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In the Place of the Public: Observations of a Frequent Flyer

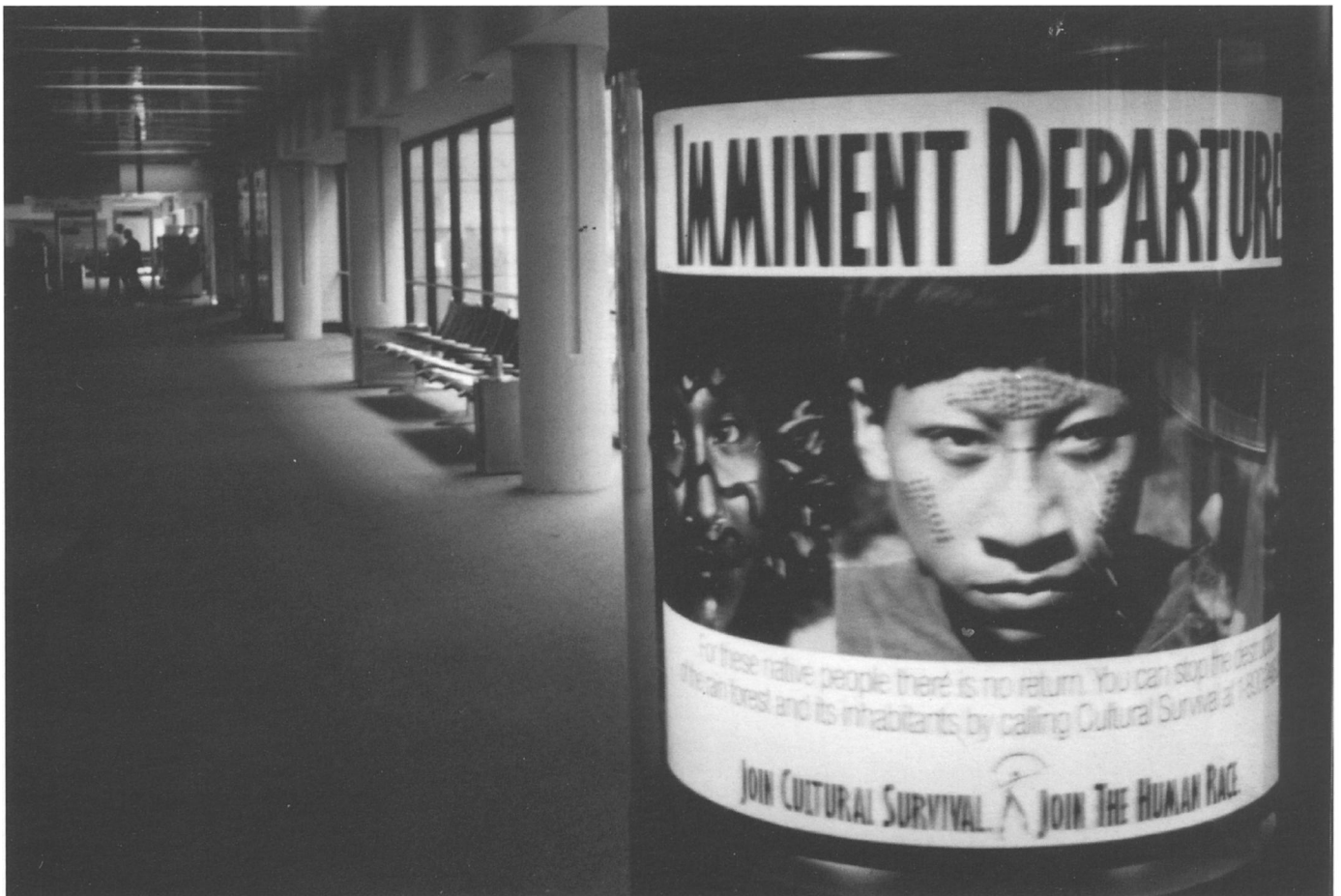
Martha Rosler is an artist, working primarily with photography, text, and video.

You've the effrontery to tell me I must go to Kansas City to get to New Orleans. You people are rewriting geography! You're mad with power.¹

Capitalism and neocapitalism have produced an abstract space that is a reflection of the world of business on both a national and international level, as well as the power of money and the 'politique' of the state. This abstract space depends on vast networks of banks, businesses, and great centers of production. There also is the spatial intervention of highways, airports, and information networks. In this space, the cradle of accumulation, the place of richness, the subject of history, the center of historical space, in other words, the city, has exploded.²

I grew up standing at the front window of New York City subway trains fantasizing an effortless, unencumbered, but noisy flight through the tunnels. As a small child in postwar America I rode the railroad from the East to the Midwest and back, as well as on many shorter adventures, and I developed a typically archaizing love of trains. Unlike absolutely anyone I knew, in my neighborhood where almost no one could afford to own a car, when I was three years old I flew to Chicago with my mother — an ostentatious trip paid for by my profligate aunt; I exulted even over the deafening noise of the propeller as we climbed into the plane from the runway. But for many years thereafter, even as the newly proliferating private automobiles were driving passenger railroads out of business, I did not — except for a recreational helicopter flight — again. As a teenager at the end of the 1950s, I was lucky enough to sail the Atlantic and the Mediterranean on a scholarship voyage. In the



































1960s and 1970s I drove across America a number of times. In the 1970s, when many travelers were already flying, I still couldn't afford it. Instead, I traversed the country in long-distance buses, experiencing the bald regimentation of passengers suggestive of custody for minor crimes — trips which I photographed in black and white. By the end of the decade, though, the art world required a lot of jetting about by artists, for shows or lectures. As an artist whose fare was paid for by various institutions, I finally all but abandoned the buses for airplanes.

I offer this history as typical of the possibilities awaiting an upwardly mobile city dweller in the postwar United States. Air travel was both an entry into and an emblem of a very different world from that of bus stations and ground-level transportation.³ By now, the airport represents entry into the world of “everybody,” those whom mass media, advertisers, and everything else address; the riders of the bus are those others whom time and fortune have forgotten. Long-distance bus travel, like poverty, is not respectable in the United States.⁴

In the past fifteen years, living an artist's life, I have frequently found myself traveling on commercial airlines. I found myself in the company of the besuited and the befurred, of those in trench coats carrying attaché cases and garment bags or those in leisure wear toting skis or pedigreed dogs. I discovered that at many small airports the flyers included the same people who might have been riding the bus.⁵ I changed my black-and-white film for color and my serious 35-millimeter camera for a less weighty pocket version. I became interested in the ephemera and experience of this form of travel, so different in time, space, and (self-) organization from train and, particularly, long-distance bus travel. I flew during crises that stranded travelers for hours while planes were grounded wholesale for investigation of strain points and cracks. I flew during the breaking of PATCO, the association of air-traffic controllers whose crushing marked the opening onslaught of the Reagan administration. I flew during strikes (of airlines other than the ones I was flying, of course) and during the bankruptcies and takeovers occasioned by the cancellation of the antitrust regulations governing the industry. I flew during periods of war and bad weather. And I continue to

fly, and to photograph. I continue, no doubt indefensibly, to resist researching airports much beyond the elements and experiences accessible to the ordinary traveler with ideas in her head and a camera in her hand. In a time in which production in advanced industrial countries is increasingly characterized by metaphors of transmission and flow, I am interested in the movement of bodies through darkened corridors and across great distances but also in the effacement of the experience of such travel by constructs designed to empty the actual experience of its content and make it the carrier of another sort of experience entirely. This totalized representation of air travel and its associated spaces as “a world apart” differs wholly from that of any other form of mass transport.

Walter Benjamin, unexpectedly, ends “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” with a pocket analysis of architecture: “Architecture has never been idle. Its history is more ancient than that of any other art, and its claim to being a living force has significance in every attempt to comprehend the relationship of the masses to art.”⁶ Architecture, Benjamin continues, is “appropriated” not only through sight but through touch; it is experienced by the body as presence, through “distraction,” or habitual use, not through optical contemplation. Lkening the new art of cinema to architecture, he holds out the hope of the education of the senses as a means to combat the fascist aestheticization of politics through spectacle. Despite the focus of his essay on the social effects of photography and film, Benjamin could hardly have anticipated the invention of virtual reality, a computer-simulated “environment” or “architecture” that envelops the spectator in a sensory phantasmagoria of spatial, auditory, and tactile cues — in other words, “experience.” Virtual reality, like the broader conception of a computational environment known as cyberspace, exists more in the promise than in the fulfillment;⁷ but it is not news that in the organization of physical space and the design of buildings in advanced industrial society there are elements that relinquish presence or presentness in favor of signification: the so-called Empire of Signs. Those who seek cyberspace dream the future by literally moving space to the plane of the imaginary.

How far can one advance a discussion of air travel and its

associated spaces, structures, and experiences by broaching the subject of virtual reality? Not far, perhaps. Nevertheless, as the quotation that opens this essay suggests, Henri Lefebvre, followed by a host of commentators, has shown how space is produced by the relations of production, mapping political economy onto the physical world.⁸ Cyberspace, too, although only a simulation, is thrown up by the collective imaginary of late capitalism, a translation of Lefebvre's "abstract space" to an intangible realm. In describing the role of processes of image reproduction in contemporary society, the situationist Guy Debord has argued that "the spectacle" is created by the mode of production and is not a technological accident, not a freely created spectral other world standing against "the real":

The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images. . . . The spectacle cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images. It is, rather, a *Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated. . . . The spectacle, grasped in its totality, is both a result and the project of the existing mode of production.⁹

Ultimately, Debord and Benjamin are on the opposite sides of the question of technological optimism, but in terms of diagnostics, Debord's proposition that "this society which eliminated geographical distance reproduces distance internally as spectacular separation"¹⁰ seems equivalent to Benjamin's concept of fascist aestheticization.

