

## **Chapter 1 : Art in Context**

Throughout this thesis I use contemporary art as an analytical tool, approaching the *Transit Zone* through photographs, video, performance, sculpture and multi media art works. However, the defining characteristic of these works is not their medium, but the artists' approach to art making. The artists use art as a form of critical and political discourse, ethnography and performance. In addition many of these artists come to the *Transit Zone* by invitation, creating works for the public art programs in airports. The artists create what theorist Justine Lloyd calls strategic and tactical documents which intercede in the fantasies of society.<sup>38</sup> This chapter places these documents in the context of contemporary art practice and provides ways of considering the works I discuss in this thesis and my own art practice.

### **1.1 : The critical discourse of art**

Art has a longstanding engagement with the political, both as a direct polemical form of discourse, and a more indirect vehicle for challenging and subverting social and aesthetic structures. It is the latter form of working that interests me in this thesis; contemporary art that critically engages with the *Transit Zone* through what Hal Foster calls the "coarticulation of artistic and political forms."<sup>39</sup> Here I use the term political in relation to the act of expressing views about social relationships involving authority or power. This can include relationships between objects, individuals, and systems internal and external to the specific practice of art. I approach art as an area of discrete research producing its own outcomes and individual forms. I argue that it is through a complexity of intellectual and aesthetic engagement that art gains its power to reconceive and transform its object of analysis.

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<sup>38</sup> Lloyd, 'I'd Rather Not Be in Marrickville: Aerial Modernities and the Domestication of the Sublime'. See quote on page 24.

<sup>39</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 5.

Herbert Marcuse, in his book *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*,<sup>40</sup> calls for art that contributes to critical discourse in society yet does not subsume its aesthetic concerns and artistic integrity. Marcuse argues that:

The critical function of art, its contribution to the struggle for liberation, resides in the aesthetic form. A work of art is authentic or true not by virtue of its content (i.e., the "correct" representation of social conditions), nor by its "pure" form, but by the content having become form.<sup>41</sup>

Theodor Adorno, similarly argues in his book *Aesthetic Theory*, that an artist "mediates between the problem he confronts as a given and the solution as it potentially inheres in his material."<sup>42</sup> The art work is a result of the idea expressed in the artistic form. Both these theorists stress that art's success in critically reflecting on the subject of its analysis arises out of the unification of political and aesthetic discourses.

For instance The Builders Association, a cross media performance company, combine innovative weaving of multimedia and performance which explores the forms of theatre and media arts with incisive comment on contemporary society in their works *Jet Lag* and *Super Vision*, discussed respectively in Chapters 2 and 3. Underlying the two works is the question of how technology constructs presence using data and audio-visual technology. Throughout the performances issues of technology are rarely overtly discussed, rather the camera mediates between individual performers, and between them and the audience. For example, in both *Jet Lag*, Figure 18, and *Super Vision*, Figure 19, actors sit onstage in front of video cameras and perform to the camera. The camera's point of view is simultaneously projected on a screen behind the actors so the audience sees both the real and the mediated versions of the performance at the same time. Sets are constructed on the computer and projected behind the actors as real environments.

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<sup>40</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, trans. Erica Sherover (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 239.



Figure 18: (top) The Builders Association and Diller + Scofidio, *Jet Lag*, 1998 – 2000, a cross media performance. The actor on the right is projected on the screen above.

Figure 19: (bottom) The Builders Association and dbox, *Super Vision*, 2005, a cross media performance. The actor on the bottom right is projected on the screen above.

And when actors use computers in the performance the data they generate is also projected. The object of analysis, technology, also becomes a formal aesthetic device through which the performances are constructed. The critique is seamlessly integrated into the combination of performance and media, the content creating the form of the work as the work's form creates the content.

The two works present the audience with questions rather than answers. Adorno contends that an art work is similar to a riddle, "another way of putting this is to say that art expresses something while at the same time hiding it."<sup>43</sup> Art makes its points implicitly rather than explicitly. This became clear to me while simultaneously undertaking two forms of research, the theoretical and artistic. In writing my thesis I engage in an explication of my argument. Whereas, in creating my art work my position and the concerns I address are implied, with the intention of provoking an interpretive engagement from the viewer.

In addition, an artwork need not resolve aspects of itself. Adorno argues that artists should allow inconsistencies to remain, rather than creating a work which provides an obvious answer to the problem it poses. He writes:

In art, the criterion of success is twofold: first, works of art must be able to integrate materials and details into their immanent law of form; and, second they must not try to erase the fractures left by the process of integration, preserving instead in the aesthetic whole the traces of those elements which resisted integration.<sup>44</sup>

A fully resolved art work is so self-contained that it shuts its audience out. It provides a didactic statement rather than posing a riddle for the viewer to interpret. An art work should create a space for interaction and reconsideration. In *Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art*, Carol Becker asserts that:

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 176

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

For Marcuse, art is a location – a designated imaginative space where freedom is experienced. At times, it is a physical entity, a site – a painting on the wall, an installation on the floor, an event chiselled in space and/or time, a performance, a dance, a video, a film. But it is also a psychic location – a place in the mind where one allows for a recombination of experiences, a suspension of the rules that govern daily life, a denial of gravity. It ‘challenges the monopoly of the established reality’ by creating ‘fictitious worlds’ in which one can see mirrored that range of human emotion and experience that does not find an outlet in the present reality.<sup>45</sup>

I use art’s ability to create fictitious worlds by mimicking yet changing reality, as a means of analysis. Through diverse practices artists mimic aspects of the *Transit Zone*, and through this mimesis construct a new perspective on it. An example of this is my art work *borderline*,<sup>46</sup> Figure 20, for which I created a scale model of a border control hall, that I used as a film set. The model replicates the idea of the space, yet is not identical to any one border control hall. The resulting video is eerily empty, simulating a known environment yet making it strange to the viewer. Marcuse argues for art which estranges the viewer from reality, saying: “only as estrangement does art fulfill a *cognitive* function: it communicates truths not communicable in any other language; *it contradicts*.”<sup>47</sup> Playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht also called for work to have a *Verfremdungseffekt*, an estrangement or distancing effect whereby the familiar becomes strange. The moment of estrangement reveals to the viewer what they assume to be natural. Indeed, Brecht asserts that when “things of everyday life are lifted out of the realm of the self-evident... That which is ‘natural’ must assume the

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<sup>45</sup> Carol Becker, "Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art," in *The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society, and Social Responsibility*, ed. Carol Becker (New York: Routledge, 1994), 117.

