MOBILE HORIZONS: ART AND MOBILITY AT MONTRÉAL-TRUDEAU INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

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Abstract: *As non-places, airports generally do not lend themselves to considering art in ways that aren't directly followed by movement. Understanding the visuality of art in this context, however, can shed light on ways in which the state manages the mobility of people, and the flows of capital in globalized economies. Using the Montréal-Trudeau International Airport as a case study, I consider how the fluid evocations of digital screens, as well as the fragmented abstractions of space contribute to branding Montréal through images. Contemporary art here functions as one of many rarefied spheres of the airport, and vice versa. Bodies follow signs and images, but within the limits determined by state and transnational capitalist interests. How does art at Montréal-Trudeau engage with these interests? How does the mutual reinforcement of art and mobility relate to the invisibility of those denied mobility by the state?*
Keywords: globalisation, contemporary art, airports, mobility, creative class, visual culture.

Résumé : *En tant que non-lieux, les aéroports ne se prêtent généralement pas à une appréciation de l'art d'une façon qui ne précède pas immédiatement le déplacement. Une meilleure compréhension des régimes visuels de l'art dans ce contexte permettrait pourtant d'éclairer les façons dont l'État gère la mobilité des individus, ainsi que les flux mondialisés de capitaux. Prenant l'aéroport international de Montréal-Trudeau comme étude de cas, je considère comment les évocations fluides de ses écrans numériques, ainsi que les abstractions fragmentées de ses espaces contribuent à l'identification de la ville de Montréal comme marque. L'art contemporain fonctionne ici comme l'une de plusieurs sphères privilégiées du non-lieu de l'aéroport et vice-versa. Les corps suivent à la fois signes et images, mais au sein de limites déterminées par l'État et les intérêts transnationaux. Quel est l'engagement de l'art à Montréal-Trudeau face à ces intérêts? Quel impact le renforcement mutuel de l'art et de la mobilité a-t-il sur l'invisibilité de ceux que l'État immobilise?*
Mots-clés : mondialisation, art contemporain, aéroports, mobilité, classe créative, culture visuelle.

By design, airports generally do not lend themselves to aesthetic contemplation. The act of stopping and looking is antithetical to the frenetic mobility that airports are largely known for. A central design feature of Montréal-Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport, as in many airports, is the network of signs and structures that determine how the space should be navigated. Movement takes its cues from signs, so that the act of looking is intertwined with movement. Indeed, outside of labour, it goes against the grain to experience the airport as a destination for contemplation, and the frenetic movement surrounding the art and design at Montréal-Trudeau, as well as the installation and curation of the works, offer little opportunity for considered critique. In this way, at least, the speed by which culture is experienced echoes the circulation of images across Western urban centres, rejoining the operative procedures of the culture industry. What does it mean to stop and look at the airport? We could consider the question of mobility globally today, which points towards the growing inequalities between what motivates people to move transnationally. 2016 has counted more than 30 billion legal international arrivals, compared to 150 million in 1950. Meanwhile, Canada continues its temporary foreign worker programme, in which migrants are placed in exploitative labour contracts and regularly face deportations. Their plight has been made invisible through this federal programme's design: through the type of labour (e.g. farm workers, live-in caregivers) as well as the workers' mobility, often involving travels between Canada and the Philippines or the Caribbean. The space of the airport, as a space that is necessarily always inflected by the circulation of transnational capital, is also characterized, notably, by racial and class distinctions that determine movement through its highly regulated paths. Airports, like other large-scale infrastructural spaces for transit, are designed "with the visible in mind" (Lefebvre, 199, p. 76), whether through the security apparatus of the state, or individual processes of navigation. As Nanna Verhoeff (2012) has argued, navigation is "a primary trope in (urban) mobility and visuality" given how tightly intertwined visuality is in processes of mobility (p. 13). The space of Montréal-Trudeau airport is thus centred on the visibility of movement, but what are the hidden forces and limits at play? How much does its visual culture