The history of flight is not separate from the history of information management¹¹ — nor from that of image production and, ultimately, of "simulation." The flight simulator was an embryonic start toward virtual reality. Its sensory inputs were multiplied in the interest of training military pilots. As soon as it became practicable, video became part of flight-simulator training, and video and flight simulation have developed in tandem. According to Captain "X," air-traffic controllers, who spend their free time playing video games, are able to handle their jobs only through a process of derealization: if they thought of the radar blips as *planes* with *people* in them they could not last a single day.¹² The recasting of movement as information flow is a consequence of excess complexity. In the brief compass of the present essay, I want to invoke some

features of air travel and airports that, among other things, touch on matters of simulation and representation.¹³ I reiterate that I frame my discussion, however, not from the point of view of an expert, an outside observer, or even a student, but from that of a traveler.¹⁴ That is, a traveler and an artist.

In 1834 the American transcendentalist poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson reported on an English train ride. He described railroad travel as a salutary drug of sorts, disconnecting the traveler from place and loosening the perception of stability — or the stability of perception — with its streaks and blurs of motion and allowing for a new (transcendent) perception of nature:

One has dim foresight of hitherto uncomputed mechanical advantages who rides on the rail-road and moreover a practical confirmation of the ideal philosophy that Matter is phenomenal whilst men & trees & barns whiz by you as fast as the leaves of a dictionary. As our teakettle hissed along through a field of mayflowers, we could judge of the sensations of a swallow who skims by trees & bushes with about the same speed. The very permanence of matter seems compromised & oaks, fields, hills, hitherto esteemed symbols of stability do absolutely dance by you.¹⁵

Back home in the States, railroads were soon extended across the "empty" continent, linking scattered communities and regions. Emerson's technological optimism, encapsulated in his responses to the railroad, gave way to disenchantment. In 1840, six years after his initial euphoria, he wrote, "The railroad makes a man a chattel, transports him by the box & the ton, he waits on it. He feels that he pays a high price for his speed in this compromise of all his will. I think the man who walks looks down on us who ride."¹⁶ Even in his earlier account of the train's perceptual effects, Emerson had noted the habituation to this technological marvel that the English — both travelers and roadside observers — had achieved. A century later Charles Lindbergh lamented his own loss of poetic perception resulting from habituation to flight.

All histories of art's responses to technology invoke the early twentieth-century effusions on modernity offered by the Italian futurists that ended up affirming the technology of death. A well-known passage by Filippo Marinetti,

quoted by Benjamin, celebrates death from the air as wholesaled to Ethiopian villagers in the Italian rehearsal for the Second World War:

War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke from spiraling from burning villages.¹⁷

War — and its pornographic appreciations — helped dampen technological optimism, even among artists, until it was giddily reawakened by the “global village” of post-war communications technology and, more recently, by cyberspace. Such fictive “spaces” made possible by instantaneous transmissions are compensatory for the destabilizations and fragmentations (the clichés of urban life) brought about by the “globalization” of production and of markets. Despite industrial interest in a yet-to-be-realized technology of environmental simulation, at present the play environments of cyberspace are generally being developed by and for restive young men who find few places for mastery among existing social relations.¹⁸ But even today the computer and telecommunications networks that join discontinuous actual places into working units create a functional cyberspace, however primitive and lacking in simulation cues. (It is worth noting here the collision between the detective-fiction cyberpunk underworld of simulation games and the banal space of the operational office interior.) Manfredo Tafuri has noted that “the technological universe is impervious to the *here* and the *there*. Rather, the natural place for its operations is the entire human environment — a pure topological field, as Cubism, Futurism, and Elementarism well understood.”¹⁹ The movements of industry and information that link discrete areas of the world and simultaneously create localized discontinuities in ways of life and daily experience are not most notable for their transitory perceptual effects — particularly those that affect vision and perhaps the sense of balance. Furthermore, there would be nothing surprising in the observation that, once again, the technology of speed represents a flight from

the urban toward an Edenic pastoralism that leaves the losers off the train, immured in the city’s immiserated sprawl. The scale of social and psychic fragmentations occasioned by the globalization of advanced industrial production and distribution is incomparably vaster than those produced by train, plane, or space travel; yet these movements of individuals are symptomatic.

After a century of fascination with the ever-increasing speeds of transportation and information, we find speed alone not especially discomfiting, indeed possibly reassuring. Motion parallax, no longer confusing, is simply another special effect of travel. We have learned to cope with the rapid passage across ground and water, in conveyances powered by complex hidden mechanisms. Jet travel, in contrast, introduces a dislocation or destabilization so complete that it is well to suppress the realization of where one really is in favor of illusion. The technological development of illusionism has adequately kept pace with the technological development of motion, and it appears that those with a taste for imagining the future prefer to do so through simulations rather than through anything as normalized and apparently orderly as jet travel.

The possible euphoria of actually flying, of being in flight, is not capitalized on by those whose business it is to keep us from excessive curiosity or from panic while passengers in commercial aircraft.²⁰ The determinism of speed has no meaning in the sky, and the detachment brought about by the dream of flying helps to organize each person into private space, making us the perfect audience for the in-flight movie, the perfect suckers for the unrelenting babying by cabin attendants. Airlines forgo the opportunity (so far) to beguile travelers with video and flight-simulation games or other electronic flight-related diversions. The illusions that are provided in midair replicate the banalities of everyday life, or worse, the experience of institutionalized infancy in an imperfect womb. The dignity of both passenger and attendant is left at the gate. Confined in spaces so small no one in control of their circumstances would willingly endure them, passengers are pacified by promised diversions of food, drink, movies, music. For the shopping addict in withdrawal on long flights, airlines offer sales of high-end trinkets, perfumes, electronic toys.

As the specialness of air flight — which once gave rise to expectations of special treatment, special food, special entertainment — gives ground to the ordinariness of air travel, the regular passenger does not hesitate to submit to the ordinary fare of homely television, complete with advertisements and “news” reports, in the newly domesticated space in the air. This domestication of air travel is symptomatic of the falling rate of profit in the sky.

Look out the window of the plane during flight. Below is a vague array of generic sights: rivers, mountains, agricultural parcels; towns and cities; cloud cover and horizon. Rising sun, setting sun, a plane or two flying above or below. Except for the occasional wonder of the world, the scene lacks impact; it is dreamlike but without compelling narrative. You might object that a trip across the ocean in a commercial liner is no different, only emptier and longer. But on the ocean one sees the water and the waves, one remembers maps and globes, one recognizes one’s place in a microcosm with a daily round of events, on a voyage that makes no pretense of instantaneity. Flying intimates that there is no journey, only trajectory.²¹ Look at the maps at the back of the airline guide. Arrows dominate the featureless shapes on the map. Less to identify with here than with the image of the globe from outer space. One U.S. airline used to show the image out the cockpit window at takeoff on their DC-10s; do they do so still? It is the rare passenger who pays attention to the cabin attendants’ demonstration of safety equipment, rarer still the one who obediently follows along in the safety guide to emergency exits.²² Better to become absent-minded about such procedures and about where one is.

Denial is as powerful a psychological mechanism in air travel as it is in much of the rest of everyday life. Deny speed and elevation. Deny the thinness of the plane’s aluminum skin that provides warmth, oxygen, protection. Deny the totality of air crashes, the dangers inherent in aging air fleets, the possibility of incompetent or inadequate maintenance. Deny the terror of completely relinquishing control to the hidden men/machines up front. Deny the small chance of hijacking or the larger one of “pilot error.” Deny the absurdity of the space into which you are shoe-horned. But think about this particular physi-

cal space. The bit of social space hurtling through the air that is the airplane is regarded by its masters as very expensive real estate, and the smallest margin of comfort above the outrages of cabin class is expensively obtained. (There is a certain historical irony here, since Le Corbusier referred to airplanes as little flying houses [!] and attempted to adapt some principles of house design and production from aircraft production.) The physical expansiveness of the gasoline-hungry Boeing 747, although more a matter of vista than of bodily allowance, has been supplanted in more recent U.S. airplane production by the crampedness of the more fuel-efficient 757.²³ In terms of comfort, the European airbus is little better, though the Boeing 767 is. Even under the best of circumstances, the commercial airliner is certainly nothing like the ocean liner or even the railroad train, which gather their inhabitants in communal spaces for dining or recreation and do not insist on strapping them to their beds; rather, it is much like the least wonderful specimen of long-distance bus.²⁴

If the plane is like a bus, however, the journey hardly resembles a bus trip,²⁵ although each of these conveyances aspires to a hospital atmosphere under the firm hand of those who control levels of light, noise, or temperature, periods of eating or sleep. But in the plane the smooth-faced attendants are professionals, and there is no getting off this particular “bus,” no physical escape for the duration. In the United States long-distance bus drivers surely regard themselves as stern patriarchs, lecturing their passengers, likely to be working-class travelers and students, about rules and whatever else strikes the driver’s fancy. Pilots may serve, fitfully, as invisible tour guides and weather reporters, but rarely as guards. (As Captain “X” explains, once the captain appears, there is no higher appeal, and if that appearance fails to bring order, what then?) The cabin “stewards” of the airways, although modeled after obsequious servants on old-fashioned pricey ocean liners, also read out and enforce the rules.