<sup>46</sup> *borderline* is included in my examination exhibition

<sup>47</sup> Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, 10.



Figure 20: Melissa Laing, *borderline*, 2008, production still. Image courtesy of the artist.

features of the extraordinary. Only in this manner can the laws of cause and effect reveal themselves."<sup>48</sup> Through creating a *Verfremdungseffekt*, *borderline* creates a conflict between the reality it presents and accepted reality. It reflects what the viewer thinks they know of the environment through invoking the ubiquitous qualities of the space, and it contests that knowledge by making it strange.

A *Verfremdungseffekt* can also be achieved through intervening in an existing space and disrupting the normal pattern of the environment. This form of critique often occurs in permanent or temporary site specific and performative work. For example, Francis Alÿs interrupts normal conventions and uses of space through what he calls *paseos* (strolls).<sup>49</sup> These involve him taking a stroll with a performative element through a location. The *paseos* range from the small and personal displacement of himself to the movement of hundreds of performers. Alÿs' self-assigned instructions for each *paseo* create an interruption which, for however long, disrupts the normal interactions with the space for those who witness it by introducing an unusual element to the space. In Havana he strolled wearing magnetic shoes (*Magnetic Shoes*, 1994); in Sao Paulo he walked the neighbourhood of Pinheiros carrying a punctured paint tin which dribbled a trail of paint behind him (*The Leak*, 1995); in New York he co-ordinated a procession of people and replicated artworks from MoMA Manhattan to MoMA's temporary headquarters in Queens (*The Modern Procession*, 2002). In Chapter 2 I discuss his *paseo The Loop*, Figure 31, page 71, where he flew from city to city around the Pacific Rim. Referencing both the idea of the flaneur and the situationist idea of drift, these *paseos* are a way creating art that draws from and interacts with its environment and situation. The *paseo* presents to the gallery only the documentation of its path.

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<sup>48</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften zum Theater*. (Berlin and Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1957) quoted in Adrian Carr, "Art as a Form of Knowledge: The Implications for Critical Management" (paper presented at the Art and Aesthetics in Management & Organisation Studies, Manchester School of Management, UMIST, England, 11 – 13 July 2001).

<sup>49</sup> Carlos Basualdo, "Head to Toes: Francis Alÿs's Paths of Resistance.," *Artforum International* 37, no. 8 (1999).

The artistic practices of mimesis and interruption create moments of alienation; gaps which inspire new knowledge and questions. As Adorno argued “Art completes knowledge with what is excluded from knowledge, and thereby once again interferes with its character as knowledge, its unambiguous nature.”<sup>50</sup> The art works incorporated into my thesis are used to both define the *Transit Zone* and expose its ambiguities, thereby expanding and interfering with my knowledge of it. This knowledge and questioning has diversified my research intellectually, aesthetically, explicitly and implicitly.

Art as a form of political discourse impacts on ethnographic observation, performativity and public art. These three forms of practice engage with social and aesthetic criticism through specific languages.

## 1.2 : Ethnography/Art

In this thesis the ethnographic turn in photographic and video work is used to reflect directly on the environment and subjective experience of the *Transit Zone*. The artist as cultural observer and analyst is a paradigm of long standing. However, only in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did artists, along with sociologists and ethnologists, begin to explicitly engage in a self-reflexive critique of how culture is produced by not only analysing the culture they observed, but analysing themselves as observers. In his book *Return of the Real*, art theorist Hal Foster argues that the artist critiquing contemporary culture is engaging in a form of cultural analysis; it is, he claims ‘the artist as ethnographer.’<sup>51</sup>

The self-aware (artist) ethnographer is explored by James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, who positions ethnography as “diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation.”<sup>52</sup> Clifford

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<sup>50</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 54. Translation modified by Frederic J. Schwartz, in *Blind Spots : Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth Century Germany* (New Haven Yale University Press, 2005), 239. I use the Adorno’s words as translated in *Blind Spots* as I find Schwartz’s English translation more appropriate for the point I argue.

<sup>51</sup> Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*.

<sup>52</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9.

asserts that the authority that derives from the presence of the participant-observer is based on the assumption that “the experience of the researcher can serve as a unifying source of authority in the field.”<sup>53</sup> The ‘truth’ statement that ethnography makes is based on the first person experience of a specific time and place. As Marc Augé wrote:

Anthropology has always dealt with the here and now. The practicing ethnologist is a person situated somewhere (his ‘here’ of the moment) who describes what he is observing or what he is hearing at this very moment. It will always be possible afterwards to wonder about the quality of his observation and about the aims, prejudices or other factors that condition the production of his text: but the fact remains that all ethnology presupposes the existence of a direct witness to a present actuality.<sup>54</sup>

Both the ethnographer and the ‘artist as ethnographer’ engage with the subject position of participant-observer to authorise the information they present. They inhabit the here-and-now of the culture they observe and document it as they see it.

The concept of ‘participant-observer’ is integral to ethnology. It represents the attempt to simultaneously occupy inside and outside perspectives. Clifford defines this as “a pervasive condition of off-centeredness in a world of distinct meaning systems, a state of being in culture while looking at culture, a form of personal and collective self-fashioning.”<sup>55</sup> Theorist Miwon Kwon describes the concept of participant observation as a “relay between an empathic engagement with a particular situation and/or event (experience) and the assessment of its meaning and significance within a broader context (interpretation).”<sup>56</sup>

The self-aware participant-observer is producing a reflexive critique on how culture is created, and concurrently analysing themselves as participants within that culture. Clifford emphasises the need to critically

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>54</sup> Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Miwon Kwon, "Experience Vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the Works of Lan Tuazon and Nikki S. Lee," in *From Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, ed. Alex Coles (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000).

read the products of this act of documenting to reveal the observer's context as well as that which is observed. This circular act of observing and then analysing the observation to reveal the observer observing was taken up by the arts when the postmodern discourse of deconstruction or reflexivity embraced the reading of the text to disclose the meta-narratives produced and the authoring roles. In the arts this textual analysis was applied to the imagery produced by artists as well as the texts written about the arts.