serve to extend and celebrate dominant forms of mobility? I will argue here that the visual culture of the airport, far from being merely an aesthetic facet of the insfrastructure, deploys visual representations of place in ways that typify settler ways of seeing land, while actively obscuring images of culturally marginalized forms of mobility. In thinking through these questions, I will focus on the visual culture of Montréal-Trudeau, unravelling how visual representation intersects with power in this site, i.e. examining its particular visuality (Mirzoeff, 2002). In this analysis, I will therefore extend methods from two fields: that of visual culture, but also the recent focus on mobilities in critical theory (Urry, 2007); as well as their intersection in the "spatio-visual" or "navigational turn," as articulated recently by Verhoeff in *Mobile Screens* (2012, p. 13). I will detail the particular material setting of my case study, firstly by examining the aesthetics of contemporary art in the context of the spatial dynamics at Montréal-Trudeau. I will then focus on relevant conceptions of space, notably the non-place. Lastly, I will consider how the "aesthetics of mobility" at the airport relate to senses of place drawn from Indigenous forms of mobility that challenge the flows sanctioned by the state. By addressing Indigenous forms of mobility particular to the site of the airport, I aim to critique settler representations of mobility that socially produce the space of the aiport, thereby defining the particular texture of its visual culture. The works of art at the airport are not meant to be experienced as a whole, or as a conventional exhibition (which is in any case prevented by security checkpoints). I choose here to focus instead on curatorial decisions, and the ways that art extends and reflects the infrastructure of the airport. I will particularly examine the triangular relation between place branding, visualisation and the production of space, through artworks that are most emblematic of the aesthetic of the airport, notably the *Art en Couleurs* series of light columns.

The Montreal Identity (Aérogalerie) Programme

Montréal-Trudeau was officially known as Montréal-Dorval International Airport until 2004, when it was renamed to commemorate the life of former Prime Minister Pierre-Elliott Trudeau, and many Montrealers still call the airport "Dorval." It opened as a military airport in 1941, in order to fly soldiers to

Europe in support of Allied Forces. In subsequent decades, as a civilian airport, it underwent several large infrastructural changes, notably adapting to the mega-events of 1967 and 1976 that were instrumental in shaping the image of the city through the visibility of international audiences. 16 million passengers passed through Montréal-Trudeau airport in 2016 (ADM, 2016). It is an important international gateway into the country, but also an important node for labour: more than 58 000 people work either on site, or in related roles for companies operating at the airport. Air Canada, which was privatized in 1988, has its corporate headquarters in Montréal. The head offices of two prominent organizations for aviation, the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) and the International Air Transport Association (IATA), are also located in Montréal. Additionally, the massive security overhauls that followed 9/11 have greatly contributed to shaping experiences of the airport. This is not only, as one might assume, through the increased force of the state at security checkpoints, but also through opportunities that have arisen for businesses and leisure past checkpoints. As passengers became increasingly prepared for longer security checks at the airport after 9/11, they started arriving earlier. This produced longer periods of waiting between security and flight times. Montréal-Trudeau therefore decided to add more restaurants and boutiques in the restricted zone (ADM, 2016b), a process which paralleled the proliferation of media art, both before and after security.

Aéroports de Montréal (ADM), a private non-profit organisation, is the main airport authority for the island of Montréal. It administers a programme showcasing contemporary art across Montréal-Trudeau that is known as the Aérogalerie, or the Montreal Identity programme. As this name suggests, the programme charges itself with "infusing the airport facilities with a typically Montréal character, as well as helping support the city's artistic and cultural development." (ADM, 2015) This choice to brand Montréal, while facilitating movement through the airport, is reflected in the curation of *Art en Couleurs*. This feature, a highly visible part of the Aérogalerie, consists of a series of 9 illuminated columns, with floor-to-ceiling light boxes. Facing the main international departure gate, they form a line between international check-in and domestic check-in counters. Two sides of each column showcase one public art or design work in Montréal, so that 18 works are represented overall.