As the commercial flight industry developed, the pretty young female nurses of air travel’s beginnings were transformed into smiling beauty queens (sometimes male) with a disposition to serve you food and drink and tuck your little self under a blanket.²⁶ The flight crew called the

women “menu items” and saw them as providers of sexual services. As commercial flying grew older, so did its flight attendants, and the airline owners’ fantasy of docile glamour (“Coffee, tea, or me?”)²⁷ was beaten back by the organization and professionalization of this still overwhelmingly female labor force.

Now that flying is the established mode of travel, the airline industry has made its first tentative overture to the flying public in an attempt to capitalize on a nostalgia similar to that which overtook rail travel, wherein special trains and trips were created for “railroad buffs.” The English entrepreneur Richard Branson (who so far has catered to youth-culture individualists), seeing the link between recorded music and air travel (and sex?), founded both Virgin Records and Virgin Atlantic Airways; he has now begun Vintage Air Tours. At this relatively early date, Branson seeks to create, in effect, a historical theme park in the sky. This isn’t nostalgia for the pioneer days of the Red Baron or Lucky Lindy; this is a yearning for the imaginary unproblematic docility of regularized commercial air travel — and its stewardesses — circa 1940. Destinations appears incidental, but the charter venture will fly between Orlando (site, where else? of Disneyworld) and Key West. Fifty-year-old magazines are provided and attendants wear pillbox hats and seamed stockings. But will it fly?²⁸

Despite distraction and denial, the body cannot escape the mundane physical dangers — or the rather remote catastrophic ones²⁹ — posed by flying, and many affect the crew above all. The frequent changes of time zones and of work schedules upset circadian rhythms (though a recently publicized pill will, it is claimed, somehow adjust the body clock). The food, even in first class, offers poor nutrition, and alcohol consumed in thin, dry air is more intoxicating than an equal amount drunk on the ground. The dryness of the cabin atmosphere disposes to respiratory ills and diseases but also to dandruff. Air travel means exposure to an alarmingly high degree of cancer-causing cosmic radiation: at forty thousand feet, the average exposure is two hundred times greater than at ground level and solar storms can greatly increase the dose.³⁰ Ventilation aboard airplanes is often inadequate because outside air must be heated before it is released into the cabin, which

requires a lot of jet fuel, and therefore many aircraft mix fresh with recirculated air. This recirculation of the cabin atmosphere means repeated exposure to whatever pollutants, pathogens, and vapors may be present, including “side stream” cigarette smoke. Most of the moisture in the air is that expelled by fellow passengers. It is certain that respiratory ailments have been passed around, as cholera has been.³¹ The carbon-dioxide-laden air (at thirty times recommended levels) may precipitate fatal blood clots; less cataclysmically, it causes excessive fatigue and fuzzy-headedness. Atmospheric pressure aloft is typically as low as that at a ground altitude of nine thousand feet. The descent of small planes, even the workhorse Boeing 727s, may bring about motion sickness. As the plane descends, air pressure decreases, and while many passengers may suffer minor ear discomfort, those with colds or blocked eustachian tubes risk severe pain or even burst eardrums. Finally, the plane is itself a disease vector, as the cholera case demonstrates. It has been hypothesized that AIDS was first brought to the New World by an Air Canada steward who contracted HIV in Africa. Because transportation links are multiply redundant, such diseases will inevitably arrive everywhere in fairly short order (or may even have been here already), but it suits the mythology of the present to locate the transmission of HIV aboard a jet. For U.S. crews, one imagines the stress caused by the uncertainty of employment during these deregulation decades, in which takeover artists acquired airlines, leveraged their debt through junk bonds, and sent the airlines into bankruptcy, ridding themselves of unions and wringing concessions from the remaining employees.

For passengers on long flights, aided by the blankness of the environment, the paucity of reasonable pastimes, the heightened effect of alcohol, the poor air, the white noise generated by the engine, the cessation of the stress of running for the plane, of “making one’s connection,” the impulse is to go to sleep. Infatuated couples, mothers and their discomfited infants, people with high metabolisms or active hormones as well as compulsively occupied businessmen — those who can or must ignore the imperative to hibernate — run against the trend. In any case, aggression, along with the body, must be folded into a very small

space. Stewardesses claim to prefer male over female passengers, and their favorite type is the frequent-flyer businessman: the person, in other words, created by the system at hand. Even though the realities of class division and ranks of privilege are replicated on virtually every flight (Virgin Atlantic calls its front-of-the-plane seating "Upper Class"),³² the imaginary ability of those at the back to sit in the more expansive, well-tended front negates the impulse second-class passengers may feel to invade or to destroy.

What defines first-class accommodations on airplanes, where every passenger is a captive? Greater leg and arm room, wider aisles, fewer fellow travelers, quicker deboarding, more convenient and roomier storage space, closer bathrooms, first choice of business publications, excess obsequiousness and pampering by the crew, hot towels, nonproletarian (and almost tolerable) food, salt-and-pepper shakers, and wine from corked bottles rather than the screw-top variety used in the back — that is, the rest — of the plane. (But the likelihood of death during crashes is increased at the front of the plane.) When second-class passengers, allowed entry into the forward first-class precincts through overbooking or by virtue of their frequent flyer "upgrades," caused concern and annoyance among snobs who felt invaded by the less well-dressed or well-behaved, airlines responded by importing an intermediate class from international flights into the domestic schedule, namely, "business class" (*petit bourgeois*?).³³ Upgrades will now allow cabin-class passengers into business class but never into first class, the airlines have pledged. Finally, for those international jet-setters who disdain the company of their social inferiors or who can pay the price for speed, there is the SST, the Concorde. One wonders if its toilets are less revolting at the end of a flight than those on any ordinary long-distance plane.

One of the great blessings of railroad and subsequently plane travel was the inaccessibility it afforded the traveler: no phones. The perpetually plugged-in lower-level executive or criminal of today cannot abandon the telephone, carrying it into restaurants, on the road, and, along with computers and fax machines, into the air.³⁴ Phones are implanted in seat backs on some aircraft. Fax modems will

soon be able to link computers, phones, and land terminals with their flying users; these functions, moreover, will likely be combined in a single pocket-size instrument.³⁵ This telephone slavery completes the circuit of physical passage from point A to point B. As the plugged-in body moves through real space, the plugged-in mind, in the loop of information in transmission, has no respite. How does this condition differ from that of the social offender who, under house arrest, must wear an electronic bracelet? Alternatively, a passenger dons the headphones provided by the cabin attendants or those of a personal Walkman. This otherwise unoccupied interval is thus recast as a duality: produce or consume, work or be distracted (or become inebriated or unconscious). This never-terminated hookup — an ad hoc version of cyberspace, after all — reflects the auditory *horror vacui* of all formerly silent public spaces, from elevators, to restaurants, to dentist's offices, places that used to be without piped-in sound, a condition of auditory freedom now apparently forbidden. An exception is the air terminal, which, unlike the airplane or the telephone "hold" mechanism, has not yet been deemed conveniently colonizable by "easy listening."

Eventually, the plane lands, the traveler arrives. At "major destinations," airport traffic, on the ground and in the air, is often congested. Airports are planned yesterday and built today to serve tomorrow's planes arriving and departing at tomorrow's volume. In the United States only one new airport, in Denver, has been built in decades, partly because of the difficulties of convincing local communities to accept the disruption of ground and air traffic. As with roadways, adequate planning is almost impossible because the future of aviation cannot be properly forecast, based as it is on geopolitical and business trends rather than merely on the logic of technological change (and indeed, the Denver airport, still unfinished in 1994 and vastly over budget, appears to be a costly mistake, but one that cannot be criticized because the mayor who pushed it through, Federico Peña, is now the U.S. Secretary of Transportation). Overcrowded airports mean periodically clogged terminals, delayed departures and arrivals, heavy road traffic, crowded airspace.³⁶ Captain "X" blames air congestion not on planes but on communication: "The real problem is

radio congestion. We're flying near Mach 1 [the speed of sound] while using old-fashioned voice communication."³⁷

In the United States, the air-travel market was given free reign by the deregulation process begun in the late 1970s and strengthened in the 1980s by Reaganist policies.³⁸ But the deregulation of American carriers, while allowing many former bus riders to fly, also forced most travelers to spend longer on the plane and in the terminal, for during this period the airlines extensively developed the "hub" system of organization. In the hub system each airline is based at a particular city, seldom one that is a likely destination for many passengers — such as Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina. Passengers must first fly to this city and then, usually by changing planes, fly to their destination city.³⁹ Because of the local monopoly, people who begin or end their trips at the hub city must pay higher-than-average prices. Others pay the price of boredom or stress, waiting for or running to catch the connecting flight. Because most air-travel accidents occur during takeoffs and landings, increasing the stops en route also increases the physical risks. (New classes of privilege are constantly being created, including the ability to fly the shortest and most direct way without stopping en route or changing planes.) Cutbacks in service to unprofitable locales force people onto the small, more dangerous "commuter" planes. Fares are also often significantly higher to small cities than to higher-volume destinations. The airline industry is now poised on the brink of genuine globalization: in the United States, in late 1992, with the proposed interlocking and eventual merger of Northwest with KLM and USAir with British Airways, the first moves were made toward the formation of international airlines operating out of "megahubs."⁴⁰

Far from participating in a grand display of arrivals and departures, air passengers are politely hustled onto and off of their planes, preferably through narrow "jetways" that channel them from terminal to plane or vice versa. These elevated walkways share something with the elevated shopping arcades, or skywalks, of malled-in America. It is the denial of the space below, the space that surrounds them, their demarcation of separateness and privileged passage, the nature of the (dis)embarkation. Were we, understandably, to apprehend these passageways as con-

duits to a netherworld, we might locate the space of the plane as the bowels of the earth: invoking the crossing of Charon, a plane flight becomes an encounter with death. Or the bowels of the body: the airport itself can be seen as a series of blind passages and darkened tubules along whose walkways passengers move peristaltically. Out on the field, the airplane, with its female name, lies quiescent, serviced by shuttling fuel tankers and "honey wagons," food trucks and cargo carriers. These evocations of the body are the closest approach to the female in the phallocratic regime of flight.⁴¹ That it calls to mind structures of domination replicates the relationship of air travel to the land, to the sky, and to the earth itself.

