

Museums in Transit: An Examination of the Growing Collaboration Between Museums and Airports.

Dr Melissa Laing

Presented at the AAANZ: Art Association of Australia and New Zealand Conference, ANU, Canberra, 26 to 28 November 2009, Session 6: Contemporary Space in Crisis

In his book *Airspaces* David Pascoe asserted that “Airports, lying as they do at the threshold of airspace, should be treated not as the sterile transitory zones with which we are all familiar, but as ‘vessels of conception’ for the societies passing through them. More than any other building type of the last century, their being seems to depend on cultural identification no less than architectural use, on their aesthetic properties no less than technological function.”¹

Dejan Sudjic in his 1992 book *The 100 Mile City* suggested that airports reach a critical mass, transforming them from a transport hub to a vital part of the city akin to an urban centre. Writing

If not actually a city in its own right, it [Heathrow Airport] has become a vital constituent of the city as a whole. It is a place which attracts tourists and plane spotters, job hunters and salesmen, criminals, retailers and caterers. Businessmen come here for conferences. Punjabi women from nearby Southall find work as cleaners and kitchen staff. Entrepreneurs, fresh from their business school MBA courses, come to put their marketing theories into practice with new ideas for retail franchise chains. It's immigration halls have become the setting for political demonstrations: Tamil refugees have stripped naked here rather than quietly submit to deportation.²

Considering the airport from these cultural and urban perspectives it seems logical that they should partner with museums, institutions that are dedicated to examining how society is conceived. Indeed, collaboration among airports and art, cultural history and science museums is widespread. To the point that, in 2001, Marion Schwarzer posed the following questions in the American Association of Museums magazine *Museum News*:

Have museum professionals recognized the airport as the new downtown, a worthy locale for a museum's offerings? Are airports a viable setting for museums striving to reach out to the elusive global community? Or, in our ambitions to be expansive, are we, by accrediting commercial airports as

¹ David Pascoe *Airspaces*. (London: Reaktion, 2001). 10 - 11

² Dejan Sudjic, *The 100 Mile City*. (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd, 1992). 147

appropriate containers for museums, just stretching the definition of museum thinner and thinner?³

This paper is an effort to examine the varied and growing practice of formal museum airport collaborations while bearing in mind Schwarzer's questions. In doing so I will discuss three examples of successful and innovative museum airport partnerships: the San Francisco Airport Museums, an independent museum at the San Francisco Airport; The Rijksmuseum Amsterdam's annex at Amsterdam Schiphol Airport; and the *Shifting Identities: (Swiss) Art Now* exhibition organised by the Kunsthaus Zurich with a satellite venue at the Zurich Airport.

Sudjic's description of Heathrow could be applied to any major airport, the busiest of which is Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport with in 2008, 90 million 39 thousand 280 annual passenger movements, or two hundred and forty five thousand passengers per day. Successfully accessing an audience of this scope would enable a museums to increase awareness of the arts, culture and history and reach new and diverse audiences making it seem desirable for a museum to work with a large airport. Having a museum at an airport is also seen as a winning proposition by many airport operators as is demonstrated by the words of Toby Lennox, the Vice President of Corporate Affairs and Communications at the Greater Toronto Airports Authority.

It is our experience that an effective art and culture program at an airport can have unexpected benefits for an airport operator. While the art and culture program can certainly distract and entertain the traveler, it affords the airport operator the opportunity to engage the community the airport serves in an entirely new way, opening doors and starting dialogues that are simply not possible without an art and cultural program. An airport can be more a part of the community it serves with an art and culture program that reflects that community.⁴

For the airport hosting or collaborating with a museum serves to humanise the airport, increasing passenger satisfaction through entertainment that distracts them from the unpleasant aspects of air travel, through this ensuring the passengers repeat custom. An art and culture program is also seen to confer prestige on the airport, and build better relationships with local communities.

