

Air Matters. Learning from Heathrow - Nick Ferguson

The air is partitioned, apportioned, and legislated like any other part of the environment. At Europe's busiest airport, London Heathrow, state-sanctioned global formations collide with quotidian suburban life, rendering the air a site of significant contestation. For some, it is a hypermodern space of networks, flow, and transit where routines and daily rhythms are structured around economic priorities. For others, it is what they must breathe. The conflation of such incompatible requirements within a single commons presents a significant societal challenge that has implications for sustainable development, wellbeing, and human dignity. If these are considerations for policy at national and supra-national levels, then there is a need for fresh thought.

In his essay *Toward the Development of an Air Terminal Site* the artist Robert Smithson speaks of how the artist extracts from a site associations that have remained invisible within the old framework of rational language. He concludes: 'One does not impose, but rather exposes the site' (1967). Smithson's ideas about art's capacity to reveal unseen dimensions of 'the site' (air terminal or otherwise) are now central to location-driven research across the disciplines. They build on more longstanding acknowledgement of art's propensity to withhold judgment, as well as on its capacity to cope with semantic and ontological uncertainty: the bleeding of value, parameter, and number; the instability of truth, the shortage of answers. Moreover, since Smithson's time, art has come to operate in an expanded technological field, and within a much-altered political landscape. Changes include new technologies of capture, display and dissemination, new forms of public life, new dependencies and their attendant rhetoric of creativity and regeneration. On balance, these developments leave art relatively well positioned as an instrument of spatial research, not least because they have placed at its disposal multiple methods, modes of reading (allegorical, encyclopaedic, etc.) and formats for presentation.

This project takes advantage of art's nexus, to proceed within and outside the registers of art – performatively, affectively, representationally – and in the spirit of resolute experimentation, to explore and map the contestation of air at Heathrow. Working at the scale of surrounding territories, we, the researchers, will engage with the air's phenomenological properties and through, for instance, investigations into sound, will consider the space made by the air, and how it shapes what can be thought, felt and performed. Through study of airborne life, air mobility objects and cavities, we will identify competing users of the air, and explore ways of representing the rivalries in which they are embroiled. Through engagement with empirical data relating to trajectories and patterns of movement, we will make visible, and hence available for scrutiny, aerial architectures. At the same time, we will identify theoretical frameworks through which to

position our work in relation to wider discourses on the commons, mobility, territorial justice, and the societal challenges posed by aviation. We will reflect on what art can teach us about the air.

The project will take public form through workshops, an exhibition and trans-disciplinary symposium. What we hope to achieve is, first, a nuanced understanding of the political economy of Heathrow airspace: of the power relations inscribed within it; of how it shapes the societies that it envelops; of its sustainability. Second, we hope to build, in the interests of well-being, and in partnership with local and global actors, an epistemic community that embraces local cultures and practices of air use and will enable urban planners to define the problems they face. Third, we hope to widen recognition of the interplay between urban space and art as an instrument for its discovery and transformation.

References

Smithson, R. 1967 'Toward the Development of an Air Terminal Site' In: Robert Smithson. The Collected Writings. Ed. Jack Flam. Berkeley, University of California Press