The airport suggests the meeting point of theories of time and of space, of schedules and of mappings. The airport is a multidimensional, multifunctional system whose overriding concerns are operational. To state the obvious, airport design requires the consideration of a set of flow trajectories in vertical space, a dimension normally regarded as more or less stable. The most intensive period of airport construction coincided with the ideology of a stripped-down functionalist modernism. It would be interesting to compare airports built in the early postwar period with those built more recently, when the dominant metaphors of flow dynamics have shifted from water to information. Airports, unlike railroad terminals, are located not in the heart of an urban milieu but on the peripheries and so are not subject to the same kinds of siting and façade considerations as other major structures. Further, they are often under the control of different agencies from those responsible for town or city planning. Falling into the realm of the technocrat, they do not encode capital the way large urban structures do.⁴² Since the airport is conceived of as a web of functionalities, the idea of an architecturally imposing gateway structure, while certainly present, is secondary. The conception of the façade is also altered by the possibility that ground travelers may, in the best circumstances, approach airports not from roads but from trains, preferably underground — though this is rarely so in the United States. Increasingly, they are approached solely by air travelers getting off one plane only to get on another. That the airport venerates technical efficiency, rather than the interests of the state or the

public, has resulted in structures whose experiencing subjects are atomized. Inside the terminal buildings, each atomized subject is in fact the same consumer created by other commercial transactions: an irrationalist, operating in the realm of desire.

Even excluding retail and other land-side services, the terminal at a major airport is a typically schizophrenic space, given over to the instrumentalities of schedules and movement (as well as the equal imperative of pacification). As a site of commercial exchange, the airport consists of terminal, hangar, and airstrip (runways, taxiways, and ramps) along with ancillary buildings and access routes, a complex system of structures around which flows an endless cycle of production, construction, demolition, maintenance, and other forms of labor. The airport is implicated in this mesh of customs and ticketing procedures, this trafficking of fuel, cargo, baggage, food, merchandise, cash, and mail.⁴³ The volume of air freight at commercial airports is likely to be greater than that of passenger travel. Kennedy Airport has an “animalport” and huge cold-storage lockers. Stationed at every airport are fleets of ground vehicles, including those for emergencies. The airport as passenger destination provides an array of services, the most fundamental of which may be toilets, telephones, and food, as well as access to air and ground transportation. At large airports, the passenger terminal is further served by passenger pick-up and drop-off areas, parking lots for private vehicles, bus and taxi stops, rental agencies, and internal transportation routes. Of course, the notion of the terminal as a passageway for travelers vies with the conception of it as a city on a hill, an enclave amid wastelands. Many international airports offer lodging, meeting rooms and clubs, health centers, medical and dental services, even supermarkets.⁴⁴ Singapore’s Changi Airport advertises its “city within an airport.”

All the while, the bulk of the airport labor force remains invisible to visitors.⁴⁵ Executive offices house the administrative staff. The control tower holds the famous yet unseen air-traffic controllers — flow masters in whom the public mind has accumulated all the stress associated with flying so that it can be expunged from the image of pilot and passenger alike. Inside as well as outside, in interior

tunnels and machine spaces, in unfinished cubicles behind nubby-carpeted passageway walls, pushing baggage on and off wagons and conveyor belts, running X-ray machines, news shops and food kiosks, driving little vehicles, pushing cleaning carts up and down the halls or engaged in cleaning, changing bulbs, fixing escalators, or doing carpentry, terminal workers enter in and out of passengers’ sight. Airport workers, like in-flight workers, wear quasi-military uniforms, from officer to grunt. Most are local residents who virtually never get off the ground.

Except for a few high-profile terminals, the airport may not be usefully described in terms of “architecture.” Airports reflect the thinking of engineers, underlining the historic split that turned architects into a profession of more or less willing mandarins. While the airport does not escape its conception as a system composed of a linked series of operational “modules” — a term interestingly incorporated not only into the lexicon of space travel but also that of the “architecture” of the computer “environment” — it is useful to elide the distinction between architected and engineered space.⁴⁶ Architecturally, the airline terminal is conceived as a hangar or shed. Many terminals celebrate the functionality of glass and steel, elements not only considered essential to the construction of the terminal itself but thought to signal the fabric of the plane and the very act of navigation. Façade elements are deemphasized in favor of an interior often defined by glass but without the triumphalism of the Crystal Palace; many airline terminals forgo even an orientation outward. Central areas or concourses range from the humdrum to the grandiose, with little in-between. Huge aimless spaces are marked off by rope-and-stanchion arrays to keep order among those lined up at ticket counters. Away from the central hall, acoustic tile in grim tracks, self-effaced flooring, fluorescent-lit low-ceilinged corridors are ubiquitous. The accountant and the crowd-control manager are the gods supplicated within.

In most airports there is no immediately intuitive logic to the terminal layout, which is often described in terms of “fingers.” Such biomorphic analogies notwithstanding, the fingers may be on far too many “hands” to make obvious sense. You get off a plane and rush to catch another. Frequently, the departure gate is far away. You race along the

fingers to a different bay. You run along or ride on a moving walkway or you ride in a cart or in a wheelchair. (The suspicion lingers that the architect and the terminal owner harbor a certain satisfaction at showing off the whole property to the captive audience of travelers.) This mystification of place and space appears to conflict with the operational aim of routing people efficiently. Passengers are directed by reductive signage no more inflected than road signs (though the latter are meant to be grasped at high speed). In the airport as in a giant shopping mall or an immense natural history museum, an aerial schematic map tells you, "You are here."

At Kennedy Airport, Eero Saarinen's biomorphic 1962 TWA terminal, while attempting an inspiring interior, is probably more comprehensible from the air than on the ground.⁴⁷ At Chicago's O'Hare Airport — America's busiest — Helmut Jahn's celebrated late-1980s United Airlines terminal organizes our perceptions in a straight-ahead interior runway with a big sky. If the great nineteenth-century railway terminals created a pseudosacral public space that soared meaningfully upward, the United terminal is a mausoleumlike reminder of individual insignificance. (And that authoritarian black-and-white checkerboard floor!) But Jahn, although predictably megalomaniacal, can be held accountable only for his design, not for its emptiness.⁴⁸ Underground, those passing from one concourse to another are enfolded in an astounding fun house of serially flashing neon lights and overhead reflections flanked by backlit pastel walls of molded plastic curves. Filling the ears is an a cappella sound mix of abstract melodic phrases studded with directives and warnings such as "walk! walk!" and "walkway ends! walkway ends!" enunciated by a perky female voice. I do not whether this extravagant fairyland has colonized the dim tunnels through which I had in past years seen homeless people pushing their carts or whether that stygian space still exists in some other territory of O'Hare underground.

Like the airplane itself, the airport is not organized as a signifying space that creates a public — unless we accept their message equally to be docility, homogeneity, replaceability, and transitoriness. This is a "public" constituted only as a regulated flow. The internal spaces of air-

line terminals preclude collectivity or immanence. The seats in most waiting areas are individual buckets screwed to the floor in rigid patterns that, in an effort to prevent sleeping, enforce isolation.⁴⁹ Terminals are full of television monitors, and full of people gazing at them. Some list arrivals and departures, some broadcast television shows, and some are "personal" sets attached to molded plastic chairs into whose space a person slips, feeds a coin, and takes her choice. In the airport disembodied voices give instructions. I heard a midwestern airport manager describe the monorail between terminals at his airport: The vehicles must come and go rapidly, since each is programmed to arrive within ninety seconds of the departure of the previous one. But people tended to hold open the doors for stragglers. At first, a recorded male voice admonishing riders to enter and allow the doors to close was tried, but it was soon ignored by travelers. A female voice was tried with similar effect. At present, an artificially generated voice like that of the computer Hal in the movie *2001* is used, and it works. The machine exercises its own authority. In the United States, despite pseudo-sidewalk cafés complete with umbrellas under the terminal roof, the airport is so far removed from the model of the public plaza that the fundamental right to solicit money or to hand out political and religious leaflets was uniformly denied until reinstated by the Supreme Court. In this effort at a tidy order free of political or religious displays, airport authorities have revealed their conception of the facility as a private space much like a store or home.⁵⁰ "Public spaces" are rethought here as "nonprivate" spaces, spaces of consumption and control or spaces of disorder, characterized by homelessness, crime, vehicular traffic.

In countries less dominated by the reign of commodities, in the peripheral reaches of the Empire of Signs, the totalization of the airport as a singular unified space is less advanced. In Johannesburg, commercial signage is minimal, the modest bit of art is commemorative bronze statuary, and passengers ascend and descend the planes via staircases moved onto the runway. This is a society in which consumers know themselves, and the state has other preoccupations than facilitating consumption. (Tourism is another matter: there is a full-scale replica of

a Dutch Colonial façade in one corner of the high-ceilinged terminal, behind which tourist information/propaganda is retailed to travelers.) Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow has recently come under contract from some European company or other and there have appeared a few gigantic electrically lit signs announcing duty-free shops and glassed-in display kiosks of electronic goods. All commercial signs are, of course, in English. The balance of the terminal is shrouded in gloom, and the processing of passengers is archaic, bureaucratic, paranoiac. The duty-free shop as yet stands alone as the mirage of capitalism.