Photographically, each work is represented through dramatic close-ups, featuring small inserts with more conventional installation shots, and captions identifying the works' various sites across the city. The columns thereby include a pattern of fragmented forms and variegated geometric abstractions. As Caroline Bergeron, the photographer for *Art en Couleurs* (Figure 1), has explained: "My approach is to feature these colours and shapes, take them out of their environment and bring them together in one place. Overly static works and colours that have become so familiar are reinvented in this place of arrivals and departures." (ADM, 2016a) Many of the columns, tellingly, re-present the context of other transit hubs where the works are located. For instance, viewers are drawn into the works underground at the Montréal Metro, through Mario Merola's *Octavie* (1976) featured at Charlevoix station, Lyse Charland Favretti's *L'Éducation* and Pierre Osterrath's *Untitled* (both 1982) installed at the Du Collège station, or *.98* (2007) by Alex Morgenthaler at Henri-Bourrassa station. Other spaces known for their transitoriness include the Esplanade of Place des Arts and the Palais des Congrès, which are featured through, respectively, Luis Feito's *Maïrel No 1* (1978) and the much-reproduced *Lipstick Forest (Nature Légère)* (1999-2002) by the landscape design office of Claude Cormier + Associés.

Figure 1. Art en Couleurs *display with* Révolutions *by Michel de Broin (installed by Papineau Metro station) in the foreground*

The theme of mobility is evoked here at different levels. The transformation of figuration and representations of place into fluid abstractions represent only its most overtly modernist manifestation. This fluidity also extends for instance, to representations of transformations on the human body. Two columns are especially alike in this regard: one reproduces David Altmejd's *The Eye* (2010-11), while the other reproduces Anthony Gormley's *Building VI* (2003). Their photographs also reproduce the context of the Montréal Museum of Fine Art, where both works were installed as public art. Both Altmejd and Gormley's figures are schematically anthropomorphic, and seemingly on the cusp of movement or physical transformation. *Building VI* (Figure 2) represents a figure that through its pose and inclination, tends upward towards the skyline. The modular blocks forming the work, like the modernist grid, seem to both constitute and threaten the unity of the figure. Altmejd's *The Eye*, on the other hand, is pierced through with a gigantic hole, as hands creep forward inside its torso and above, to form the semblance of a head. Its wings also draw a relationship to the sky, while the bodily fragmentations evoke an uncanny mobility.
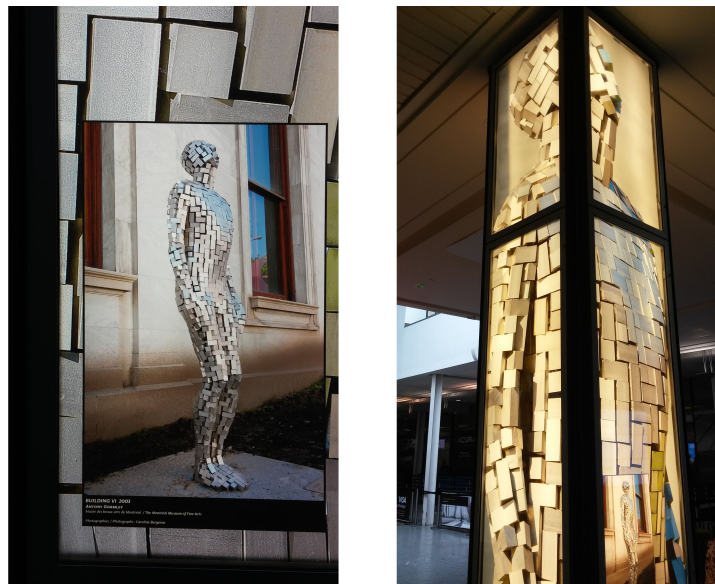

