etearn, Airport Sign and Montello Satellite Image, from International Airport Montello, 2004–7 (artwork © etearn; all photographs provided by etearn)
The small high-desert community of Montello in the far northeastern corner of Nevada is an unlikely site for an international airport. Once a passenger stop and operations center on the transcontinental railroad, a part of the economic and territorial expansion of the West, Montello today has little more than two bars, a small motel, and a gas station along State Highway 235. Freight trains still rumble through town but have not stopped in decades. The population of Montello, a matter of conjecture in this unincorporated community, hovers somewhere between sixty-five and several hundred. Jobs, to the extent they exist at all, come from a nearby ranching operation or from fifty-five miles away in West Wendover, an always-down-on-its-luck gambling town along Interstate 80 at the Nevada-Utah border. With little reason to exist, Montello long ago adopted the barroom motto of “the town that refuses to die.” Several years ago, perhaps as a result of this perseverance, Montello became home to the International Airport Montello, a land-use experiment begun in 2004 by eteam, the New York–based artists Hajoe Moderegger and Franziska Lamprecht, working in collaboration with the people of Montello.

Accounts of airports as cultural voids and depersonalized wastelands have become a cliché in both academic and popular writing. Airports, for instance, are among the emblematic “non-places” described by Marc Augé as proliferating under the logic of global capitalism—spaces that are homogenized, generic, and lacking in local distinction and difference. International Airport Montello (IAM), however, does not fit this mold. As eteam explains, “International airports are often described as sterile and impersonal environments, disconnected from the local culture. . . . They all look like a mall. . . . IAM is an exception. The environment is not sterile, and the coffee is not real.”

Combining sincerity with satire, history with fiction, labor with laziness, and collective action with private delusions, International Airport Montello was initiated after eteam purchased a parcel of land in Montello through eBay and began to explore the possibilities for its development. Despite the town’s small size and remote location, the International Airport Montello, supported by a commission from Art in General, soon developed something of the infrastructure and range of services one might expect of any major airport: there are two runways in the form of a long-abandoned, unpaved airstrip just outside town, a waiting area and, occasionally, luggage handlers, a runway maintenance crew, a security detail with dogs and screening devices, a communications center, a restaurant, a chapel, a gift shop, and more.

The parameters of IAM extend beyond its physical site and infrastructure (the town and abandoned airstrip) to include a virtual space (a collaborative website at www.internationalairportmontello.com) and a series of public events and interventions at other locations. Like all airports, IAM cannot exist alone as some kind of discrete modernist object, but must rely instead on its contingent relationship to larger networks and systems. For IAM this network has emerged in a variety of ways: as a windsock outside Art in General in New York or the Hordaland Art Centre in Bergen, Norway; a “plane” that cannot fly emerging from a hangar at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn; or a group of Montello-bound
eteam, Baggage Handler, from International Airport Montello, 2004–7 (artwork © eteam; photograph by Kristin Lucas)

eteam, Skyview Dinner Club, from International Airport Montello, 2004–7 (artwork © eteam)
passengers waiting for a very delayed flight at the Sara Meltzer Gallery in Chelsea, reimagined for the occasion as airport gate. Not fixed to the literal coordinates of its own site, IAM is constituted less by its physical plant of runways and terminals, its passengers and freight, than by the poetics of flight and the discursive possibilities of excavated histories, collective fantasies, and artists’ interventions.

The open-ended nature of International Airport Montello is also reflected in its changing iterations and varied finished works eteam has made in connection to it. There is a three-channel video, International Airport Montello (2007); a slideshow with voice-over; various installation elements including video, photographs, maps, cutout figures, and other objects; a book published in 2007 by Art in General; and a second video called Truth in Transit (2008).

As a site-specific intervention in the desert spaces of the American West, International Airport Montello belongs to the legacy of Land art from the late 1960s and 1970s. Reinforcing this relationship is IAM’s location roughly twenty-five miles from Nancy Holt’s Sun Tunnels near the ghost town of Lucin, Utah, and about eighty miles as the crow flies from Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty across an expanse of desert and the Great Salt Lake. Eteam, however, expresses little overt interest in these works and even less in their status as art-world pilgrimage sites.

As an open-ended collaboration rooted in a specific local community, International Airport Montello might be understood in terms of such more recently proposed categories as relational aesthetics, diastolic art, do-it-yourself collectivism, or experimental geography. Yet eteam foregrounds none of the issues—viewer activation, authorship, community building, or social justice—frequently motivating the projects associated with these terms. That is not to say that IAM might not be productively discussed in relation, for instance, to Situationism’s “constructed situations,” Nicolas Bourriaud’s notion of “little services rendered,” or Grant Kester’s “performative interactions.” But what seems most pressing both aesthetically and politically in IAM is the obvious and gaping disconnect between the grandiose social, economic, and experiential implications of an international airport and the more dismal reality of Montello itself, a disjunction that eteam is more interested in exploiting than in remedying.