Artists I discuss in this context base their analyses of the *Transit Zone* (or facets of it) on the authority of having inhabited it, of having repeatedly passed through it. Reinforcing this authority many of them present their reflections on the *Transit Zone* through the documentary language of photography. I have been, I have seen, I have documented. The tourist, the photographer and the ethnographer speak in this language. In these artworks the artist works not as the producer of new meaning, rather as the analyst of existing culture. However, the artists are also analysing their own subjective experience of the *Transit Zone*. For example, Martha Rosler structures her explorations of the *Transit Zone* from the perspective of a passenger observing the environment and embracing her participation in it.<sup>57</sup> In her accompanying text she writes "My point of view continues to be, not that of an expert, an outsider, observer, or even a student, but that of a traveller. That is a traveller and an artist."<sup>58</sup> With this statement she acknowledges that she is not a disinterested observer, she is an active participant who also observes, and whose observations are shaped by her participation. Rosler's photographs are both documents of the spaces of the airport and aeroplane, and evidence of the photographer's travels. The text interventions suggest the lateral thoughts of the artist which shift and distort the meanings of the images. For instance, canal?", Figure 22, emphasising the visual analogy of the image, and exploring the subjective experience of the *Transit Zone*.

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<sup>57</sup> Martha Rosler, *Martha Rosler: In the Place of the Public: Observations of a Frequent Flyer* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 1998).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

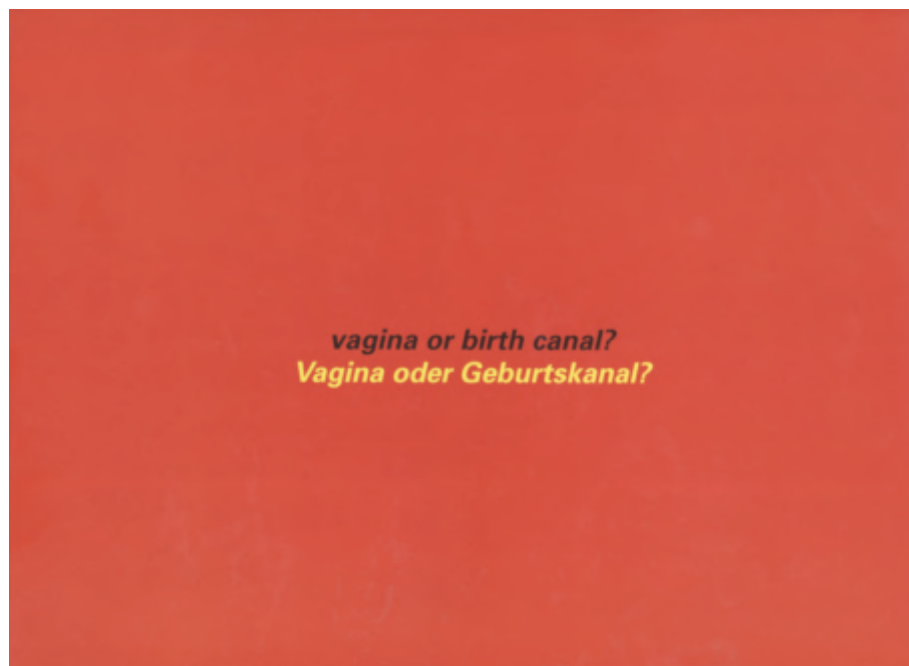
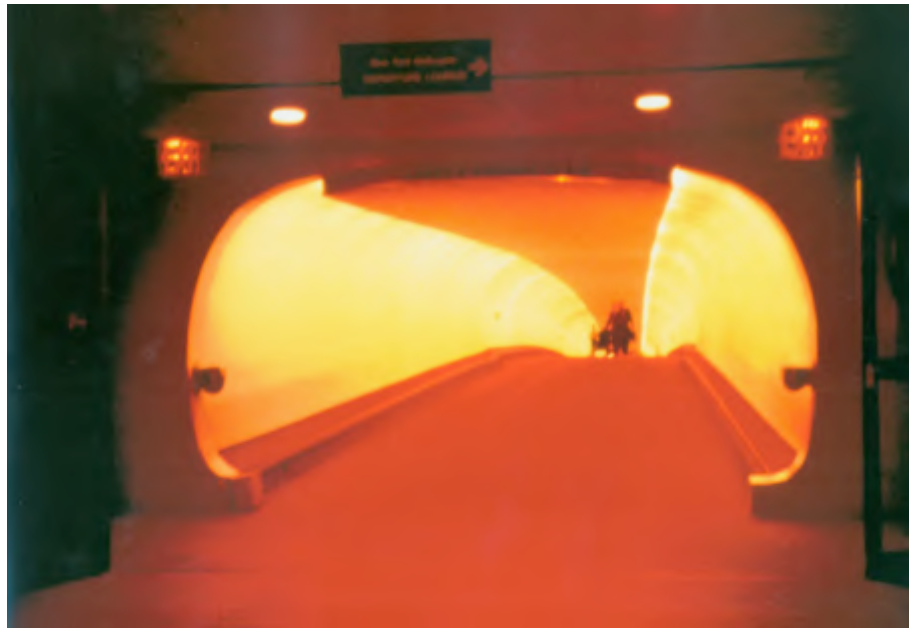


Figure 21: (top) Martha Rosler, *JFK, TWA terminal (New York)*, 1990, 1998, photograph in Martha Rosler, *In the Place of the Public: Observations of a Frequent Flyer*.

