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### Life in the Departure Lounge

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A recent Irish advertisement depicts a young couple savouring the delights of ‘travel value’ shopping. While less enlightened travellers hasten towards their destinations in a blur of accelerated motion, the young lovers drift slowly through the arcades before setting off on their holiday. The message, spelled out in a reggae-style theme tune, is that instead of hurrying we should simply ‘take our time’ and embrace those moments of involuntary stasis that punctuate all journeys. With the right attitude, it seems, even delays caused by proliferating security procedures and erratic low-budget flight schedules can be transformed into quality time. Spielberg’s latest film, *The Terminal*, offers a similarly hopeful vision of airport time. Judging solely from the trailer, as I have not yet seen the film, *The Terminal* presents an old Hollywood story in a relatively new setting. Tom Hanks plays Viktor, an airline passenger forced to remain indefinitely in JFK airport because his visa is invalidated by a coup in his (invented) Eastern European homeland. Viktor triumphs over adversity and during his lengthy stopover, he learns English, makes friends with a multi-ethnic array of airport workers and eventually wins the heart of the glamorous stewardess played by Catherine Zeta Jones.

This feel-good fable is ‘inspired by’ the experience of Merhan Karimi Nasseri, a British-educated Iranian refugee who has lived in Charles de Gaulle airport for 16 years. In 1988 Nasseri’s passport and United Nations refugee certificate were stolen from him and, rather than be returned to Iran, he declared himself to be stateless. As might be expected, the particularities of Nasseri’s status as a refugee have been set aside in Spielberg’s version and Viktor is simply a hapless tourist whose statelessness is primarily a consequence of bad timing. These omissions tend to emphasise absurdity over tragedy, but *The Terminal* does touch upon a certain set of cultural anxieties regarding globalisation, concerns that have also informed art practice. Its setting, the airport departure lounge, seems particularly emblematic of globalised urban space, devoid of specificity and literally crowded with signs for products available throughout the western world. Airport terminals are spaces where even time

itself loses meaning, and jet-lagged dissociation is intensified by 24-hour fluorescent lighting.

The visual arts programme that accompanies this years Fringe Festival sets out to explore the consequences of this kind of spatial and temporal disjunction. The curators have solicited and commissioned works on the theme of 'Transit', siting them in explicitly transitional spaces such as Dublin Port Ferry Terminal, Connolly Station and Pearse Station. The development of the project has been informed by a number of texts and artworks dealing with concepts of identity, narrative, national consciousness and migration. In one key article, John Di Stefano examines the role of time-based art in articulating shifting conceptions of home.<sup>1</sup> Drawing upon Benedict Anderson's theory of the nation as an 'imagined community', he emphasises that identities are constituted through fluid and evolving fictional constructs. From this perspective a home is simply a structure of activity and belief, around which narratives of belonging can be constructed .

Di Stefano suggests that the airport can function as a new paradigm for home. In this model the airport is viewed "a varied and complex interlacing of personal and political trajectories", the site of spaces of belonging that are also spaces of disappearance.<sup>2</sup> This vision of transience is hopeful, if not utopian, because it suggests that the sense of being 'between places' might link otherwise disparate constituencies. Di Stefano is, however, sensitive to the complexities of the personal and political trajectories that intersect at the airport, acknowledging that mobility may be forced as well as chosen. These issues would be difficult to ignore in any contemporary exploration of mobility and, given the recent referendum on Irish citizenship, they are central to the Transit project.

The complex relationship linking personal and political trajectories of mobility is highlighted by the siting of works at Dublin Port Ferry Terminal. In the past the Ferry Terminal has served as a point of entry for those seeking asylum in Ireland and its character as a 'space of disappearance' is perhaps particularly pronounced. The numerous freight containers that are stored around the Port act as oblique yet pressing

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<sup>1</sup> John Di Stefano, "Moving Images of Home – Video Recording About Homelessness", *Art Journal* 6. 4., Winter 2002, 38-51.

<sup>2</sup> Di Stefano, 41.

reminders of the migrant stories that have entered the public consciousness specifically because they have ended in tragedy. Certain works commissioned for Transit, and sited at the Terminal, are concerned with forms of clandestine mobility that are more specifically Irish. Yvonne McGuinness's project, for example, calls attention to the Port's history as a point of departure for Irish women seeking abortions in the UK. Other works are more concerned with the various small ways in which everyday mobility can be circumscribed, particularly for those that are most vulnerable to exploitation. Glen Loughran's posters and billboards, sited at various locations around the city, highlight the insecurity of labour and rental markets – an issue that is again of particular significance in the Irish context. Anyone who has rented property in Dublin during the boom years will be only too aware of the way in which market forces (not to mention dependence on social welfare) can restrict movement. In Ireland these restrictions are often most directly experienced by groups that are marked as exemplars of 'nomadism', such as immigrant workers, asylum-seekers and members of the Travelling Community.