To give you an idea of the prevalence of art in airports I did a brief survey of the top thirty airports in the world in 2008 based on passenger movements,

³ Marjorie Schwarzer, "Airport Museums." In *Museum News*, June 2001. http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/MN_MJ01_AirportMuseums.cfm. accessed 17/04/09

⁴ Eighth Annual AAAE Arts in the Airport Workshop, Indianapolis, Indiana April 15 - 16, 2010, <http://events.aaae.org/sites/090406/> (accessed 23 October 2009)

focussing on the presences of permanent commissioned artworks, art galleries, museum collaborations and on site independent museums.⁵ While this list represents a narrow spectrum of major airports, dominated sixteen North American Airports, it serves to indicate this trend.

Twenty one of these airports have permanent artwork commissions in their terminals. this is in part predetermined by percent for art legislation in 16 of the individual countries or states which ensures that there will be some form of commissioned permanent art work in a publically owned airport.

Fifteen of the thirty have changing exhibitions of contemporary art occurring in dedicated gallery spaces or along the walkways and corridors of the airport terminals. A number of these galleries operate on a proposal based system encouraging applications from local artists.

Nine of the thirty collaborate with off site museums from the local community. These collaborations range from the airport exhibiting reproductions of the museums collection, such as the recently announced collaboration between Paris' Roissy Charles de Gaulle and the Musee de Orsay, to establishment of a satellite gallery in Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport by the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam showing original artworks from its collection. Between these two extremes is the more common case where airports, such as the Hong Kong International Airport, exhibit changing displays of original artefacts sourced from offsite museums, private collectors and galleries, frequently curated by the museum loaning the collection.

Five of the thirty have an onsite independent museum, three of them actually located in the airport terminal the other two on the airport grounds. These museums, such as the San Francisco Airport Museums, collect, preserve and exhibit artefacts and historical documents primarily related to the history of aviation. However, in the case of the Phoenix Airport Museum its core business is managing and adding to a collection of more than 500 artworks which is exhibited over three airports. In 2004 they were locally named the best public museum in Phoenix. The Phoenix City press release attributed this to the fact that "With over 200,000 visitors on an average day, the Phoenix Airports Museum Program is able to reach an audience that might never visit a museum."⁶

The number of airports and museums collaborating currently appears to be increasing. Mid sized airports such as Korea's Incheon International Airport

⁵ The survey was conducted via material published on the internet. The list of airports was sourced from Wikipedia page "World's busiest airports by passenger traffic"

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World%27s_busiest_airports_by_passenger_traffic (accessed 23 October, 2009)

⁶ City of Phoenix, "Sky Harbor Named Best Public Museum by Phoenix Magazine" http://www.phoenix.gov/NEWSREL/ARCHIVE/2004/AUGUST/A19_005303.html (accessed 23 October, 2009)

and Taiwan's Taoyuan International Airport both launched collaborations with their national museums in 2008. In addition the American Association of Airport Executives will host its *8th annual Arts in the Airport Workshop* in 2010, a yearly event "designed to help airport personnel involved with art programs incorporate these programs into their airport, derive financial and public relations benefits from the programs, and discuss the latest trends and challenges in airport art."⁷

These examples indicate that airport administrations are seeking to host the arts and culture at the airport. They also indicate that museum professionals are recognizing the airport as a worthy location for a museum. However, exhibitions at airports have to satisfy an often conservative conception of what is appropriate artistically and thematically that is determined by the airport authority. Additionally they have to compete with other visual distractions such as advertising, the retail environments and the spectacle of the airport and aeroplanes. Their primary audience has not gone to the airport to view the exhibitions and is frequently unaware of their existence until they stumble over the work. These factors impact on how the exhibitions are chosen and constructed.