Figure 22: (bottom) Martha Rosler, *vagina or birth canal*, 1998, in Martha Rosler, *In the Place of the Public: Observations of a Frequent Flyer*.

By positioning herself as a traveller, Rosler makes herself an object of analysis. Her images document the *Transit Zone* as it impacts on the passenger, who she also comes to represent. Hal Foster argues that the artist and community become linked, often to the point that the artist stands for the community. The artist, through embodying the subject they present, positions themselves as the ethnographic ‘other’ as much as they examine the ‘other’.<sup>59</sup> Ethnology and anthropology are engaged in the production of alterity; the ‘other’ is the central subject of their observation. As Marc Augé states “Anthropological research deals in the present with the question of the other. The question of the other is not just a theme that anthropology encounters from time to time; it is its sole intellectual object, the basis on which different fields of investigation may be defined.”<sup>60</sup> The subject position of ‘other’ is created in a very explicit fashion through the observation and re-presentation that ethnology performs.

The artist who engages with a community or site to create their work is also producing alterity. They are situating the community and site observed in the language of ethnography for an audience to read. In the case of artists working with the *Transit Zone* they are examining the production of the passenger by the *Transit Zone*, or the mechanisms of the *Transit Zone* itself. They produce the passenger or *Transit Zone* as an ‘other’ for the viewer of the work, just as they produce themselves as passenger, artist and ‘other’.

In contrast to Rosler, Harley approaches the *Transit Zone* as an expert documenting its sites, emphasising his observation rather than participation. Harley’s images in the *Aviopolis* project are analytical tools. They position the photograph as a text which specifically articulates a position on the *Transit Zone*. Where Rosler’s photographs are ambiguous, deliberately amateur, focussing on the experience of the sites of air travel, Harley’s images locate, identify and critique the systems which construct the sites of air travel. Many of the photographs have a textual

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<sup>59</sup> Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, 198.

<sup>60</sup> Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, 18.

overlay, which intervene in the photographs as labels. For example Figure 23 shows a photograph of Pudong Airport in China, one side is labelled 'sterile' and the other non-sterile'.<sup>61</sup> The photograph is one of a sequence which explores the architectural elements that separate the passenger flows. The image shows arriving passengers passing through customs on one side of an architectural divide, and on the other, 'non-sterile' side, the general public waits. This image presents the argument that the airport is a movement processing machine that shifts passengers between non-sterile and sterile states, movement and stasis, arrival and departure. It utilises photography's ability to bear witness to make this argument.

The methodology of observing and documenting a situation in which the observer is also a participant is uniquely appropriate to the photographic medium. Photography, like ethnography, privileges the truth of the act of observing and disclosing. In her seminal book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag explores the construction of the photographic image as truth. She deconstructs the myth of the veracity of the photograph, and thereby the authority of the photographer. While today's audience knows that photographs can be manipulated or staged and are the result of the photographer choosing what to photograph, nevertheless, the photograph, couched in the language of reportage, still retains its aura of truth.

Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it. .... A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture. Whatever the limitations (through amateurism) or pretensions (through artistry) of the individual photographer, a photograph - any photograph - seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Fuller and Harley, *Aviopolis: A Book About Airports*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977), 5.



Figure 23: Ross Rudesch Harley, from the *Aviopolis* series, 2002–2005.

Harley uses photography to represent to the viewer objects and sites that any passenger can see. But through invoking photography's truth value, he enables a reconsideration of these objects. The architectural devices, signage, clocks, telephones, fuel trucks and roads that appear in his photographs seem more accurate than our own memories of these sites and encourage the viewer to compare their personal experience against his analytical documentation.

Sontag's analysis of photography's truth statement, Clifford's critique of the ethnographer's 'distance' and Foster's discussion of art's engagement with ethnographic techniques are part of an ongoing recognition that the observer can never achieve absolute distance in that they are always a participant of what they choose to document, and the culture that informs them. This means the artist as ethnographer enacts a self-reflexive role in which the artist must acknowledge their own position in the gathering and presenting of information. This awareness underpins the practice of contemporary art practice whether it places the emphasis on participation, as in Rosler's case, or the observation as in Harley's work.

In addition to displaying an awareness of the artist's own participation in the *Transit Zone*, the art works that I discuss expect their viewers to have a familiarity with the sites and experiences they document. The works presume a mobile, travelled audience. They are resonant with shared experiences of the *Transit Zone*. The audience can read the text produced by the participant-observer against their own experiences of the site and culture examined. However, the works present new ways of considering and interpreting the experiences which utilise the familiarity of the site to shift the viewer's understanding of it.

### **1.3 : Performativity**

Another way in which artists engage with the *Transit Zone* is through the language of performativity, whereby the artist themselves enacts a character or subject position that exists within the context of the *Transit Zone*. Performative construction of identity occurs in many of the works that I discuss in this thesis. These range from the direct utilisation of

performance in *Jet Lag* and *Super Vision* and the performative videos by Pipilotti Rist and myself,<sup>63</sup> to the performative assertion of identity in the ethnographic act of taking a photograph, where for example Rosler constructs herself as a traveller and artist or Harley constructs himself as a researcher and artist.

In discussing performativity in art I draw upon Amelia Jones' argument that "identity is not a 'position' based on biological anatomy or cultural experience ... but a process of negotiation involving complex circuits of identification and desire...."<sup>64</sup> For example, in the video works of Pipilotti Rist, whose 1997 video work *Pamela* is discussed in Chapter 5, the female subjects are not reducible to their biological identity, rather their identity is negotiated through the act of performance, always mutating and multiplying in their complexity. In constantly mutating the role that she performs, Rist reconstitutes the identity she is exploring, calling into question what we expect the subject to be.

