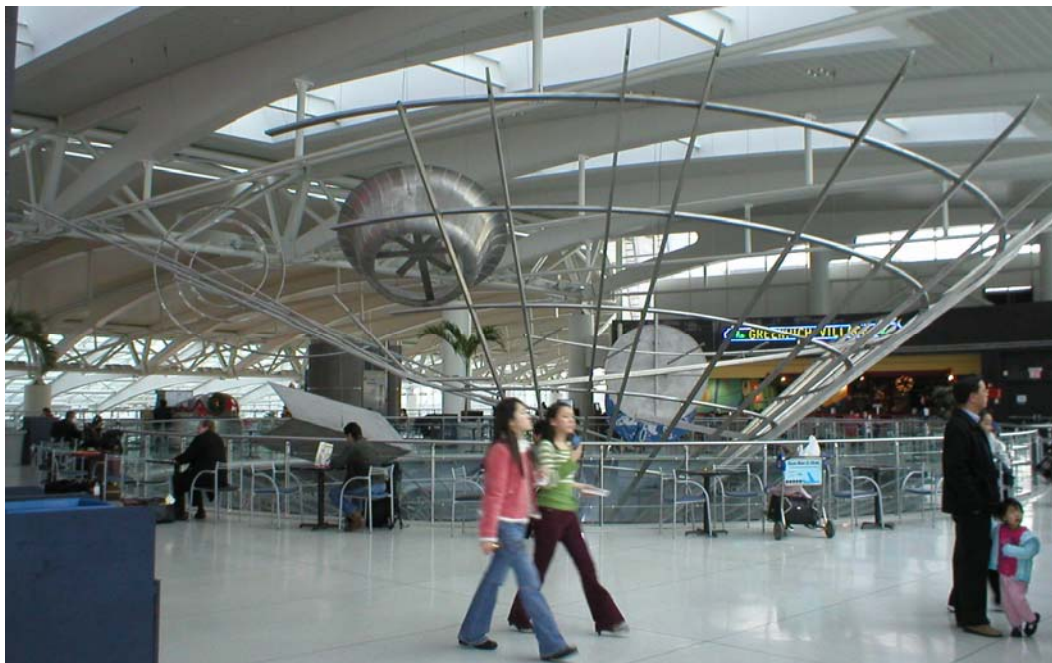


Fig. 3.37. Alice Aycock, *Star Sifter*, 1998.



Fig. 4.1. Keith Sonnier, *Double Monopole*, 2005.



Fig. 4.2. Keith Sonnier, *Ba-O-Ba*, 1968-74.



Figs. 4.3 & 4.4.
Keith Sonnier, *Ba-O-Ba I*, 1969.
(Photographed with gallery lights on and off, respectively).



Figs. 4.5 & 4.6. Keith Sonnier, *Mirror Act*, 1969.



Fig. 4.7. Keith Sonnier, *Air to Air*, 1975.



Fig. 4.8. Keith Sonnier, *Kali*, 1981.



Figs. 4.9 – 4.12. Keith Sonnier, *Ba-O-Ba Berlin*, 2002.



Figs. 4.13 – 4.16. Keith Sonnier, *Tears for St. Francis*, 2002.



Figs. 4.17 – 4.21. Keith Sonnier, *Lichtweg*, 1989-92.



Fig. 4.22. Michael Hayden, *Sky's the Limit*, 1987.