A new terminal at USAir's hub in Pittsburgh contains a shopping mall (with regular mall prices, not the usual extortionate air-terminal prices), apparently still the only model to which an air terminal can aspire. (European airport shops tend toward the upscale boutique; less democratic?) The huge terminal also offers a "meditation room" designed by a New York artist with works by other internationally known artists, among them Robert Morris.⁵¹ Many U.S. airports incorporate art, much of it mandated under municipal "percent-for-art" programs. A *New York Times* article called attention to the huge differential in size between the potential audiences at airports and at museums.⁵² Unconcerned with the issue of airports as private property, the *Times* treats these works as examples of public art. It compares O'Hare airport's sixty million passengers and uncounted other visitors in 1990 to the four and a half million who visited New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in the same year. The elision of the difference between travelers passing art works and (paying) visitors to a traditional museum tells. What also tells is the article's description of a planned Baudrillardian simulation in the Denver hub in the Rockies: "the facility will use its multi-million-dollar art budget to bring the essence of Colorado to the many transfer passengers who never venture outside the airport. Among innovations planned are a light sculpture that will cast changing Colorado cloud formations onto an atrium roof, and a sixty-foot-long water sculpture reproducing nearby mountain landscapes." The terminal earnestly approaches the status of the enormous room, the prison-house of culture, described by people as diverse as e. e. cummings and Theodor Adorno.

This conception of the airport as museum is municipally imposed and does not follow the logic of the resident airlines, which naturally want to colonize our minds with notions of big and little trips. The works of art — often screwed to the wall like fire hoses in thick Plexiglas cases — generally seem negligible, out of place, absorbed into the "architecture" like inexplicable "beauty marks" or eruptions on its office-interior skin. Airlines, as I have suggested, want terminals to be more like virtual than actual spaces. Airport corridors are generally no better lit than the average department store, with similar intentions: to cast us inward to the psychological space of desire. In the airport, desire is always infinitely deferred and meaning is elsewhere and otherwise. Back-lit photographs lure us to Tahiti or Cincinnati (unless we are in Tahiti or Cincinnati), to Disneyland or the Eiffel Tower, to Marlboro Country, to the remote land of outmoded forms of transportation, or to the land of financial accumulation, telephones, and computers — sometimes simultaneously. Photographs even remind travelers of the existence of other planets, all equal possibilities for fantasy destinations, all for some reason more interesting than the view awaiting the flyer outside the window of the terminal or the plane.

This sameness blanketing the world to uneven depths (and with however many rents in the fabric), this global neoimperialism, reassures and defeats the traveler. The crippling comforts of the advanced world appear in many guises in far-flung locales. No news here; this has been true for a century or more. But the businessman linked to global networks never shucks these bonds, no matter how invisible and revocable they seem. Everywhere is anywhere when you retain the means to "phone (or fax or modem) home" at will. Then there is no "there" there. As Debord puts it: "The economic organization of visits to different places is already in itself the guarantee of their equivalence. The same modernization that removed time from the voyage also removed from it the reality of space."⁵³ Photography and the creation of (commodified) space, which share a common origin, continue to develop together; preservation efforts, always a project of elites, are being carried forward via electronic digitization of images, the latest linkage of photography and computerization.⁵⁴

If at the airport profit and crowd control are the prime movers, surveillance is the constant practice. Surveillance may or may not be accomplished with the aid of hidden cameras, as in urban luxury high-rises or government buildings. There is always in place some dangerous and invasive Other to be invoked, and the entire international air-travel system now appears organized around the specter of the international terrorist, a sufficient excuse for the remilitarization of flight.⁵⁵ Especially in certain European capitals, terrorist explosives must be guarded against.⁵⁶ Yet ordinary armored-car robbers of airport payrolls,⁵⁷ not to mention organized-crime extortionists as well as petty criminals like baggage thieves and pickpockets, are more likely to be the interlopers at American airports. Thieves and those with no homes. One effort of policing terminals is to prevent homeless people from seeking shelter at the airport.⁵⁸ In this task, U.S. airport managers are fortunate, because airports, unlike ground-transportation terminals, are located well away from urban downtowns. O'Hare is one of the few that can be easily reached by rail from the city.

The airport, like the modern corporate space, cleanly embodies Foucault's observations on the ways in which information is used to organize and control people. Information, a necessity for every traveler, is not easily obtained. With any change in schedules or plans, whether caused by accident, mechanical failure, bomb threat, or weather, the system breaks down and the flow of passengers stops. The oldest model of bureaucracy — information constriction, information sadism — takes over. Your plane begins to taxi down the runway but for some reason it turns back to the gate. Told almost nothing, you are left sitting for an hour in the darkened, unventilated plane; maybe you are asked to step back out into the terminal. Or you hear about a paralyzing storm before leaving for the airport. You attempt to telephone your airline. After an interminable period on hold, you are told by a bored clerk that he or she "knows nothing." It is, of course, impossible to obtain the number of the airline or anyone else at the actual airport. You arrive there to discover that your flight has been delayed indefinitely. People are standing in long lines or in clumps trying to find out what is happening, with scant effort at cooperation from the airline employees, who stand

behind counters, manipulating computer terminals and declining to make eye contact. Hours pass. Food and drink are rarely offered, hotel accommodations only in extreme circumstances. But regardless of the nature of the emergency, information is as far as possible withheld.⁵⁹

On the other hand, the search for *impersonal* information on the part of the authorities extends to a microscopic level. High-technology bomb detectors, "thermal neutron analyzers," have been announced as being readied to search luggage at international gateways in the hunt for plastic explosives. (This announcement was made to placate the families of the people killed in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, but the reality is that the machines tested so far don't work.)⁶⁰ More routinely, all hand luggage (and much checked baggage) is scrutinized by means of X-ray machines and hand inspections, and passengers must pass through magnetic metal detectors or be physically searched. At another level, customs and immigration officers inspect passengers and documents to apprehend and turn back illegal entrants. And at international gateways, at least in the United States, extraordinary measures are taken in the search for illegal drugs. Dogs accompany customs agents in cargo areas. Drugs have been uncovered in the structural spaces of airplanes and in the luggage of flight crews. Passengers on suspect flights are detained and searched, sometimes X-rayed for swallowed condoms or balloons of cocaine or heroin and held in custody until their bowels are voided.⁶¹ (True story: detained passenger balks, waiting customs agent falls asleep, balloon bursts, detainee dies.) The people employed as drug couriers represent a theatrical sectioning of the population, with the cast of the hour never knowable in advance: sometimes the "mules" are women with small children, sometimes very young girls, sometimes middle-aged women, sometimes old people, making the job of customs inspectors perhaps less boring. Planes and passengers from suspect places — most of Latin America, Jamaica, Nigeria — are heavily scrutinized. When in 1990 an Avianca plane flying in from Columbia with seventy-three people aboard crashed at Kennedy, out of fuel because it was kept circling during a busy period, it was rumored (probably falsely) that the plane was kept

aloft to satisfy customs' requirements for a clear stretch of time in which to search the plane and the passengers, and probably the crew, for drugs.

When catastrophe befalls a plane carrying a large number of Americans, when such a plane crashes or blows up, routine is left behind. Along with emergency services, news and information are marshaled for various purposes.⁶² The machinery of containment is deployed by the airline and the state, human-interest stories are written and grief is exploited by news agencies, blame is sought as a cathartic act. With crashes of international flights, the rationalist efforts of state agencies are offset by sudden suspicion of conspiracy and secret terror. Pilot error, the preferred explanation,⁶³ is not particularly reassuring to travelers, traffic-controller mistakes or mechanical failure even less so. Foreign acts of aggression may suit state purposes. Worst are the suspicions or confirmation of sabotage. Sabotage, formerly perpetrated by persons seeking life-insurance gains, is now inescapably the purview of international terrorists, almost all Islamic. Mass paranoia, generally repressed, rages around such incidents, fueled by the families of victims, who brush aside explanations offered by the state. As time passes, the families' dragnet is cast wider and wider, invoking hidden plots and counterplots by intelligence and other, unnamed clandestine forces, involving explosives and drug smuggling, agents and double agents. This was as true of the Soviet downing of KAL flight 007 over Sakhalin in 1983 as of the still-unresolved bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988 and the crash of the U.S. military charter flight over Gander, Newfoundland, in 1985.

What of the airport as a gross physical, a geographic, entity? The airport's presence on the land is generally that of a wound near water. Airports serving large cities are often many miles from town, and the Cincinnati, Ohio, airport (so designated) is located in Kentucky. Airports are tremendous colonizers, turning the land they occupy and the surrounding areas into wasteland. As a city effaces the ground on which it stands, the airport bulldozes and flattens out the spaces of nature. It brings the land as close as possible to a condition of perfection in which geometry has conquered diversity or incident. As in Isaiah, every valley is exalted and every mountain brought low. But

unlike the time of the second coming and unlike the space of the city, the airport remains a gash immured in temporality. Air travel wrecks more than the land on which the airport sits; in addition to the chemical pollutants inevitably introduced into the surrounding landscape, human and animal life in a wide area is disturbed by airport noise. (But money talks, and pilots are often required to loop about in the air, giving up a direct route in or out of the airport to preserve the quiet of wealthy homeowners below.)⁶⁴ Land values around airports and below flight paths are depressed and the working-class dwellers of these neighborhoods are annoyed and sometimes even killed.⁶⁵ In 1978 in San Diego (where the airport is actually right in town, a situation growing out of San Diego's character as a city wholly formed by and for the military) an incoming Pacific Southwest Airlines plane with one hundred forty-four aboard clipped a small plane also approaching this very dangerous airport. Both planes fell, setting ablaze a long swath of small houses in the immediate neighborhood. In 1992, in Amsterdam's suburban Bijlmermeer district, an unknown number, originally estimated as over a hundred, of poor immigrants of color, many from former Dutch colonies such as Surinam and Aruba, were killed when an El Al cargo plane taking off from Schiphol crashed into a pair of high-rises situated along the flight path, at the undesirable outskirts of town.