I single out the performative methodology as it pertains specifically to my examination exhibition. The performative video works in the exhibition explore diverse ideas about the *Transit Zone* and attitudes towards it through monologues, costuming, props and performances that invoke and subvert desire, obsession and cliché. Amelia Jones made the following argument in regard to the performative use of the self in the works of Cindy Sherman and Hannah Wilke:

These performative images are still "self portraits" in the sense that they convey to the viewer the very subject who was responsible for staging the image ... and yet – through their very exaggeration of the performative dimension of the self (its openness to otherness and, especially clearly in representation, its contingency on the one who views or engages with it), clearly they profoundly shift our conception of what a self portrait – and the subject – is.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Both Pipilotti Rist's and my own performative works are discussed in Chapter 5

<sup>64</sup> Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 215.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

By performing the characters in my videos I engage with the language of the performative self portrait which merges the artist with the character she performs while simultaneously revealing the artist. The artist plays with a self-aware knowledge that she is performing a character, while simultaneously performing herself, as each of the desires and obsessions enacted belong, in some degree, to the artist.

My performative practice engages with desire: desire for objects which have meaning to the possessor, such as airline blankets; sexual desire; desire for an attribute that a figure is purported to possess or embody such as bravery and competence; and the empathic embodying of how the subject enacted may feel about the desires directed at them. All are desires that I both express and elicit from the audience in my exploration of pivotal figures in the *Transit Zone*.

My own obsession can be clearly seen in the 2006 work *What more can I say*. In three acts a woman/the artist explains to the camera how she likes to care for the airline blankets that she collects. In the first act, Figure 24, she demonstrates how she irons the blankets and folds them so that they are all the same size. In the second act, Figure 25, she discusses the origin of each of the blankets in her collection and how some are gifts given to her by others who know of her obsession. In the final act, Figure 26, the woman demonstrates alternative uses for the blankets including using one as a backless dress. Through these acts we see how she uses the blankets to entertain herself, and how she defines herself through her interest. The woman is not limited by her obsessive blanket collecting, instead, she is stimulated by it.

To a certain extent the video is a metaphor for my broader obsession with the *Transit Zone* as it has played out over the last eight years, most recently within the process of my PhD candidature. The video performs an autobiographical truth transformed into a wittingly constructed character. I am not masking myself, rather I am deliberately and visibly performing an identity which explores the interstices between the artist/myself and the constructed ideas of a character or role connected to aviation: the flight attendant, the pilot, and the individual obsessed with flight and its associated accoutrements. The artworks shift our conceptions of who and

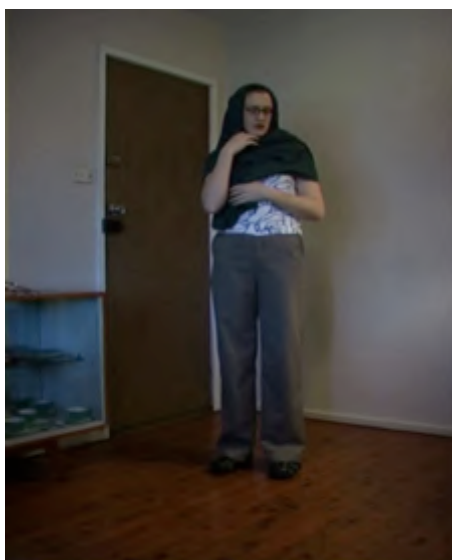
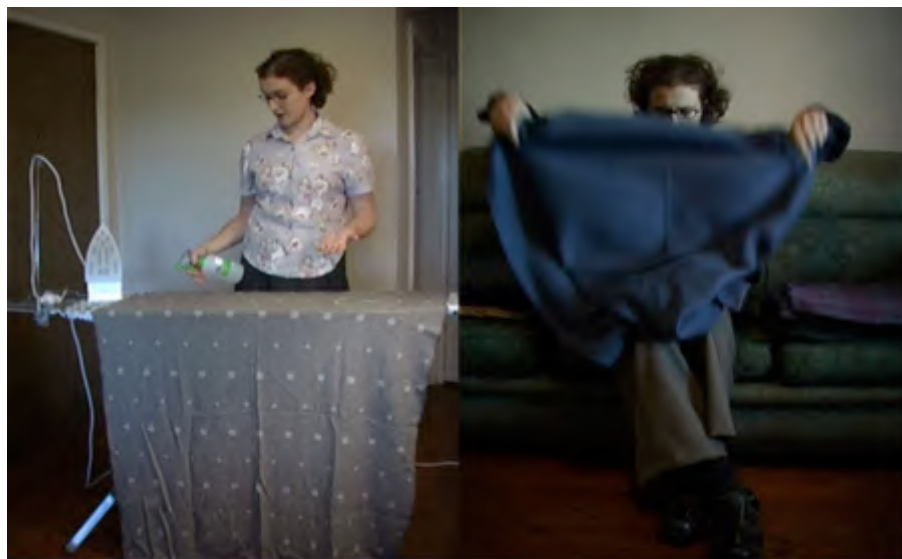


Figure 24: (top left) Melissa Laing, *What more can I say*, 2006, single channel video, 30 min. Image courtesy the artist.

Figure 25: (top right) Melissa Laing, *What more can I say*, 2006, single channel video, 30 min. Image courtesy the artist.

Figure 26: (bottom) Melissa Laing, *What more can I say*, 2006, single channel video, 30 min. Image courtesy the artist.

what these selected figures of the *Transit Zone* are and how they have come to be constructed in broader social imaginings.

#### **1.4 : Public art practices**

Airports have long engaged with art by commissioning art work for their sites. This practice has enabled artists to directly intervene in the sites of the *Transit Zone*. Here I briefly discuss airport art commissioning practices of the last ten years. It is not an exhaustive discussion of art commissioning practices by airports, rather it creates a framework for the discussion of particular works which investigate both the *Transit Zone* as a specific locus and the sites that comprise it.

Public art operates in a cynical realm where the outcomes are not measured solely in aesthetic or intellectual terms. Public art is commissioned by corporations, councils, government bodies and wealthy individuals to fulfil different needs and functions: to display good corporate citizenship and seduce public opinion, to commemorate an event and evoke civic pride, to aid in the regeneration of a public area, to embellish the environment and to entertain the public. On rarer occasions it is commissioned to engage with social and political issues. In addition, there is public art generated by artists and galleries, whose projects, both temporary and permanent, focus on artistic rather than civic or corporate priorities.