**The Aesthetics of Delay**

For the community of Montello—tiny, isolated, and economically depressed—the “international airport” carries a utopian, if also ridiculous, promise of mobility, economic development, and global interconnectedness. Eteam courts these discourses, yet continually mocks and subverts them. While using the rhetoric of economic development, mobility, and growth, eteam’s International Airport Montello results instead in nothing so much as isolation, stasis and, most of all, delay.

Delays at IAM take many forms: airplanes that never arrive and never take off; construction that is never complete and rarely begins; jobs that are never created; passengers who seldom show up; and local residents who do not leave. Delay of course is among the most widely shared experiences of travel, particularly air travel. (The other would be fear, not necessarily of terrorism, but of the very concept of air travel. “The atmosphere is great,” Andy Warhol once commented about airports and airplanes, “it’s the idea of flying that I question.”)

Unlike the sublime transcendence of flight, the experience of delay is mundane, durational, and generally unremarkable.
It is the absurdist and often literal performance of delay at International Airport Montello that seems most important and that structures its rhetoric, attitude, and form. Indeed, as a series of disruptions and continual transitional moments, IAM suggests what might be termed an aesthetics of delay that inverts the instantaneous perception of modernist aesthetics and the utopian promise of the airport. The aesthetics of delay operating in IAM need not be limited to either the representation or literal enactment of delayed passengers and flights, although such delays at IAM are common. Broadly conceived, the aesthetics of delay also necessarily encompasses the economic, historical, and psychic dimensions of IAM.

The idea of delay has been central to many of eTEAM's earlier projects involving land use as well. In 1.1 AcE Flat ScreE (2002–4), eTEAM first used eBay to purchase a small plot of nearly worthless land in southern Utah with the hope of finding a way to increase its value and then auction it off again at a profit. Noticing that freight trains occasionally passed by on a nearby rail line, but never stopped, eTEAM mulled the many possibilities for trying to stop a train by either force or guile, eventually deciding to erect a snack bar as a train rest stop. Remarkably, Train Stop Inn, as they called it, succeeded in persuading an engineer to stop his train and delay his route, if only out of curiosity.

TEAM came to Montello on a similar venture in 2004 after buying ten acres of land.
of land outside town. Arriving to examine their property, the artists found a road running through it that should not have been there. Despite the fact that apparently only one person ever used this road, a rancher who passed through about once a week, eteam considered the existence of the road to be a problem. After considering many options to prevent the use of the road—such as installing a gate or building a bridge or an aerial tram—eteam decided to generate a traffic jam, in other words a delay, that would "solve" the problem by exacerbating it. For an event called Artificial Traffic Jam, eteam invited everyone in Montello to bring their cars to the property at a specific date and time in order to clog the road, impede traffic, and delay progress.9

With 1 1 Acre Flat Screen, Artificial Traffic Jam, and International Airport Montello, eteam has taken useless and unused spaces and, in different ways, reconceived their value by linking them to systems and networks to which they cannot possibly or properly belong. This procedure was extended to the virtual world for Second Life Dumpster, 2007–8, which created a public dumpster as a space for virtual trash.10

A current project, Open Source Grabeland, connects retirees farming small garden plots in a village in eastern Germany to the expansive desert rangeland of Nevada through a shared lack of reliable water sources and a fantasy of transatlantic travel. The aesthetics of delay in these projects involves both marking and collapsing the distances between urban and rural, between dream and reality, and especially between the promise of mobility in globalism's capital flow and the paralyzing stasis of communities like Montello.

Archaeology and Found Objects

If International Airport Montello seems entirely a figment and a fantasy, or simply an absurdist joke, it should be emphasized that Montello is a real place, a real town, with real people and a real landing strip. Eteam insists on this specificity of place. Many of its statements about the airport are lyrical and cryptic, but they also tend to be bracketed by raw data and factual information. In the audio accompanying a slideshow installation of the project, one of its many iterations, the voice of Moderegger recites:

It's August 25th, 2004, 11:45 a.m.  
It's a beautiful day. Humidity: 67%.  
It is a possibility. An open area. An aerial promise.  
It is a 5,850-foot-long landing strip.11

Indicative of eteam's deadpan approach, the allusive characterizations of the airport as a "possibility" and a "promise" are framed by factual observations of time and weather and physical descriptions of the site. If the airport is merely a possibility, then it is one that can be measured: the landing strip is 5,850 feet long. As a site-specific project with a preexisting infrastructure, IAM is not an invention so much as a found object and an archaeological site.