In 1980 the San Francisco Airport Commission, in collaboration with the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and Community Arts International (CAI), created a museum program within the Airport terminals. Out of this has arisen The San Francisco Airport Museums, a comprehensive example of sustained professional museum practice at an airport. This museum is entirely located at the San Francisco airport and is a department of the airport authority. The museum, accredited by the American Association of Museums in July 1999, divides its activity between an exhibition program covering approximately twenty galleries throughout the Airport terminals that display a rotating schedule of art, history, science, and cultural exhibitions, and the San Francisco Airport Commission Aviation Library and Louis A. Turpen Aviation Museum, a permanent collection encompassing some 9,000 aviation artefacts and 6,000 books and oral histories dedicated to the history of commercial aviation.⁸ Its collections are permanently housed within the airport in a research facility that is modelled on the Passenger Waiting Room of the 1937 San Francisco Airport Administration Building that can be found before the secured boarding areas.

One of the museums missions is "to create exhibitions that would humanize the Airport environment"⁹ This is primarily realised through the displays in the terminal, which are contained in clusters of vitrines and photographic works

⁷ American Association of Airport Executives "Eighth Annual AAE Arts in the Airport Workshop", <http://events.aaae.org/sites/090406/> (accessed 23 October 2009)

⁸ "San Francisco Airport Museums." <http://www.sfoarts.org/about/exhibits.html>. (Accessed April 14, 2009)

⁹ Ibid.

exhibited along the walls of passage ways and are primarily available to the flying public and the airport staff. The exhibitions are well thought out, professionally displayed and informative.

In the terminal exhibitions you can see a balancing act between creating displays that are entertaining and easily grasped and providing indepth research driven information that increases the audience's knowledge and critically reflects on its subject. However, the predominant emphasis does tend to fall on entertainment and accessibility. As Mark Hall-Patton, from the Howard W. Cannon Aviation Museum located in the Las Vegas McCarran Airport, put it, the "passengers' favorite airport exhibitions contain objects that they can quickly put into context."¹⁰ A San Francisco Airport Museums staff member advised me that the exhibitions are specifically orientated towards a 'family' audience and avoid controversial topics and anything relating to violence and air disaster. In addition she advised me that they have received the most positive feedback from their audiences when showing exhibitions on topics such as the history of bread, space toys, chocolate and lunch boxes.

Other shows have included aviation related toys and games, a Dracula Costume Exhibiton, and contemporary dance costumes. In addition to popular culture and history the museum also exhibits anthropological collections from other museums such as the current Generations in Clay: South Western Pottery from the California Academy of Sciences, Department of Anthropology. These exhibitions are condensed explorations of subjects that could easily be, and have been explored in greater volume in city and state museums internationally. I do not make that statement to diminish the exhibitions at the San Francisco Airport so much as suggest that you can think of these exhibitions as akin to the genres of short films or short stories, self contained and complete, a full narrative, but not a long one.

Airport surveys conducted in the passenger terminals have recorded that the San Francisco exhibition program, which encompasses both the museum activity and the permanent artwork commissions, consistently ranks within the top five services the airport offers with frequent users of the airport giving it a slightly higher rating overall than first time visitors.¹¹ The popularity of the museum and art work programs in the airport polls demonstrates that people are willing to engage with the arts in the context of the airport and that the airport cultural programs are achieving their goal of entertaining the passengers and enlivening the environment.

¹⁰ Schwarzer, Marjorie . "Airport Museums." Museum News, June 2001.
http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/MN_MJ01_AirportMuseums.cfm. accessed 17/04/09 referring to Mark P. Hall-Patton, "McCarren Aviation Heritage Museum: Redefining Museums," Curator 40, no. 2 (1997): 97-100.

¹¹ San Francisco Airport Commission, *2008 Air Passenger Survey: May 12 Through May 18, 2008*, San Francisco International Airport. 2009

Where the San Francisco Airport Museums disperses its programs between an onsite museum space and terminal display areas, the collaboration between the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and the Amsterdam Schiphol airport has resulted in a permanent annex of the state museum occurring at the airport. Schiphol Airport is known to be at the forefront of the movement towards creating airports as self enclosed cities that offer diverse urban experiences. You can conduct your business at Schiphol and get married there, as well as experiencing extensive leisure, shopping and entertainment options. In addition the Netherlands are known for promoting the arts. Schiphol airport already has an extensive selection of permanent art works, so hosting a museum is a logical step.