Airports struggle to maintain a positive image in the local community as the traffic and noise of an airport impacts negatively on the quality of life and property values of surrounding neighbourhoods. Art programmes which draw from the local arts community are used to provide positive promotion for the airport within the area. Public art is also used as a valuable promotional tool, generating publicity whose value can exceed the expenditure on the actual artwork. The British Airport Authority (BAA) estimated that the initial launch of the BAA Arts Programme at

Heathrow Airport provided the equivalent of £90,000 (AU \$217,666) worth of advertising.<sup>66</sup>

Writing about the development of contemporary public art practices in *Artforum* in 1988, Patricia Phillips asserted that “the making of public art has become a profession, whose practitioners are in the business of beautifying, or enlivening, or entertaining the citizens of, modern American and European cities. In effect, public art’s mission has been reduced to making people feel good – about themselves and where they live.”<sup>67</sup> The problem Phillips sees in this outcome is that such work is conservative and unambitious which results in work that occupies space rather than genuinely interacting with the given public and politics of the site. The work does not challenge, nor does it inspire, it “only understands how to preserve life, not to create it; and thus always undervalues the present growth, ...”<sup>68</sup>

Public art within the airport tends to be dominated by such work; however, among the many works which entertain there are works which critically engage with the *Transit Zone*. I examine the difference between artworks which entertain and enliven the space and artworks which critique the *Transit Zone*; to do this I utilise Friedrich Nietzsche’s discussion in *The Use and Abuse of History*, transferring his perspective on history to the realm of public art. Quoting but transposing Nietzsche, I argue that “The fact that life does need the service of history [art] must be as clearly grasped as that an excess of history [art] hurts it.”<sup>69</sup> Nietzsche argues that history fulfils different needs in an individual’s life “in relation to his action and struggle, his conservatism and reverence, his suffering and his desire for deliverance.”<sup>70</sup> History (art) is necessary to

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<sup>66</sup> Public Art Development Trust, *Documentary Notes: Frances Hegarty Andrew Kearney Philip Napier Maurice O’Connell Mick O’Kelly Louise Walsh* (London: Public Art Development Trust, 1998).

<sup>67</sup> Patricia C. Phillips, “Out of Order: The Public Art Machine,” *Artforum* 27 (December, 1988): 93

<sup>68</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins, 2nd ed. (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957), 20. In my use of Nietzsche I must acknowledge the influence of Paul Usherwood’s excellent chapter, “Public Art and Collective Amnesia,” in *Art, Money, Parties: New Institutions in the Political Economy of Contemporary Art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004)

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

provide an example and inspire; to preserve the past and experience pleasure through it; and to provide a critical perspective on contemporary times.

From the need for history Nietzsche defined three types of methodology or form: “the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical.”<sup>71</sup> However, Nietzsche warned of their potential misuse. He decried what he saw as a false use of the monumental as fact rather than inspiration, saying when the monumental approach dominates “the past itself suffers wrong. Whole tracts of it are forgotten.”<sup>72</sup> The monumental approach ignores the detail of history in its celebration of the end result. Nietzsche also despised the excessive use of the antiquarian approach, which he deemed the province of “curious tourists and laborious beetle hunters.”<sup>73</sup> He believed the antiquarian approach, in excess, privileged the past above progress and stifled a society’s growth. Nietzsche asserted that the monumental and antiquarian approaches needed to be balanced by a critical approach, “in the service of life.”<sup>74</sup> That is, history should be investigated to discover the past’s errors and injustices, to learn from them and attempt to create a new future.

As can be seen, both in Phillip’s critique of public art and in airport commissioning practices, public art is dominated by the antiquarian approach. However, as is outlined below, all three approaches are visible at the airport. Indeed, Nietzsche did not strive to destroy the monumental or the antiquarian approaches, he sought to warn against their abuse and inspire a healthy approach that made “use of the past in that threefold way – monumental, antiquarian, or critical.”<sup>75</sup>

The ‘monumental’ artwork can be defined as that which seeks out the great moments, tragic or triumphant, creating an artwork that is inspirational – a work that proclaims “that the great thing existed and was therefore possible, and so may be possible again.”<sup>76</sup> Its purpose is to speak of the potential for greatness, to set an example for following

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 12 – 13.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 14.

generations. Traditionally, the monumental sculpture is commemorative of war, celebrating the sacrifices that were made and the victory that was achieved. More recently the monument has come to celebrate the location, the people and the values connected with the place. For example Jaume Plensa's 2004 *Crown Fountain*, Figure 27, in Chicago's Millennium Park, celebrates the people and values of Chicago by screening 1,000 diverse faces of Chicago residents on two 50 foot glass block towers at each end of a shallow reflecting pool.<sup>77</sup>

Nietzsche warns, of the monumental perspective, that it “will never be able to have complete truth; it will always bring things together that are incompatible and generalize them into compatibility, will always weaken the differences of motive and occasion. Its object is to depict effects at the expense of causes – ‘monumentally’”<sup>78</sup> His analysis of monumentality is a surprisingly accurate description of the monumentality of airports. Not only in their own right, but in the way they unify the diverse requirements of nation-states, cities, airlines, retailers, passengers and corporate bodies, to effect the processes of air travel.

Indeed, the monumentality of any individual public art work is generally diminished by the scale and intention of the airport. Airports speak to the status of the city and country that hosts the airport. They represent the economic and political situation which allows for travel and they celebrate the inspiration of flight both romantically and technologically. Architects custom design airports which strive to be unique, symbolic of the country and site. Influential architect Norman Foster, who designed Stansted Airport, Hong Kong Chek Lap Kok Airport and Beijing International Airport, said, of the Beijing International Airport, “It will be welcoming and uplifting. A symbol of place, its soaring aerodynamic roof and dragon-like

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<sup>77</sup> ‘The Crown Fountain’,  
[http://www.millenniumpark.org/artandarchitecture/crown\\_fountain.html](http://www.millenniumpark.org/artandarchitecture/crown_fountain.html)  
 (accessed March 14, 2008)

<sup>78</sup> Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, 15.



