

Liminal Art in the *Transit Zone*

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For five years passengers departing from Sydney International Airport farewelled, cried and laughed and took final photographs in front of panels of fibre optic cable which flashed Morse code. Having become attached to this farewell spectacle marking the divide between here and not here, I was rather surprised when I was confronted with its absence. In the world of instant obsolescence that is air travel, nothing lasts long.

I took more than a passing interest in this because, for a long time now, I've been paying attention to what occurs in airports and aeroplanes. I've been contemplating the strange environment that international air travel creates around itself, and creating artworks that respond to this. I name this environment, defined by government borders and housed inside the airports and aeroplanes of the world, the *Transit Zone*. It is a separated space, conceptually and bureaucratically outside of the nation-state. An excluded space that a passenger is suspended in, transitions through.

One of the ways we can consider the *Transit Zone* is by paralleling its functioning to Victor Turner's concept of liminality and the 'rite of passage'. He bases his exploration on Arnold van Gennep's book *Rites de Passage*¹ and the idea that there are three phases to a rite of passage "*separation, transition and incorporation.*"² In the case of the *Transit Zone* the (profane) space of general access, within the nation-state borders, is demarcated from the (sacred) space open only to those who have crossed through border control and legally exited the nation-state.³ The passenger is separated from the outside world and remains in transition until they are re-incorporated on final arrival.

In using this parallel we must remember that passage through the *Transit Zone* is secular, an act of physical movement. The processes do not seek to transform those who enter it. Justine Lloyd argues that the contemporary airport experience is all about distraction, keeping the individual on the surface of an experience, distracted from the time they are spending, distracted from themselves.⁴ The airport with its entertainment, and shopping options diverts the contemporary

passenger from the security processes and control mechanisms of the airport. Public art is seen as part of this process of entertainment and distraction.

Inside the liminal space of the airport artworks can be found, commissioned by airports to enliven, uplift, entertain, distract and celebrate. Unfortunately most of them do little more than this. As with all public artworks there are works in the *Transit Zone* which critically engage with the site they are located in. Let me take you on a short travelogue, briefly showing you future, existing and obsolete works from Sydney's Kingsford Smith International Airport, Amsterdam's Schiphol International Airport and Toronto's Pearson International Airport . These works investigate the subject of transit and the social, physical and political aspects of site of the airport. Additionally, they examine the richer possibilities of passage through the *Transit Zone*.

Sydney Kingsford Smith International Airport : Departure Gateway : Robyn Backen : Weeping Walls : 2000

Robyn Backen's multi panelled works of lit fibre optic strands in large frames stood in front of the doors between airside and landside. They marked the last point of contact between those who were leaving and those who were remaining. In the current upgrade of the Sydney International Terminal the works have been relocated, but for five years they marked the *separation* moment where a passenger becomes fully committed and screened the transit (sacred) space from external view.

While the works were located on the landside of the airport, they distinguished the beginning of the *Transit Zone* and examined as well as facilitated the transitional moment of to the *Transit Zone*. Backen's work has been described as occupying "the sphere of transition, inhabiting thresholds between the elements of land, water and air; between the human body and technology; randomness and pattern."⁵

Backen's work, occurring at the point of *separation*, was designed to heighten the poignancy of the separation moment, where the initiate/passenger separates from their current position and enters into the rite of passage (the entry rituals for the *Transit Zone*, passport control and security, completing the *separation* rituals). The Weeping Walls were made of fibre optic strands, the material that enables us to maintain communication with those near and far. However until through the separation rituals the passenger who crossed behind them could not communicate

with those left behind. Backen's works dramatised the separation moment, the titles and rain-like strands of fibre called to the anguish or wrench of separation, the anxiety and fear of change.

Morse code quotations flashed by the panels both emphasised and counteracted this. The use of phrases such as Andy Warhol's "Famous for fifteen minutes" and Oscar Wilde's "I have nothing to declare but my genius" injected both levity, joy, and pride into the rite of separation. Now at Sydney International Airport you just walk through a door to start leaving the country. While Backen's work stood there the passengers separation had more weight and ceremony. Celebration and mourning were made visible at the gateway out of the nation-state. While the *Transit Zone* suspends the passenger within a site of ambiguity, it also allows the passenger to exit and be integrated into a new site. In the work's absence, I ask myself, should this separation moment be mundane or not?

Amsterdam Schiphol International Airport : Pier D : Marc Ruygrok : SO GO ON : 1996

While the *Transit Zone* retains many of the normative constraints of society, it simultaneously creates an anonymity and separation from everyday roles which can be liberating or confronting. Turner refers to the liminal as creating an anti-structure which allows for "the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles, and being acutely conscious of membership in some corporate group ..."⁶

International air travel excludes you from the world, and you are not reincorporated until you exit into the arrivals hall. You spend your time in transition, your reality is entirely internal. Psychiatrist E. Graham Lucas wrote of air travel: "every conceivable environmental stress is exaggerated at a time of maximum vulnerability when basic personality traits such as anxiety, aggression, obsessionality, and irritability can all be caricatured."⁷ In a state of indeterminate waiting it is not surprising that people do unusual things.

Given this freeing and constraining of behaviour Marc Ruygrok's three metre high words **SO GO ON**, located near the departure gates on Pier D, can be read in so many ways. Dependent on our purpose and state of mind 'so go on' can act as an endorsement, encouragement or admonition.