Airports, like all modernizing modalities, serve the needs of capital above all and leach away resources from those who are not integrated at a sufficiently high level into the political economy. Airports, highly valued real estate, devalue the real estate around them. And airports, like shopping malls and other spaces of social formation, are both symptomatic and productive of a shrunken public space, a space that no longer adequately functions as a genuine accumulator and circulator of persons and ideas but rather of consumers and non-consumers, or threats to consumption. Just as car ownership is presumed to be "universal," so too, the ubiquity of air travel underdevelops more modest forms of transportation such as the train and the bus. Some urban areas, like St. Louis, sink millions into light-rail lines to the airport while neglecting internal transport in the highly segregated city. Lefebvre again:

Abstract space reveals its oppressive and repressive capacities in relation to time. It rejects time as an abstraction — except when it concerns work, the producer of things and of surplus value. Time is reduced to constraints of space: schedules, runs, crossings, loads.

Time has disappeared in the social space of modernity. . . . Economic space subordinates time, whereas political space eradicates it because it is threatening to existing power relations. The primacy of the economic, and still more, of the political, leads to the supremacy of space over time.⁶⁶

A grand reconception of the entire Kennedy Airport, which would have involved building an immense central terminal (designed by Henry Cobb of Pei Cobb Freed) in the midst of the existing scattered terminals, was commissioned in 1984 and scrapped in 1990; the next couple of years saw recriminations over moneys already spent by the Port Authority on even the barest traffic-flow improvements. The reigning paradigm always casts its meanings back through time; wherever possible these meanings are newly embodied in social practices, in the landscape, on the face of the city and its structures. On the way to the commuter railroad that takes me to work from within the “new” Pennsylvania Station in New York City, an enormous, hideous pit with low-ceilinged, dreary areas uncomfortable in every detail, I pass a series of photographs of the old Beaux Arts Pennsylvania Station (McKim, Mead & White, 1906–10) razed by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1963. The face presented to the street — the architect’s face — meant to replicate the Roman Baths of Caracalla, was that of monumental classicism and stability. Inside, at track level, the traveler encountered a paean to engineering, a Crystal Palace of soaring steel. Without romanticizing the “lost” edifice, one may still invoke this grand advertisement for capital as the epitome of the public space, the physically embodied metaphor of an imperial people — as is the still-standing Grand Central Terminal on the other side of town. In these terminals one realizes oneself, for good or ill, as part of a totality. By contrast, in the airport, the space on which the new Penn Station clearly is modeled, everything and everyone is weightless, anomic, and the appeal is to consumerism over sociality.⁶⁷ There is no middle ground between imperial citizenship and the vacuum. As one descends the escalators of the

contemporary Penn Station, one is confronted by an enormous panoramic lighted advertisement that appears too close. There are no other signifiers of importance. In comparing the two terminals, there is hardly any need to ask oneself, “Where would I rather be standing?”⁶⁸

In 1978 Grand Central Terminal (Warren & Wetmore, architect; Reed & Stern, engineer, 1910–13) was saved by New York’s Landmarks Preservation Commission, which had to pursue its owner, the near-bankrupt Penn Central Railroad, all the way to the Supreme Court to keep it from knocking the terminal down in favor of a tall office building.⁶⁹ In 1989 the tremendous lighted Kodak “Colorama” sign, a unitary image of Americana in place for forty years, was removed as not in keeping with the terminal’s plan.⁷⁰ One may draw one’s own conclusions about “preservation” values from this — but not without acknowledging that both terminals, the carceral and the grand, house populations of people who would otherwise have to sleep in the street. Their passage across the landscape is in inverse proportion to the speed of those above them. The space created by capital perpetually recreates its own underworld, its own space of “underdevelopment” and immobility, its own wasteland. Gertrude Stein has written:

The twentieth century is a century which sees the earth as no one has ever seen it, the earth has a splendor that it never has had, and as everything destroys itself in the twentieth century and nothing continues, so then the twentieth century has a splendor which is its own and Picasso is of this century, he has that strange quality of an earth that one has never seen and of things destroyed as they have never been destroyed.⁷¹

How is it that we are confronted with a choice between the intrusive reminders of capital’s aspirations toward total domination and the blank-eyed emptiness of anywhere/nowhere?

Notes

1. The words of an irate traveler in Arthur Hailey's best-selling novel *Airport* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 20–21.
2. Henri Lefebvre, "Space: Social Product and Use Value," in J. W. Freiberg, ed., *Critical Sociology* (New York: Irvington, 1979), 285–95. Compare the passage from *La Production de l'espace* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1974) as it appears in a new translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 51: "Capitalism and neocapitalism have produced abstract space, which includes the 'world of commodities,' its 'logic' and its worldwide strategies, as well as the power of money and that of the political state. This space is founded on the vast network of banks, business centres and major productive entities, as also on motorways, airports and information lattices. Within this space the town — once the forcing-house of accumulation, fountainhead of wealth and centre of historical space — has disintegrated."
3. In the late 1960s, struck by the growing hegemony of air travel, I produced some collages with airplane themes. One four-by-six-foot collage was based on aerial photographs of International Style cities and airports around the globe. I filled the sky above this everywhere town with airplanes high and low and surrounded the enclaves with bulldozed earth. Although no bombs and no destruction were in evidence in this work, the image of the B-52 haunted this, the Vietnam War, period.
4. Tour buses are another matter entirely.
5. It wasn't until later that I figured out that deregulation of transportation, which had made air travel accessible to the bus riders, also made it necessary, since so many bus routes were abolished along with the competition. And still later, I realized that many bus riders' time in the air market would be relatively brief, as short-hop fares rose precipitously.
6. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1939), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 240.
7. The term "virtual reality" was coined by one of its inventors and promoters, Jaron Lanier. At present, participation in this simulated body of experiences, which is being developed in conjunction with the military-industrial academic complex, generally involves donning goggles or a helmet equipped with tiny video monitors and a glove containing sensory elements that together allow the wearer to see, touch and manipulate objects not present in the same space or not existing in the real world. The synchronicity and multiplicity of these cues serve to "inform" the experiencing subject that s/he is "in" this other space. The term "cyberspace," as is now well known, was coined by the science-fiction writer William Gibson in the mid-1980s in his *Neuromancer* future-dystopia novels and refers to a vision of an entire world based on computer simulations. There is a certain irony to the fact that these nightmarish and paranoid visions of a future far more bleak and disorienting than Orwell's 1984 are likely to be realized through the intervention of the military. For visions of this future unencumbered by such dark speculations, see, among other sources, Michael Benedikt, ed., *Cyberspace: First Steps* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991). Benedikt is a professor of architecture; the book is inflated, but less annoyingly so than Howard Rheingold's breathless *Virtual Reality* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991). The military, the aircraft industry, the entertainment industry, the architecture/real estate industry, and advocates for the disabled are particularly interested in virtual reality.
8. The production-driven progression of metaphor making was dramatically underscored in the summer of 1992 by the official opening by the administration in Washington of the "information superhighway," the newly capitalized road to the intertwined information-based technologies of the future. We have yet to hear where it will be located on the map of labor, on the one hand, and of profitability, on the other.
9. Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (1967), translated as *The Society of the Spectacle*, rev. ed. (Detroit: Black & Red, 1977), props. 4–6.
10. *Ibid.*, prop. 167.
11. On the most concrete level, commercial flying was kept financially aloft by its national and international transport of the mail.
12. See Captain "X" and Reynolds Dodson, *Unfriendly Skies: Revelations of a Deregulated Airline Pilot*, (New York: Doubleday, 1989). The captain is a pilot for a commercial U.S. airline. To avoid mistaken impressions caused by my linking the discussion of virtual reality with his comments, I stress that the pilot's book evidences not the least interest in flight simulation or virtual reality.
13. My experience is limited largely to North American airports and airlines and a number of mostly western European ones, though my experience in Russia and with Aeroflot reveals a number of differences that just now appear to be giving way to capitalist cost-accounting and marketing techniques. On another note, although some airports (the St. Louis airport and San Diego's Lindbergh Field, for example) make much of the relationship between flight and fight, I will pay little attention here to the relationship between military aircraft and hardware, space exploration, and commercial aviation, except to note the intertwining of military and civil aircraft development and the ancillary command, control, and communication systems. This all-pervasive relationship is of a piece with the rest of the military-industrial-academic domination of postwar life.
14. About the design of planes, for example, I know little beyond the immediately observable. The ubiquitous "streamlining" of the utopian 1930s was borrowed from aeronautical theory as actualized in ships, planes, and dirigibles and subsequently extended to high-speed trains. It was then adapted to home furnishings and appliances. "Speed," wrote Norman Bel Geddes — along with Raymond Loewy an indefatigable formulator and popularizer of the streamline style — "is the cry of our era, and greater speed one of the goals of tomorrow" (Norman Bel Geddes, *Horizons* [1932]; quoted in Richard Guy Wilson, Dianne H. Pilgrim, and Dickran Tashjian, *The Machine Age in America, 1918–1941* [New York: The Brooklyn Museum and Harry N. Abrams,

1986], 125). Streamline styling, an evocation of speed rather than a functional necessity, had a greater influence on the plane's interior than on its exterior and was most comfortable producing fortresslike, inward-looking interiors, windowed with glass brick instead of clear glazing. But streamlining, along with the religion of progress that it symbolized, is past history. An astounding remnant, perhaps a 1950s moderne reworking of the style, is the air-traffic controllers' tower at La Guardia, oldest of New York's commercial airports, which rises like the sepal of a flower, swelling tumescingly upward to a windowed top much broader than its base and covered along its sharply curved shaft with a myriad of tiny windows. The more subdued utilitarian functionalism of the 1960s was made homey in the 1970s. By the 1980s it was "doodadded" up with minor evocations of opulence. My favorite airplane décor accent of the period was a line drawing of a castle woven into the napless carpeting that covered a bulkhead wall.