Figure 27: Jaume Plensa, *Crown Fountain*, 2004, two 50-foot glass block towers, incorporating LED screens at each end of a shallow reflecting pool. Located in Millennium Park, Chicago, United States. Photograph by Melissa Laing.

form will celebrate the thrill and poetry of flight and evoke traditional Chinese colours and symbols.”<sup>79</sup> In other words the airport fulfils the purpose of the monument.

In fact, the now decommissioned TWA terminal building at JFK Airport in New York has become a monumental centrepiece inside the new redeveloped JetBlue Terminal 5 at JFK International Airport, Figure 28, due to open in late 2008.<sup>80</sup> The TWA terminal was designed by Eero Saarinen and finished in 1962. It is known for its ‘space age’ design and is an iconic architectural form. The TWA terminal proclaimed the modernity that flight embodied and became synonymous with New York. Ironically, the terminal was obsolete almost before it opened as it was designed for propeller aircraft, but by the time it was finished the larger jet aeroplanes had come into service.

‘The Saarinen building is open and big, but you can fit it in our lobby,’ says David Epstein, Gensler's lead designer on the project. With two sets of approach roadways, one to the old building and one to the new, the expectation is that passengers with a flair for the dramatic and architectural will get their boarding passes in the historic building and walk through Saarinen's Flight Wing Tubes to the new terminal.<sup>81</sup>

By incorporating the Saarinen terminal into the new designs it has been transformed into monumental sculpture celebrating the history and grandeur of civil aviation, its scale and impact dwarfing any other public artwork intended to be a monument to flight.

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<sup>79</sup> Norman Foster, *Catalogue: Foster and Partners*, (London: Prestel Publishing, 2005), 54.

<sup>80</sup> Fuller and Harley, *Aviopolis: A Book About Airports.*; David W. Dunlap, ‘Renovated T.W.A. Terminal to Reopen as Jetblue Portal.’ *The New York Times*, February 22 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/2002/2022/nyregion/2022trumpet.html>.

<sup>81</sup> Andrew Blum, ‘Jetblue's Terminal Takes Wing,’ *Business Week* (July, 2005) [http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/jul2005/di20050721\\_216497.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/jul2005/di20050721_216497.htm). (accessed January 31, 2008)

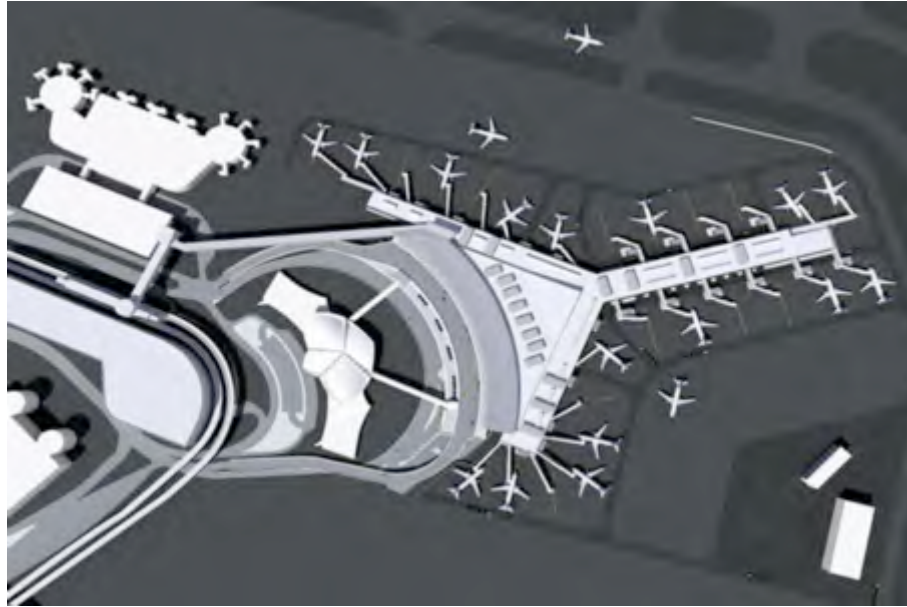


Figure 28: Architect's rendering, JetBlue Airways Terminal 5, JFK International Airport. Designed by architectural firm Gensler incorporating the TWA Terminal, designed by Eero Saarinen. [www.gensler.com](http://www.gensler.com).

Art commissioned to occupy the airport tends to fall within the realm of Phillips' complaint that the art entertains and distracts but does not critically engage with the viewer or the site.<sup>82</sup> Nietzsche describes this as an antiquarian approach, a use of history or, in this case, art which "invokes the past not for any ennobling or educative purpose but simply to provide amusement and interest."<sup>83</sup> The antiquarian approach is promoted by public art commissioning bodies for a variety of reasons which are not that different from other public art sites. As demonstrated by Denver International Airport's (DIA) exhibition program policy statement, airport art commissioning criteria and processes tend to be conservative and orientated towards diverting the passengers.

The DIA Art Exhibition Program entertains and informs passengers and airport visitors by providing a diversion from what can be a stressful time. The exhibits are engaging, aesthetically pleasing and enlightening to visitors, thereby enhancing their experience at DIA. ... The subject matter of the exhibitions must be appropriate for viewing in an airport venue. In keeping with the Airport's mission statement, DIA does not accept for display political statements, nudity, lewd or pornographic depictions, violent or menacing images, weapons, ethnic slurs or any controversial materials that could make airline passengers apprehensive about flying.<sup>84</sup>

The difficulty with a policy that does not accept political statements or controversial materials is that it leaves very little room for a critical engagement with the site of the *Transit Zone*. Instead, public art is commissioned to reinforce the airport's role as a gateway to a particular location. The artwork celebrates the city and country it is located within and creates a positive aesthetic experience for the passenger. Another case in point is the 1998 to 2000 Sydney Airport upgrade. The airport was preparing for the 2000 Olympics, to be the 'gateway' to Australia and to promote the Australian experience to the vast influx of visitors

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<sup>82</sup> Phillips, 'Out of Order: The Public Art Machine,'

<sup>83</sup> Usherwood, 'Public Art and Collective Amnesia,' 122.