Does it encourage us to cut loose, do something wild and out of control, put on a different persona? Or are they standing in for the authoritarian controls of the *Transit Zone*? The words admonish us to tell the truth, behave, follow the instructions. From the perspective of the airport as an enterprise that earns more money through retail than from the airlines, the very same words can be read as an endorsement of consumer impulses. They are encouraging us to wile away the time with purchases. The ambiguity of the instructions indicates the many ways we can experience our transit time. The words also challenge us to respond to them, an open ended instruction that wants a response.

**Toronto Pearson International Airport : Hammerhead F Boarding Lounges:
Richard Serra : Titled Spheres : 2002-2004 (Terminal complete 2007)**

Richard Serra's work *Titled Spheres* currently stands in the shell of the terminal Hammerhead F. The work is so large that walls of the terminal will be built around it. The artwork consists of four individual curved plates, each one 4.54 metres high, 13.86 metres long and 5 cm thick, which the passenger will have to pass through to enter the boarding lounges of the international terminal. The work will be experienced through motion, as an act of approach and passage. The terminal's passengers will descend an escalator from a mezzanine, whose floor sits just above the height of the sculpture, creating an initial perspective from above. In this way the work will first be viewed as a plan, a double walled, open ended oval.

The airport is a movement processing machine, which directs the passengers through its spaces to the aeroplane (and back out). It channels and directs the flow of passengers through both security and retail spaces. Serra's *Titled Spheres* requires an act of passage, the walls all tilt inwards as well as curving, creating a looming pathway to be traversed. The monumental size and weight of the rolled steel sheets critiques the over-arching space of the airport atrium contrasting the visual lightness of the airport with the solidity of the work. The airport is not the only monumental construction within the *Transit Zone*. Aeroplanes up to six stories high and the weight of security and governmental processes also loom over the individual.

With *Titled Spheres*, the passenger has a choice, they can pass through the middle or between two of the side plates. They can be loomed over or disorientated by the precarious-seeming angle of the side. Like Backen's Weeping Walls the act of passage is a movement which references the passenger's liminal

state. However where Backen's work marks the threshold, Serra's articulates the *transition* stage of the *Transit Zone*. The space between the borders is rendered visible in the hollow between the walls. The disorientation and tension of the *Transit Zone* is rearticulated by the passage through the work.

Toronto Pearson International Airport : Baggage Claim : Jaume Plensa : *As One...* : 2003

In *As One...* Plensa demonstrates the simultaneous everywhere and nowhere of the *Transit Zone*. Departure and arrival continents are displayed and reconstituted in the letter jumble, the full word containing all the continents, creating the everywhere of the *Transit Zone*. His textual recombination of the world's geography parallels the way that the *Transit Zone* springs from the texts of international conventions realised in the laws of each nation-state. Through the *Transit Zone* the border is repositioned from the cartographical edges of a nation-state's landmass, to internal sites guarded by bureaucratic processing procedures.

The work is made of 130 metres of neon tubing, spelling out one 'super word' made up of the words "Asia," "Africa," "Oceania," "Europe" and "Americas." Departure and arrival continents are displayed and reconstituted in a letter jumble, the full word containing all the continents. The letters are illuminated combinations that spell out incomprehensible words, or alternatively new locations. In the current world of instantaneous communication, virtual communities and international air travel, the continents are being recombined. Not through continental drift and geological movement, but through technology and the erosion of kilometre-distance by time-distance.⁸ How long it takes to get somewhere is more important than the distance travelled.

While the aeroplane passes above geographical locations and through sovereign airspaces, the inside of the aeroplane is nowhere. We are in transition, sitting still waiting to be reintegrated. Until we are reintegrated into the normal world we are still in a limbo which occupies no nation state, at baggage claim we are suspended on the threshold, accepted through immigration control, but not yet reintegrated into the geographical location. Our movement from one place to another is only realised when we arrive.

For me, these art works, and the many others that can be found inside the borders of the *Transit Zone*, demonstrate the inherent liminal quality of international air travel. They contribute to our experiences and contest our expectations within the *Transit Zone*. Look for them next time you fly.

You can find images of the artists' works online:

Robyn Backen:

<http://www-personal.usyd.edu.au/~rbacken/ww.html>

Marc Ruygrok:

<http://www.ruygrok.com/ensite/Foto%2010.htm>

Richard Serra:

<http://www.metropolismag.com/cda/story.php?artid=1974>

Jaume Plensa:

http://www.richardgraygallery.com/exhibitions/exhib_jplensa.asp

Melissa Laing:

<http://www.melissalaing.com>

¹ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre : The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982). Turner references Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960) first published in French in 1909)

² Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre : The Human Seriousness of Play*. pp 24

³ While employees of the nation-state, airport, airline and retail concession holders, etc. may physically enter the architectural space of the airside of the airport they have not exited the nation-state and are not within the *Transit Zone*.

⁴ Justine Lloyd, "Dwelltime: Airport Technology, Travel and Consumption," *space & culture* 6, no. 2 (2003).

⁵ Australian Museum Exhibitions : *Catching the Harbour : The Art of Robyn Backen* (Australian Museum Online, 2001 [cited 06 December 2005]); available from http://www.amonline.net.au/exhibitions/catching/robyn_backen.htm

⁶ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre : The Human Seriousness of Play*. pp 44

⁷ E. Graham Lucas, "Psychological Aspects of Travel," *Travel Medicine International* (1987). pp 99

⁸ Paul Virilio argued that human beings have shifted from determining distance by geographical terms to determining distance by time. With electronic communication distance is erased, creating the instantaneous connection of two or more disparate places. With air travel and bullet trains physical distance is eroded and measured by the time it takes to reach a certain point, not how many kilometres away it is. Major cities connected by fast transport methods are more quickly travelled to than closer destinations connected by slower methods. Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *Pure War* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).