15. Emerson's journal entries are cited and discussed in John Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776–1900* (New York: Grossman, 1976), 114–16. See also Leo Marx's classic work, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). Kasson also invokes Charles Lindbergh's description of his first plane flight: "Trees become bushes, barns, toys; . . . I lose all conscious connection with the past. I live only in the moment in this strange, unmortal space, crowded with beauty, pierced with danger."

16. Ibid., 116–18.

17. Filippo Marinetti; quoted in

Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 241–42. I am leaving out Marinetti's, and others', celebration of the speed of automobiles because I am concentrating here on multipassenger vehicles driven by "professionals."

18. One wonders what the implications are of the fact that when the industry in question is information transmission, technological development may originate in fantasy projection, in the space of desire, rather than in "reality"-oriented problem solving. Magic versus science, the predictable antipodean choices. For a consideration of the encoding of computational space as private (real) property, see the discussion of "hacking" as trespassing versus the computer invader as "a polite country rambler" traversing "picturesque fields," in Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits* (London: Verso, 1991), 82ff.

19. Manfredo Tafuri, "The Crisis of Utopia: Le Corbusier at Algiers," in *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976), 129.

20. The airline industry, like the auto industry, initially chose to focus consumers' attention away from the technological in favor of strictly ancillary issues — styling in the case of cars, various forms of pampering in the case of planes. The increased competition for (especially business) travelers did, however, spur airlines to compete in terms of one real-world, although still abstract, consideration, namely, on-time statistics, as well as, inevitably, the all-too-real question of fares. While the statistics are not easily

decipherable, the fare "structure" is subject to manipulation rivaling that of computerized stock-market trading and is full of deceptive advertising and gimmickry.

21. On transoceanic flights, many European airlines display a cartoonlike arc and plane over a city-marked map on the on-board monitors when other programming is not being shown.

22. On some airlines, including Lufthansa, this demonstration is carried out not by the living attendants — safety officers, Ralph Nader calls them — but by the images of such persons on the on-board monitors.

23. At the same time, in response to the recession in the airplane (and aerospace) industry, Boeing, the world's largest such company, and the four largest European companies are moving toward jointly building an eight-hundred-seat passenger jet. Fittingly, this "superjumbo" would primarily service links to Asia from the United States and Europe, and there is some likelihood that Japanese manufacturers would be included in a joint-production venture. One wonders whether airport runways and terminals would have to be adapted to accommodate the Superjumbo.

24. Despite some efforts at distinctive painting or image building (including the Wagnerian image cultivated by British Airways advertising under the aestheticizing proclivities of Saatchi & Saatchi), the airplane does not match the majestic image of either the big ship or the long-distance train. At best, to stick with metaphor, the plane is likely to call to mind a tiny vessel lost in vastness, a storm-tossed boat rather than the iceberg monolith of a big ship with its deep air horns.

25. Oddly, an English computer-artist friend told me that his brother, a commercial airline pilot who began his career in the military, complained that flying commercial jets was just like driving a bus. His main complaint was that technology was usurping too many of his decisions.

26. It appears that the first attendants were male baggage handlers, but an enterprising executive at Boeing, as a public-relations maneuver, developed the idea of recruiting young nurses for the job. The conversion of a male to a female workforce is typical of the second, or take-off, stage of a mass-service industry and follows the pattern of the secretarial, banking, and telephone industries.

27. A recent incarnation of this geisha fantasy is the cloyingly saccharine Singapore Girl, the advertising persona of Singapore Airlines.

28. See "The Perfect Transport for a Flight of Fantasy," *New York Times*, 4 December 1992.

29. Discomfort and disaster may be joined as fully loaded planes appear statistically more likely to crash than lighter, less crowded ones. See Malcolm W. Browne, "Fatalities Higher on Crowded Jets," *New York Times*, 1 November 1991.

30. Matthew L. Wald, "New Estimates Increase Radiation Risk in Flight," *New York Times*, 19 February 1990.

31. Seth Mydans, "Cholera Kills One and Fells Many on Flight," *New York Times*, 21 January 1992. The flight to Los Angeles was from Buenos Aires by way of Lima, Peru. After this article was

completed, a small furor arose in the media over questions of in-flight air quality and the possible effects upon health. See, among many examples, Martin Tolchin, "Frequent Fliers Saying Fresh Air Is Awfully Thin at 30,000 Feet," *New York Times*, 6 June 1993, and Martin Tolchin, "Study Says Flight Attendant Infected 23 with TB," *New York Times*, 21 October 1993.

32. The other class is not "lower" but "economy."

33. This expensive fare class is also trumpeted, of course, on the basis of snob appeal. For example, in newspapers on 15 October 1991, United Airlines announced "Connoisseur Class," marked by wider seats, "sophisticated CD audio," "where fine wines and spirits and award-winning cuisine are artfully prepared and presented." Captain "X" writes that "since we've had lower fares, the caliber of passengers has notably deteriorated. Back [in the regulated-fare period], well-heeled passengers wore ties and had their shoes shined properly. What we get on board now may be ill-mannered street people whose dress and behavior can be pretty obnoxious" (*Unfriendly Skies*, 120). On 10 January 1993, in an unprecedented two-page spread, Continental Airlines pictured its quintessential white male business-class passenger enjoying more leg room, better food and wine, and hooked into five different "electronic" systems, only one of which — the personal color TV — is geared toward entertainment.

34. Airline attendants have discovered that on long-distance flights, business types barricade themselves in the bathroom for hours while they charge the batteries of their portable computers. Upper-echelon types can avoid all such inconveniences by taking the corporate jet.

35. See, for example, Robert E. Calem, "Look, No Wires! But the Pages Fly," *New York Times*, 8 November 1992; Anthony Ramirez, "A Telephone Visionary Who Is Cutting the Cords for Consumers," *New York Times*, 15 November 1992; and Peter H. Lewis, "Next: Wireless Widgets," *New York Times*, 24 November 1992.

36. The dangerous airspace around Los Angeles is called Indian Country because of the (racist) names of the small private craft clogging it.

37. Captain "X" and Dodson, *Unfriendly Skies*, 117. The captain does not offer a solution, but can we envision the pilot, in the plane as in the flight simulator, in virtual-reality helmet and gloves?

38. The onset of Reaganism forestalled the minimal protections proposed for small airlines and unprofitable routes. Competitive practices were touted as allowing customers to achieve lower fares on small airlines; instead, increasingly monopolistic control over pricing, scheduling, and routing led to higher fares, far fewer airlines, and a reduced schedule. The U.S. market, dominated by a few carriers, is an unstable oligopoly. Thanks to deregulation, margins have been reduced: margins of profit and margins of safety. The breaking of the PATCO strike in 1981 meant that 11,500 air-traffic controllers with every degree of seniority and experience were fired, and managers and new hires were put on the job. One may speculate on the significance of the Reagan administration's high-profile breaking of this particular professional association of government

employees and the permanent banning of its striking members. Aside from signaling the end of the "historic compromise" between big capital and big labor that had characterized the postwar economy, no doubt it also made plain the government's intention to back the airline industry in labor disputes to come. Clearly, the airline (and airplane) industry is a leading one, and the mechanisms for its operation were being realigned in favor of the most aggressively entrepreneurial and antiworker companies. In its first few days in office in 1993, the Democratic Clinton administration stated its willingness to consider rehiring some of the PATCO strikers fired and banned a dozen years before.

The "shaking out" of the airline industry continues apace, with most of the major airlines in the United States in extreme financial difficulty. The high-flying Robert Crandall, steely head of American Airlines, claimed in a long article in the *Sunday Times Magazine* that if he knew then what he knows now, he would have chosen another career and that "unless the world changes, we [i.e., American Airlines] will never buy another airplane. . . . The company simply won't be here any more." Soon after, American's flight attendants staged a strike to prevent the company from continuing to hold down compensation. See Stephen D. Solomon, "The Bully of the Skies Cries Uncle," *New York Times Magazine*, 5 September 1993, 12–15, 29, 34–38. (P.S., Crandall doesn't mean it.) While employees of various U.S. airlines, some of which have already involved their employees in stock-ownership schemes, have tried (and mostly failed) to buy out their respective bankrupt companies and keep

them going, in late 1993 Air France workers paralyzed Paris airports in violent actions against the prospective privatization of the relatively unprofitable airline by the newly installed conservative government. See, for example, "Strike Disrupts Airports in France," *New York Times*, 21 October 1993, and Roger Cohen, "Tear Gas and Chaos as Belts Tighten in France," *New York Times*, 22 October 1993.

39. Even worse is Air France's two-airport system in Paris. Madly enough, the airline is trying in its U.S. advertising to capitalize on this system, which forces flyers to arrive from overseas at one airport and then ride for an hour in a bus in the middle of the night before boarding another flight for their actual destination.