Figure 2. Art en Couleurs *display details, featuring Anthony Gormley's* Building VI

Other artworks support the airport's mobility by wrapping around, and enhancing, the airport's physical infrastructure. There are many examples of this throughout the site, such as Alex Morgenthaler's *Vous êtes presque arrivé* (2005) and Caroline Bergeron and Aliya Orr's *Orbit* (2015), both artworks using integrated lighting installations while directly complementing the airport's wayfinding systems. Christiane Beaulieu, ADM's Vice-President, Public Affairs and Communications, plainly describes the instrumentalisation of *Orbit*, for the purposes of direction and mobility: "we seized the opportunity to incorporate a new vehicle for artistic and cultural expression, something that was lacking in that part of the terminal. With this technology-based, flexible structure, we are combining practicality and appeal: showcasing dynamic made-in-Montréal works of art while improving signage and wayfinding at the same time." (ADM, 2015) *Orbit* thereby concretizes the visibility and symbolism of the US departures gate, where it is located, through digital displays that contribute to ordering movements below.

Figure 3. The oval screens used by Orbit, *by Caroline Bergeron and Aliya Orr*

The non-place of the airport and the non-place of the gallery

Such artworks evoke, and produce, a type of space that corresponds closely to the form, function and image of the non-place. The concept of the non-place, first formulated by historian Michel de Certeau in *L'Invention du quotidien (The Practice of Everyday Life)*, was later developed and popularized by anthropologist Marc Augé in *Non-lieux, Introduction à une anthropologie de la supermodernité (Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity)* in 1992. Starting with what is negated, de Certeau defines the category of "place," as primarily characterized by an order of properties, in which each spatial element is distributed through distinct positions, creating relations of stability and coexistence (de Certeau, 1990). This order and stability is disrupted in the non-place, particularly through the insertion of language throughout space. For de Certeau, it is particularly the proper nouns of signs, and how they lead to varied and conflicting spatial orientations, that alter the consistency of space to produce non-places (de Certeau, 1990). Augé largely extends de Certeau's terms, and as examples of non-places he includes such seemingly divergent spaces as train stations, shopping malls and migrant camps. Tellingly, Augé describes non-places as "invaded by text," while his examples also foreground proper nouns and the naming of places for touristic or navigation signs, e.g. "You are now entering the Beaujolais region" (Augé, 1992). Elaborating on the space produced by this use of text, philosopher Peter Osborne has defined Augé's non-place as the "the dialectical residue" that results from the negation of place by both textuality and itinerancy (Osborne, 2013). Ontologically, the non-place is thereby a space produced by the movement of people, and the invasion of textuality, i.e. of language and signs.

Osborne further argues that this dual negation of space by both text and mobility is also constitutive of the characteristic space of modern art. The space of the art gallery, particularly in its most standardized modern form, the white cube, is another example of the divergent architectural and social forms of non-places. The white cube, characterised famously by artist Brian O'Doherty as "the single major convention through which art is passed," usually entails a locale that promises the experience of art while remaining formally inconspicuous (Osborne, 2013). Despite seeming antithetical to the scale and

traffic of spaces more conventionally identified as non-places, Osborne argues that the white cube exemplifies the non-place, notably since it is designed to facilitate the movement of people (e.g. through regularly changing exhibitions) and the presence of textuality across its space. Textuality here forms an integral part of the white cube to the extent that modern art is necessarily constituted by the discourses surrounding it, and to the extent that it appears, on a more formal level, through the material inclusion of text in art, for instance following the legacy of Dada, Pop Art or Conceptual Art. The white cube is thereby, like other non-places, a self-enclosed locale characterised by the dual negation of movement and textuality. This theoretical overview of the ontology shared by both contemporary art spaces, and spaces more widely recognised as non-places, is also reflected historically. As the forms of modern art increasingly came to reflect the movement and energies of the urban fabric, so did exhibition spaces evolve in tandem with new movements in the city. Osborne has outlined how the beginnings of conceptual art can be tied to the context of the non-place through a notable example: Yoko Ono's *Instructions for Paintings*. This artwork was exhibited in the summer of 1962 in the lobby of the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo. In addition to being sited in a lobby, Ono's artwork referenced non-places by mimicking the kinds of written signs one might find in them (Osborne, 2013, p. 122).