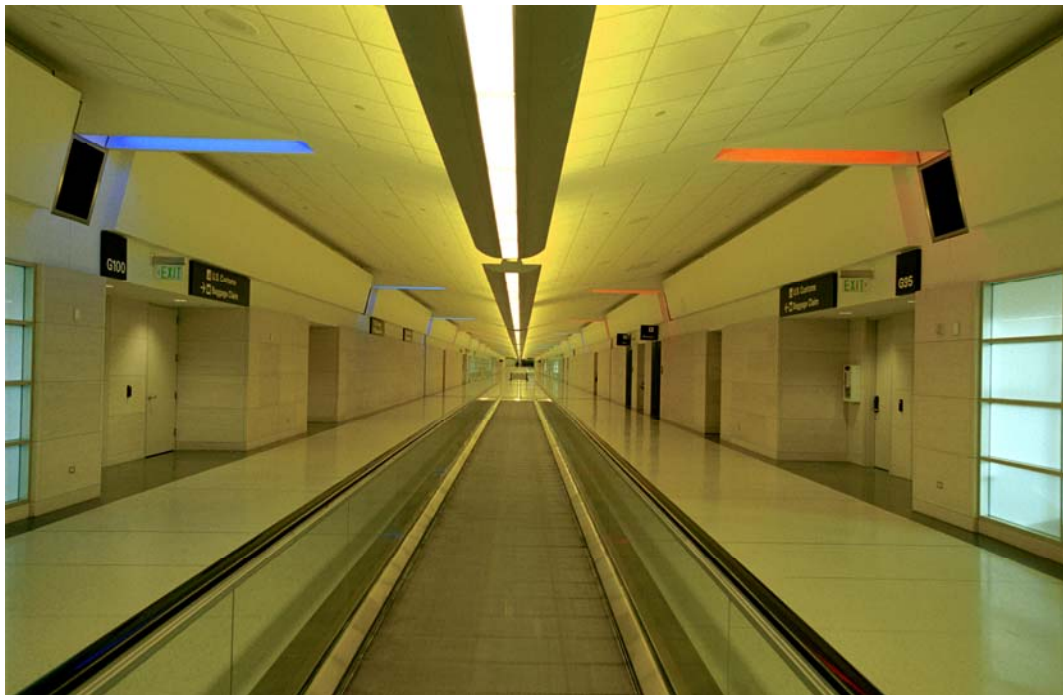


Fig. 4.23. Keith Sonnier, *Ceiling Flood*, 2000.

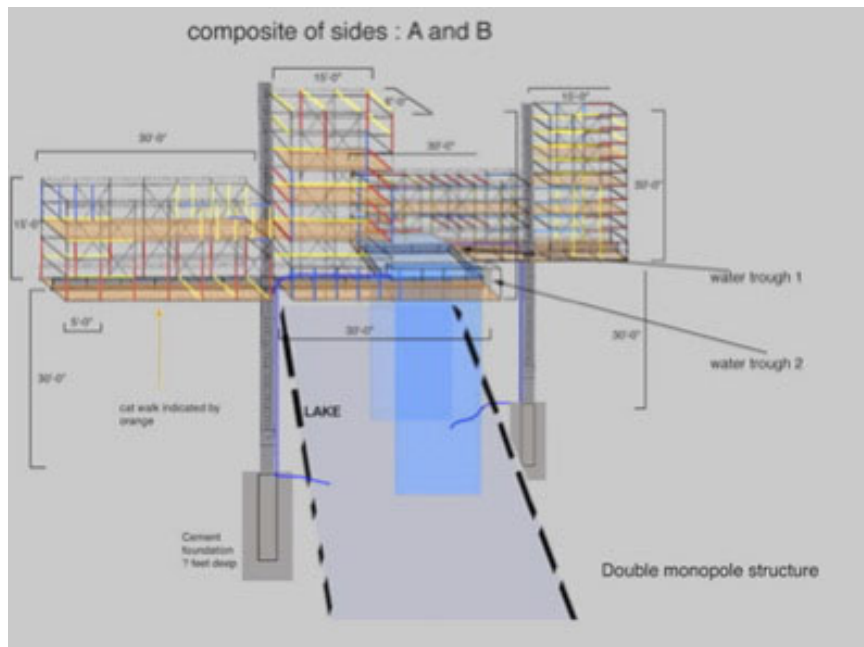


Fig. 4.24. Keith Sonnier, Diagram of *Double Monopole*, 2005.



Fig 4.25. Keith Sonnier, *Double Monopole*, 2005.



Figs. 4.26 & 4.27. Keith Sonnier, *Double Monopole*, 2005.



Figs. 4.28 & 4.29. Keith Sonnier, *Double Monopole*, 2005.



Fig. 4.30. Keith Sonnier, *Double Monopole*, 2005.

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2004 Curatorial Studies Certificate

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2002-2003 Department of Contemporary Art

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