<sup>84</sup> DIA Denver International Airport, 'About DIA - Art Program Policy', (<http://www.flydenver.com/guide/art/policy.asp>. 2005 (accessed November 14, 2005))

from around the world. Additionally, airport management was trying to counteract the prevailing dislike of the airport by the surrounding local councils and residents by generating positive publicity.

As the public art program was conceived as a way to welcome the world to Sydney and reflect local identity and culture, the commissioning committee focused on Australian artists. They commissioned works ranging from photographs and videos to architectural structures and freestanding sculptures for both the airside and landside of the airport. The artwork briefs were constructed with an eye to the media benefits of the projects and were orientated towards provoking wide editorial coverage therefore generating “significant value through positive unpaid publicity.”<sup>85</sup> The artworks were intended to ‘humanise’ the airport environment and to fulfil functions such as reinforcing Sydney tourism promotions, increasing user pleasure in the environment and providing a sense of place.

A project description, published on the Euran Global Culture Network’s website, describes the project as drawing on a “philosophy of visual culture which allows for art to be popular and accessible to a broad audience of both art lovers and those who ‘don’t know about art but know what they like’.”<sup>86</sup> With a philosophy orientated towards broad popular taste it is not surprising that the art is primarily entertaining and enlivening, that is antiquarian. A work which embodies this approach is *Touchstone* by Ron Smith, Figure 29. It is a mosaic sculpture of a green and gold frog, “an endangered indigenous species which the airport is helping to conserve through its environmental plan.”<sup>87</sup> The frog promotes Australia’s fauna and is nostalgic for a time before the airport impacted on its habitat. It is also intended to be a touchstone for travellers for good luck and safe return; however, until it was fenced off, it was treated as a climbing frame by children.

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<sup>85</sup> Euran Global Culture Networks, ‘Sydney Airport, Australia / Aéroport De Sydney, Australie’ <http://www.euran.com/airportsydney.htm>. (accessed November 7, 2005)

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.



Figure 29: Ron Smith, *Touchstone*, 2000, mosaic sculpture. In the Sydney International Airport. Image courtesy the Sydney Airport Corporation.

Susan Best points out that the airport provides a very mixed site saying “Site-specific words located in this context [the airport] have a difficult task: should they refer to the land that lies beyond or beneath the airport, or do they refer to the nature of the airport itself?”<sup>88</sup> In contrast to the approach taken in Sydney and Denver, Toronto’s Pearson International Airport deliberately sought out work that engaged with civil aviation, positioning itself as an international rather than local site. The commissioning body avoided artwork that engaged in ‘local boosterism,’ stating that:

The art wasn't designed to represent Toronto. It was designed to say we are part of the global aviation fabric, we are a major player on the global scene, and what you'll experience here is art in support of aviation, not art in support of a community or province or even a country.<sup>89</sup>

The New York Times reported that the “official criteria for art stipulated work that would communicate ‘the essence of aviation and flight in a conceptual, abstract or realistic manner.’”<sup>90</sup> As a result the majority of the artworks commissioned for Toronto’s Pearson International Airport consider the nature of flight and the factors impacting on both aviation and the airport. Works such as Jaume Plensa’s *As One...* (Figure 37, page 97) discussed in Chapter 2, critically examine how international air travel impacts on the construction of geography. However, other works in the airport such as Robert Charles Coyle’s *Flight Song*, Figure 30, create an aesthetic depiction of flight, but do not challenge it.

As we can see from the foregoing three examples of public art programs in airports, the agenda of the airport determines the nature of the artwork found within it. Denver International Airport’s and Sydney International Airport’s art programs produced art which explores the city

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<sup>88</sup> Susan Best, "Place-Making in a Liminal Zone: Sydney International Airport's Art at Work Program," *Art and Australia* 38, no. 3 (2001): 430

<sup>89</sup> Andrew Blum, "The White Zone Is for Loading and Unloading Art," *The New York Times*, March 28 2004, quoting Louis A. Turpin, president and chief executive officer of the GTAA. The works were commissioned as part of construction of the new terminal between 2000 and 2007.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* quote source not specified.



Figure 30: Robert Charles Coyle, *Flight Song*, 2001 – 2003, shot blasted lexan sheet, lexan rod, stainless steel cable, 19 figures, each 1.5 m long. Collection of the Greater Toronto Airports Authority.

and country of each and so provides a sense of location within the airport, whereas Toronto's Pearson International Airport's art program resulted in art works which explore civil aviation as an international phenomenon. Interestingly, within all of these airports there exists a similar mix of work, predominantly antiquarian with a small number of critical works.

Nietzsche says, of the necessity for criticality, "Man must have the strength to break up the past, and apply it, too, in order to live. He must bring the past to the bar of judgement, interrogate it remorselessly, and finally condemn it."<sup>91</sup> Or in the case of public art it should interrogate the public, the politics and the site. The demand that a public, politics and site should be rigorously examined is met in many different ways within the spaces of the *Transit Zone*, despite the prevailing focus on art which entertains but does not challenge. In this thesis I have chosen to focus mainly on works that critically respond to aspects of the *Transit Zone*, acting from within the site of the airport. They respond to Nietzsche's call for a history (art) that is pursued "for life and action, not as a convenient way to avoid life and action."<sup>92</sup>

Throughout this thesis I discuss art works which approach the *Transit Zone* through the language of ethnography and performativity, and works which intervene in sites of the *Transit Zone*, transitorily or as permanent public art pieces. I take the ways in which these art works suspend reality and recombine the rules of the *Transit Zone* to critically reflect upon it.

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<sup>91</sup> Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, 20 – 21.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.