

An Aesthetic of Wonder. Media Art and the Senses in the Airspace

Summary for general public

Similarly to the manner aviation profoundly changed our perception of space, and how the airport space altered our experience of travel, media art present in airports aesthetically modifies our perception and understanding of the airspace, which simultaneously determines new aesthetic experience and reception of media art. Whereas art has occasionally occurred in the airspace since the mid-1960s, contemporary airports often integrate artistic projects and curatorship into their business activity and development plan. As part of the late capitalist mode of experimentalist production, focused on experience design, airports organizationally aspire to create extraordinary sensual impressions and through the intermediary of innovative media technologies offer unique solutions and wondrous experiences, becoming increasingly a utopian space. The escalation of terrorist threats, tightening of control as well as the extension of security procedures have effectively contributed to the passengers' increased level of stress and fatigue. This has additionally fostered aesthetic transformation of the air terminal by means of both traditional art forms and new, multimedia and digital technologies, which have re-shaped it into an attractive aviopolis with a unique public space for exhibiting art (artspace), and engendering novel modes of experiencing it (experience space). The growing presence of media art in the airspace effectively impacts the way we customarily perceive and conceive of the airport. For instance, Changi airport in Singapore, annually awarded for its artistic and technological innovation, advertises itself as a "wondrous world". This necessitates rethinking the traditional rendering of the airport as a non-place, and devising a new materialist conception that acknowledges how the art works, and recognizes its sensorially intensive and transformative role in engendering aesthetic experience in the airspace. Assuming a liminal and hybrid nature of the airport (code)space, along with its specific atmosphere of enclosure, economy of movement, and temporality, the project aims to delineate how contemporary airport organizes media art for the possibility of wonder, aesthetically disavowing the schematic and instrumental perception of the airport non-place.

Exploring the relationships between the senses, media art and the airspace and reassessing their aesthetic potential for wonder, the project aims to comprehend the intensive, sensory nature of the airspace of mobility in conjunction with the particular role of media art in its development and perception. Interdisciplinary in nature, the project draws from a range of areas, such as cultural studies of space and mobility, media ecology, art theory, philosophy, cultural geography and urban studies. In accentuating the non-confrontational and interactive character of the airport media art, the project is geared to investigate the ways the airport art engages the senses, thus intensifying our aesthetic experience in the airspace. Undertaking participant observation (i.e. the passenger's perspective), the project makes methodological use of the sensory ethnography, analyzing media art in four – the busiest and the most art-saturated – airports, i.e. SFO in San Francisco (the first airport accredited by American Alliance of Museums), LAX in Los Angeles, Haneda in Tokyo and Changi in Singapore. By examining the means and techniques used by airport artistic projects, as well as the new methods of interactive contact, the project undertakes an analysis of the ways the airport media art sensorially draws us, captivating and intensifying our sensual attention in a dynamic airport space, thus eliciting wonder. The project eschews applying the textual and discursive methods of reading of the airspace and art, focusing on how they work, and not what they mean. In doing so, the project demonstrates that the airport space fosters development of extra-perceptual sensibility that is no longer based upon recognition, but wonder.

By accounting for the aesthetic changes in airports, the research will generate new knowledge of the airport as a wondrous urban landscape and will demonstrate what lies ahead in aerial culture, substantially enriching the scholarship of space, aeromobility and tourist studies. In exploring the aesthetic ecology of media art, the project specifies the airport way of interacting with art, contributing to art theory by exploring non-ritualistic spaces and modes of showcasing and viewing art. The outcomes can be useful for art educators and animators venturing beyond museum models, inspiring for the airport management and curators interested in attunement design through media art, and cultural institutions dealing with and promoting environmental and public art, as well as artists and designers themselves.