The contemporary art of Montréal-Trudeau, like its site, is full of textual references. This is firstly exemplified through the many references to place, notably landmarks of the city, or sites of public art. The textuality of the airport is further supported by the material presence of artworks, which facilitate readings of the airport's signs through their luminosity and the height of their placement. The artworks also complement the non-art signs of the airport by offering large areas of variegated colour, which contrast with the formal sobriety of the airport's general design. Furthermore, the majority of artworks re-presented in *Art en Couleurs* (Figure 4) are in fact connected to each other, through the corridors of vast infrastructures. These works can form part of an unbroken underground path through the interior spaces of the Montréal Metro, or through the sprawling network of tunnels, malls and office complexes that is the RÉSO (or Underground City), perhaps the non-place that has most come to brand the city.

Figure 4. Art en Couleurs *display with* Sans Titre *by Pierre Osterrath
(a mural at Du Collège Metro station) in the foreground*

State interests and the visualisation of mobility

Geographer Doreen Massey has argued that the increased mobility of some in contemporary Western societies has also produced increased controls on other, more marginalised, sectors of the population. Massey argues that we need to consider that the mobility that many people have the privilege of enjoying, and the power over mobility held by some, actually weakens the mobility of others: "the mobility and control of some groups can actively weaken other people. Differential mobility can weaken the leverage of the already weak. The time-space compression of some groups can undermine the power of others." As an example, she adds that "every time someone uses a car, and thereby increases their personal mobility, they reduce both the social rationale and the financial viability of the public transport system—and thereby also potentially reduce the mobility of those who rely on that system" (Massey, 1993, p. 65).

Likewise, examining the artworks of *Art en Couleurs*, as well as reflections of the type of mobility that is celebrated at the airport, can highlight the differential mobility that regulates flows across this space. What are the mobile subjects

alluded to by these artworks? Re-presentations of *The Eye*, by Altmejd, and *Building VI,* by Gormley present us with the only two prominent figures. The works both echo the artists' wider practices: Gormley is known for standardized, schematic figures, which he creates as "everymen" for different contexts. Altmejd has extensively represented the metamorphosis of fragmented and distorted figures, in contrast with classical representations of masculinity. The curatorial decisions of the *Art en Couleurs* display, and of the Montreal Identity programme as a whole, offer a prism to understand particular dynamics of representation at the airport, and more specifically, who is imagined as a mobile audience here. It is telling that out of the 18 people named as artists or designers in *Art en Couleurs*, close to all are white North Americans or Europeans. While artworks on display at the airport regularly change, this lack of racial diversity also extends from the artists and designers exhibited to the administrative level and the Advisory Committee.

In the convergence between two commensurate types of space – the non-place of the art gallery, and the non-place of the airport – it is also worth considering socio-economic conditions. While the art gallery and the airport are also typically spaces of labour, through which workers are often "mobile" through the precarity of flexible employment contracts, it is another kind of audience that the Aérogalerie seems to call upon. The aesthetics of the non-place at Montréal-Trudeau conjure a rarefied, privileged kind of mobility, that of a subject ready to gaze onto the city from high above, and to identify places with images at will.