In terms of its focus on mobility and migration, Transit is attuned both to the changing character of Irish public space and to developments in international art practice. Artists and independent curators have taken full advantage of cheap air travel since the 1990s, to the extent that many now maintain practices that span cities on different continents. These changing conditions of production and exhibition may help to explain the prevalence of what James Meyer terms 'figures of travel' in contemporary art.<sup>3</sup> This thematic emphasis on mobility does not necessarily imply the rejection of the 'local' as an artistic concern and Meyer distinguishes between a kind of lyrical nomadism that is characterised by arbitrariness and a critical nomadism that locates travel within historical and institutional frameworks and is perhaps more concerned with the particularities of place. The art world's fascination with place, whether expressed in terms of sited-ness or mobility, has been critiqued by architectural theorist Miwon Kwon. She suggests that site-oriented and nomadic practices are equally "symptomatic of the dynamics of deterritorialization"<sup>4</sup> because both respond to globalisation by attempting to recover the lost specificity of place.

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<sup>3</sup> See James Meyer "Nomads: Figures of Travel in Contemporary Art", in *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, ed. Alex Coles, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000: 10-26.

<sup>4</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, 2004, 157.

Kwon is deeply sceptical about critical potential of any art project that re-imagines the “uniqueness of place” through recourse to “authenticity of meaning, memory, history and identity”.<sup>5</sup> She is also dismissive of the way in which institutions may seek, through publicly sited projects or events, to co-opt the cultural capital of place in the interests of audience development.

Over its four year history, the Fringe Festival visual arts programme has consistently favoured public spaces over gallery exhibition as a means of creating new and varied points of engagement with audiences. This unashamed commitment to site-specific practice does not, however, imply a cynical investment in the ‘uniqueness of place’. Site-based practice can, and often does, encompass critical reflection on its own conditions and conventions. This reflexivity is evident, for example, in workseth/tallentire’s *trailer* (1998), one of a number of Off Site art works commissioned by Project during a period of institutional transition. *trailer* consisted of a series of short video narratives, filmed on a daily basis at various locations around Dublin. The videos were edited on the same day and each one was then screened at a new non-gallery location, advertised via a freephone number. Through its spatial and temporal structure, *Trailer* directed attention towards the conditions of site-based art practice, and towards the expectations and desires shaping its reception.

The Transit project, with its explicit emphasis on mobility, provides an opportunity to reflect upon the complexities of contemporary site-based practice. It might also offer a useful counterpoint to the explorations of transitory identity that have surfaced in popular cinema. *The Terminal* is only the latest in a succession of Hollywood narratives focusing upon the theme of interrupted (and predominantly masculine) mobility. It is particularly reminiscent of *Castaway*, in which Tom Hanks plays an obsessive Federal Express executive stranded on a desert island until he conquers his fears and escapes to build a more balanced life. *The Terminal* also evokes memories of the 1987 comedy *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, which centred on an American businessman forced through continual diversions to re-evaluate his uptight attitude. The morality lesson is even more pronounced in *Groundhog Day*, where Bill Murray plays a cosmopolitan weatherman trapped in a 24 hour time-loop. Although *Groundhog Day*’s small-town setting would seem to be more inviting than a desert

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<sup>5</sup> Kwon, 157.

island or a departure lounge, Murray's character is also doomed to repeat a series of meaningless social encounters until he changes his ways. In each instance, temporary and involuntary stasis leads towards personal transformation and, ultimately, some kind of emotional and social progress.

*The Terminal* also proposes that interrupted mobility can provide valuable time for self-improvement, giving rise to new modes of belonging and social connectedness. In reality, however, Merhan Karimi Nasseri's story is one of crisis rather than triumph over adversity. Although offered a passport to live in France, Nasseri will not sign the necessary papers. This is because he now claims to have been born in Britain and so refuses to recognise the Iranian nationality assigned to him by the state. His lawyers can do little more for him and he continues to live in Charles de Gaulle airport, the beneficiary of royalties from films such as *The Terminal*, which have been deposited into his airport post office account.<sup>6</sup> Despite the media attention focused on his case, Nasseri seems destined to remain stateless because his new identity cannot be accommodated by administrative and political authorities. Perhaps experience of transit does give rise to new forms of belonging, lending weight to Di Stefano's hopeful vision of the airport as a paradigm for home. Yet Nasseri's experience suggests that, while identity may indeed be fluid and mobile, the most vulnerable of travellers are likely to encounter the greatest barriers to self-transformation.

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<sup>6</sup> See Amelia Gentleman, "Spielberg spins the tale of the prisoner of Paris airport" *The Guardian*, July 27, 2004.