Where Schiphol gives the Rijksmuseum access to another large demographic, helping it to fulfil its aim of “presenting its permanent collection to as wide an audience as possible in the Netherlands and abroad,”¹² what the Rijksmuseum lends to the airport is a high status experience for the passengers which links the airport to high culture and Dutch national identity, promoting the airport as both a destination and a gateway to the Netherlands.

Instead of trying to attract attention to displays positioned through out the terminal the museum and airport have chosen to create an iconic space which attracts viewers into it. The Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Schiphol is located in the airport on Holland Boulevard, in the area behind passport control between the E and F Pier of the airport terminal in a custom built space resembling a gold pod. The airport gallery possesses two long walls on which the art works are hung behind a layer of security glass. On one wall it features a permanent exhibition of ten works from the Rijksmuseum collection by Dutch masters from the Golden Age including Jan Steen, Jacob van Ruisdael and Rembrandt. These works focus on 17th century Dutch subjects, what the curator calls the core business of the Rijksmuseum. In addition there are temporary shows each year drawing from the museums collections. The exhibitions have ranged from 20th century modernist art to art works reflecting the 80 year war. Curator Kris Schiermeier advised me that the airport gallery receives approximately 500 visitors a day, 180 thousand a year, most of whom are people travelling on business.¹³ They also have a repeat audience who visits the gallery when ever they fly through Schiphol.

The Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Schiphol can be seen as both another gallery space in the greater body of the main museum and as an independently programmed space. However, Kris Schiermeier advised me that the future changing exhibitions at the annex will focus solely on Dutch 17th Century works and themes.¹⁴ This decision will effectively reduce the breadth of

¹² Rijksmuseum on Tour

<http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/tentoonstellingen/reizend?lang=en> (*accessed 17 October 2009*)

¹³ Kris Schiermeier, email message to the Author, 15 June, 2009.

¹⁴ Ibid.

exhibitions in the annex, moving it away from being an independent space and more towards being an advertisement for the main Rijksmuseum, focussing on work that which is easily recognised as traditional Dutch art by a broad audience.

Both the San Francisco Airport Museums and Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Schiphol operate in the terrain of the family friendly and non controversial, focussing on art and artifacts that are easily recognised by a broad audience and whose value is incontestable by virtue of age and recognisable aesthetic. In focussing on the easily grasped and comprehended cultural object in the context of airport both these projects run the danger of compromising the general mission of museums, to research, educate and critique well as entertain. However, both the San Francisco Airport Museums and Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Schiphol have, to date, managed to avoid this, exhibiting condensed, yet well researched critical exhibitions.

I would now like to introduce a contrasting example of Airport Museum collaboration between the Kunsthaus Zurich and the Zurich Airport which involved exhibiting a series of potentially controversial temporary artworks as part the *Shifting Identities: (Swiss) Art Now exhibition*. A major reason I introduce *Shifting Identities* into this discussion is that it demonstrates that a museum airport collaboration does not have to focus of traditional or easily accessible works. Nor does it have to avoid controversial topics. As is demonstrated by Gianni Motti's *Pre-emptive Act*, 2008, playing on screen now, a performance work where he arranged for a security guard from the private company that served the airport to regularly pause in his routine and meditate in the middle of the terminal.

Where the San Francisco Airport Museums and Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Schiphol work with the airport to construct and enhance its environments and experiences *Shifting Identities* deliberately interrupted the structures of the Zurich Airport and by extension airports in general. The curator, Mirjam Varadinis, chose "artists and art works to critically question the notion of art as decoration or art as tool of revaluation or branding and marketing"¹⁵ at the airport. Indeed, a valuable aspect of temporary projects both in general, and at the airport, is that they provide scope for the exhibition of potential controversial art as the stakeholders are more willing to take risks sure in the knowledge that the project is not permanent. As Patricia Phillips once wrote regarding art in public places "There is a place and a need for both enduring and ephemeral public art so that stability and speculation, practice and theory, enduring values and more topical issues can ensure that public art does not become too platitudinous or inscrutable to the audiences it once set out to reach."¹⁶

¹⁵ Mirjam Varadinis, email message to the Author, 22 October, 2009

¹⁶ Phillips, Patricia C. "Everybody's Art: Long-Term Supporters of Temporary Public Art." *Public Art Review* Spring/Summer (1994).