40. This would necessitate changing U.S. law against foreign ownership and abrogating the postwar international air-trade agreements known as the Bermuda treaties.

41. The interior of the plane, however, does little to evoke the female, drawing upon the masculinist realms of the factory and the office.

42. This argument may be more applicable to U.S. airports than to European ones, where state control of the one major airline means a greater identification of the airline and the airport with the state.

43. And, inevitably, of ordinary crime.

44. In the perfect space of the terminal, retail is frequently extortionate and eminently partial. A recent visit to London's Heathrow revealed large signs promising that the prices in the airport were no higher than in the high street in town.

45. Following upon the restructur-

ing of the airline industry under Reagan, in every nonexecutive airline position, including mechanical maintenance, ticketing, flight services, and piloting, there are now two tiers of employees: A and B. A employees are decently compensated and given job protections and pension and health benefits. Working alongside them are the B employees — including B pilots — ununionized, with low salaries, few protections, less training, and less experience. They also have been shown to suffer greater stress.

46. It is intriguing but probably of no moment that John Scully, Chief Executive Officer of Apple Computers, was trained as an architect, since in the interim he was a Pepsi Cola executive.

47. The outworn bird metaphor posed by the terminal, with its dual wings, was vulgarly interpreted by airport workers as a woman's brassiere. At any rate, airplanes and the experience of flying have nothing to do with the flight of birds, except insofar as birds pose hazards to planes by virtue of their annoying habit of being sucked into jet engines, causing the planes to crash. At Kennedy, and surely elsewhere, regular though surreptitious bird shoots organized by airport officials make short work of the bird populations that nest in the marshy ground surrounding the airport.

48. "I don't think there's anything wrong in using a building to connote achievement and a certain commercial power. I think that's the way architecture has been used historically. Great statesmen, great emperors, great dictators always built great buildings" (Helmut Jahn; quoted in Mark Michael Leonhart, "Helmut Jahn, The Building of a Legend," *New Art Examiner* 15, no. 3 (November 1987): 29.

49. William H. Whyte, *City: Rediscovering the Center* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 358, n. to 121, citing an article by Robert Sommer in the *New York Times* 3 March 1974.

50. Yet no one protects the unsuspecting person at home from being accosted by real or mechanical hucksters on the television or over the telephone at any unlikely hour of day or night.

51. Michael deCourcy Hinds, "Airport Offers Flights of Meditation," *New York Times*, 2 October 1992.

52. Suzanne Carmichael, "Stuck at the Airport? Then Look at the Art," *New York Times*, 15 December 1991. Art as a last resort!

53. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, prop. 168. The frustrating sameness of tourist destinations has been described by Jean Baudrillard and such other commentators as the Australian Donald Horne. All these accounts, overstated as they surely are for theoretical effect, point out the homogenization of culture: the beaten path beats down that which it managed to reach with such difficulty. Erasure of difference always leads to efforts by the colonizer to "preserve" it, but as a depoliticized, aestheticized set of cultural practices — as a "destination."

54. Projet Patrimoine 2001, for instance, will photograph two hundred "cultural and natural wonders" and make the images "instantly available worldwide through digital transmission" (John Rockwell, "Photo File of World's Wonders," *New York Times*, 5 March 1992). What makes this preservation through image appropriation notable is

that it is a project of UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, under the impetus of its Spanish director, Federico Mayor. The project will be substantially underwritten by grants from the immensely rich La Caixa Foundation, based in Barcelona and supported by its municipal pension funds. Technical services will be donated by Kodak, France Telecom, and the Gamma photo agency. The idea is to make images of endangered treasures before, according to the *Times*, "they are further damaged by war or the environment." It is important that it is UNESCO initiating this project, which can be of interest only to the advanced industrial countries, because under its previous, African director, UNESCO was boycotted by these same countries because of its challenge to their control of information. (The U.S. withdrew from UNESCO in 1984.) Under Mayor, UNESCO claims to have turned toward "universality." Experience tells us that claims for universality translate into excuses for domination.

55. "Realism" breaks through the implacable denial of the fragilities of flight when the antiterrorism "expert," paid to create a frisson in his employers and other listeners, refers to a 747 as "a tin can full of several hundred hostages at forty thousand feet." An amusement item in the *New York Times* (23 October 1993), "Bomb Threat on an Airliner? No, He Meant His Bladder," explains that a drunken German tourist, Johann Peter Grzeganeck, has been incarcerated for nine months because on a flight home from Florida, a German-speaking flight attendant interpreted a German phrase he used, roughly translatable as "then the

roof flies" — denoting an overly full bladder — as a bomb threat. In another vein, one cannot photograph in many areas of Heathrow, particularly those that look out onto the "apron," a prohibition enforced by men seated in little booths.

56. At Kennedy Airport, when a bomber blew up some baggage lockers in the late 1970s, all public lockers throughout the entire airport were promptly and permanently removed. Indeed, one wonders, given the absolute dismissal of passengers as actual individuals rather than mere circulating ticket holders, why were the anachronistic (because imported into the airport plan from the bus and train station) lockers present in the first place? That they are of some use to travelers seems hardly enough to justify their existence.

57. Surveillance, of course, misses the big crimes that are the ordinary accompaniments of big business, ranging from extortion of protection money from freight carriers to the far more significant and successful profiteering at public expense occasioned by the constant building and rebuilding at airports.

58. Remarkably enough, Pascale Blin, "Aérogares: Le Confort du design," in *Air France's in-flight magazine* for November 1993, remarks that "comfy" chairs have had to be removed from Paris's Charles De Gaulle airport because of "a desire on the part of the airport authorities to avoid attracting too many homeless people" (p. 76; the French text on the same page reads: "Les banquettes de Joseph Motte, ayant séduit un grand nombre de sans domicile fixe, ont d'ailleurs été détruites l'hiver dernier et remplacés par un style rigide"). This article, in touting a

new departure from sheer engineer-driven functionality to architected and designed pleasurable airport spaces, nonetheless refers to these spaces as modules and units and explains that “new security measures require complete separation of flows of arriving and outgoing passengers.”

59. Computerized flight information and reservations in the United States are listed in four nationwide systems, two of which, owned by two major airlines, control seventy percent of the market. These systems had to be forced by the federal government to include information about rival flight schedules. The systems still charge high fees to competitors just to list their flights, and travel agents must sign exclusive long-term contracts. The resulting cost to travelers of the limited and distorted information has been estimated to be as much as one billion dollars a year. See Franklin M. Fisher, *Architectural Bias in CRS (Computer Reservation Systems): The Loss in Consumer Welfare* (Washington, D.C.: Public Citizen Litigation Group, 1992).

60. John Cushman, Jr., “Progress Is Slow in New Effort to Find Bombs,” *New York Times*, 15 November 1992.

61. The use of drug courier “profiles” by law-enforcement agencies has led to well-documented charges of racism. The U.S. Customs service is obsessed with the special profiles of “swallowers.” The extreme concentration on drugs at Kennedy has caused the customs service’s interest in undeclared dutiable items to wane dramatically.

62. When the U.S. space shuttle Challenger was sent aloft in 1986 as

part of a Reagan administration on-air television stunt, millions of viewers were made aware of the disaster through the image of the erratic, splitting jet trail accompanied by the level-voiced message of the mission-control officer announcing a major technical malfunction. New linguistic entries into common usage: pilot error, wind shear, microbursts, de-icing, flap position.

63. Preferred, that is, by management, which always would rather see the blame placed at the door of fallible individual workers than on itself, its machinery, or its mandated maintenance procedures.

64. On the question of airport noise, see, for example, Eric Weiner, “Rising Clamor by Airport Neighbors Brings Gains in Fight Against Noise,” *New York Times*, 17 April 1990; “You Have to Shout to Get Quieter Airplanes” (a group of readers’ letters), *New York Times*, 5 May 1990; and James Bennet, “Plane Noise Faces Limits from F.A.A.,” *New York Times*, 21 November 1992.

65. Land values near some airports but not below flight paths are sometimes increased, as in the case of the Greater Pittsburgh International Airport. Corporate, commercial, and residential complexes of significant scale are being developed nearby, right along with the airport’s billion-dollar expansion.

66. Lefebvre, “The Production of Space,” 287.

67. Trains, especially the high-speed ones designed for those

who might otherwise fly business class, are made more like planes. The seats, in particular, are more panel-like. Suggesting a cross between a school desk and a dentist’s chair, these rather cramped “modular moderne” units (to coin a phrase) are conducive to working or to self-isolation, disaccommodating those who wish to socialize.

68. Plans are afoot to convert the main Manhattan post office, of the same style and provenance as the razed Penn Station across the street, into a new-old Penn Station. Many people, I have discovered, share a fantasy I have previously never confessed to: that Penn Station could somehow miraculously be rebuilt, like the Russian and Polish buildings razed by the Nazis in the Second World War. See David W. Dunlap, “Amtrak Unveils Its Design to Transform Post Office,” *New York Times*, 2 May 1993.

69. An important brief in the case was written by David Bonderman, a former civil-rights lawyer now considered a “takeover artist” who is trying, with Air Canada, to take control of the bankrupt Continental Airlines, America’s fifth-largest carrier. See Adam Bryant, “Deal Maker Takes Aim at Skies,” *New York Times*, Business Section, 11 November 1992.

70. But in 1993 plans to install a gigantic high-definition television set were announced. See Lisa W. Foderaro, “Plans for a TV Screen at Grand Central Draws Criticism,” *New York Times*, 5 November 1993.

71. Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (1938; reprint ed. New York: Dover 1969).

Figure Credits

Black-and-white photographs from color originals by Martha Rosler. Courtesy of the artist.