The celebration of mobility through art is thereby embedded in regimes of visibility tied to class and race, whereby the state encourages the mobility of some over the mobility of others. Because this international airport is the site of borders, the settler state of Canada controls who flows through its spaces. This is a conception of spatial limits at odds with many Indigenous peoples, such as the Mohawk, on whose traditional lands the airport rests, and who have been moving from one side of the US-Canada border to the other for generations, in ways that challenge the apparatus of settler mobility. Anthropologist Audra Simpson has shed light on how Mohawk forms of sovereignty allow for an alternative understanding of forces regulating the flow of bodies through the US-Canada border. This border, Simpson claims, "cuts through [Mohawks']

historical and contemporary territory" and is, she claims, "simply, in their space and in their way." Despite this, mobility across the US-Canada border enacts the Mohawk nation's understanding of history and law (Simpson, 2013, p. 115). For her anthropological fieldwork, Simpson has collected everyday experiences of border crossing. "I have crossed the border my entire life" Simpson (2013) writes, "in cars, on buses, and had my first flight alone into Dorval International airport at age seven to see my grandparents and my extended family" (p. 199). Despite the everyday nature of this movement, and the rights supporting it, Simpson has recounted many examples in which Mohawk border crossing has been threatened, either through individual encounters at points of entry, or through the media (e.g. when demonized as "smuggling," a perception exacerbated by representations of the CBC in the 1990s).

The fluid representations of place at Montréal-Trudeau, on the other hand, evoke settler forms of mobility. These forms are representative of the privilege by which settlers can move across the continent and claim somewhere to be "their home" in a way that disassociates the land from Indigenous systems of knowledge. Settler sovereignty is, according to scholars Emma Lowman and Adam Barker (2015), "essentially 'portable' anywhere inside the Settler's domain" (p. 23). The Montreal Identity programme thereby echoes settler processes by which senses of place and belonging are naturalized as being mobile themselves, abstracted from, and in conflict with, existing place-based epistemologies.

Conclusion

The precise branding of the city through the airport's images, and the solidification of an aesthetic produced by the amalgamation of particular locations across Montréal, are here not so much a challenge to the dispersed ontology of the non-place, but rather a direct extension of it. The perceived unity of the city as a "place" in this context is not essentialized, but instead formulated through the mobility of people and capital, notably via tourism. For Osborne and Augé, the non-place cannot be defined as "relational, or historical, or concerned with identity," (Osborne, 2001) but is instead characterized by *abstraction*, i.e. the removal of forms and signs from their primary contexts. This

abstraction is reflected at Montréal-Trudeau on both spatial and formal levels, to such an extent that it solidifies an identity through an overstated aesthetics of the non-place. Formal abstraction, as well as the abstraction of place, thereby converge in this site in a way that echoes the process of air travel, and notably processes by which travellers engage with the city in a cursory and privileged way, viewing it from different scales and levels of abstraction. As John Urry notes in *Mobilities*:

> Air travel colludes in producing and reinforcing the language of abstract mobilities and comparison, an expression of a mobile, abstracted mode of being-in-the-world. And through this mode places get tranformed into a collection of abstract characteristics in a mobile world, ever easier to be visited, appreciated and compared even from above, but not really known from within (Urry, 2007, p. 154).

Airports, as sites that exemplify such abstraction, offer a wealth of insights into the processes sanctioning the flow of bodies and visibility in cities more broadly. Airports in this and many other respects can be seen as microcosms of the city, or as Verhoeff (2012) has argued, "not a miniature city but rather a model for it – an ideal" (p. 106). The particular ways that visualisation – or lack thereof – work in tandem with the movement of bodies at Montréal-Trudeau, as in many other airports, reflect how the state regulates movement in less overt ways. The aesthetics of the Montreal Identity programme, through its promise of movement, produces a kind of horizon line for mobility. This line, perpetually receding, seems to offer the promise of multiple trajectories a viewer could follow, trajectories which are in fact deeply contingent on the social and cultural positions of subjects. While this horizon line seems to facilitate navigation through the airport, it is however, deeply embedded in a visuality that actively obscures vital forms of mobility beyond what is state-sanctioned, just as it obscures vital expressions of place.

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