Shifting Identities - (Swiss) Art Now was an exhibition curated by Mirjam Varadinis at the Kunsthaus Zurich in 2008 that explored “changing values and identity shifts in the course of globalization.”¹⁷ The exhibition took place at the Kunsthaus, and at two sites which the curator identified as “places of decisive significance to the identity of our contemporary society, such as Paradeplatz and Bahnhofstrasse, twin venues of Zurich’s global financial power. And Zurich Airport, as a symbol of transit and a site of concentrated meditation on the issues of migration and identity”¹⁸ Partnering with the Zurich Airport enabled the Kunsthaus and the artists to address issues of migration and identity, borders, security and control within a site that contributes to the construction of their discourses.

The curator’s success in introducing controversial art into the Zurich Airport rested on the presence and support of somebody on staff who understood contemporary art. This support enabled her to get approval from the airport authority to exhibit potentially controversial works which critiqued the social and political structure of the airport, as well as works which were not obviously art to a lay audience.

For example, Christian Vetter’s *Here There Journal of Disorientation, 2008*, was a photoessay in the form of a newspaper that was given away at magazine racks at all boarding lounges. It contained images that referenced tourism, flight, disaster, war and consumption. Despite the visual links created between flying and disaster and acts of terror violence the artist advised me that he did not receive any “comments or negative reactions to any of the images of the journal”¹⁹ He went on to suggest that he profited from the more overtly controversial works such as Gianni Motti’s *Pre-emptive Act*, which inspired a mixed response of positive and negative comments from the passengers.

Where Vetter and Motti’s works were successful in creating a critical dialogue within the airport Nedko Solakov’s *A Passcontrolled Story, 2008* small hand drawn interventions on the passport control desks at the airport encountered problems. The drawings, which were authorised by the authorities were erased within 24 hours of going up by the airport. The doodles were not actively critical, rather they were light hearted interventions into a serious space however their removal was due to concerns that the doodles may harm the image of the border control police.

However another similarly light hearted interruption or intervention into the space by Aleksandra Mir’s in the form of her work “plane landing” a life size helium filled aeroplane balloon which was inflated alongside the “real planes” down on the tarmac was received with a overwhelming positive response. The curator advised me that people told her that “this experience was so strong

¹⁷ Varadinis, email message to the Author

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Christian Vetter, email message to the Author, 16 June, 2009

that it completely changed their life in the sense that it opened a completely new way of looking at things.”²⁰

In considering the above three examples we can see the airport museum collaboration occurs within a mixed site that is created through compromise, but not necessarily compromised. In answer to the last part of Marion Schwarzer’s question “are we, by accrediting commercial airports as appropriate containers for museums, just stretching the definition of museum thinner and thinner?”²¹ I would argue that successful museums in commercial airports are responding with concentrated and concise programming which does not lose sight of what it is to be a museum, to research, educate, critique and entertain.

This does not mean that all museum airport collaborations are successful, however to examine them would be another, less hopeful paper. As I demonstrated at the beginning of this paper, museum airport collaboration is a growing area and it is important to bear in mind the that the potential always exists for the corporate goals of the airport to corrupt the mission of their partner museums through constraining their critical scope. However, museums can successfully negotiate, or in the case of *Shifting Identities* contest, the conservative, entertainment and security driven desires of the airport, creating spaces within the airport that reveal, as David Pascoe suggested, that airports are ‘vessels of conception’ for the societies passing through them.

²⁰ Varadinis, email message to the Author

²¹ Schwarzer. “Airport Museums”