The traces of the airport in the town's past are both obvious and easily overlooked. The town's only lodging is the seedy Pilot Motel. A high mountain rising across the valley is known as Pilot Peak—a name evoking its function as a key landmark in visual navigation. Above all, there is the physical marker of the air-strip itself, abandoned but still visible from the air and the ground. The people of Montello, at least some of them, knew of the landing strip, but memories of its

9. Artificial Traffic Jam exists as a stand-alone video, as well as being part of the longer eteam video about the site, The Paradox of 10 Acres Square, 2005.
history and purpose are vague. Had it been a refueling or emergency landing spot for the propeller planes of the past? Used as a hidden site for illegal trafficking of drugs and other contraband? Or somehow linked to the World War II-era Air Force base in Wendover, Utah, to the southeast? From these fragments of history, memory, and place, IAM materializes like a delayed reception of the town’s history, a recovery of its forgotten and buried past.

These fragments of historical reality notwithstanding, the airport remains a fantasy that exists mostly in the imagination of the artists, participants, and viewers. “There is no freakin’ airport here,” declares Marilyn, an occasionally belligerent woman who offers a helpful dose of reality in eteam’s Truth in Transit video. Eteam puts it somewhat more gingerly, noting that sometimes “the potential of a place is denser than its actuality.” Regardless, what is not there is a central part of this airport. The sign “International Airport Montello” marks both the site of the airport and also, or especially, its absence. The product of artistic interventions and collective fantasies, IAM is a reconstruction of a place and a past that never quite existed and a future that never will.

Job Creation

International Airport Montello depended heavily on the cooperation and participation of the people of Montello, who approached the project and the artists with varying degrees of enthusiasm, friendship, skepticism, and indifference. (Many of these people tell their stories in the Truth in Transit video.) Of central importance to eteam, the Montello residents who came forward to participate in the project at various moments and with various levels of commitment all created their own roles in relation to the airport. Eteam provided little direction or control in these community efforts, which were led by a handful of locals like Henry J. Casolari, who created the coffee shop Juan’s at the Airport and runs the chapel, Ron Abbot, the airport manager, and Computer Ed, who is everywhere on the IAM website (itself largely created by Nevada Red), identified as being in charge of airport technology, staffing the airport cell-phone booth, sometimes working security, or simply riding his minibike through this incredible space, doing tricks, flying. If nothing else, Computer Ed shows there can be real pleasure in the performance and dream of the airport. Eteam writes:

September 1, 2004.
It is better than ever.
An exception to the rule.
Barometer 30.09 inches.
It is a cell of its own.
It’s people. It’s a job.

The roles that people like Computer Ed and many others in Montello created for themselves were also, importantly, jobs: security, communications, Juan’s at the Airport, runway maintenance, and baggage handlers. That eteam offered no financial or any material compensation (beyond providing a computer and satellite dish for communal use in Montello) did not seem to deter the participants. Whether real or fictional, built or unbuilt, IAM was about economic development, the global economy, and job creation.

One of the first events staged at the airport, even before the arrival of any

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13. These individuals and others are credited in IAM videos and publications and are also listed as collaborators on eteam’s website.
eteam, Computer Ed on His Minibike, from *International Airport Montello, 2004–7* (artwork © eteam; photograph by Kristin Lucas)

eteam, IAM Strike, from *International Airport Montello, 2004–7* (artwork © eteam; photograph by Mara Littel)
planes, was a strike against management, although no management yet existed. The strikers’ demand that management “Internationalize This Airstrip!” expresses a desire not just for good jobs, but for Montello to become linked to the global economy and a part of America’s postindustrial service economy (“We will deliver service if management will let us!” read another sign). Such demands by the residents of Montello reflect an awareness of what the sociologist John Urry awkwardly identifies as the “umbilical cord” between air travel and the global order. More important, a strike or work stoppage is an organized and politicized performance of delay. In this case, however, the politics of the IAM strike remained ambiguous, since at IAM it can be tricky to distinguish between delays that are deliberate and those that just happen. “Due to missing authorities,” eteam reports, “the strike ended as it had started, and the runway returned to its previous state.”

**Layovers**

As much as International Airport Montello promised, it could not always deliver. Takeoffs and landings, at least those by airplanes, are more a matter of the imagination than reality. At times the seasonal flies endemic to the area offer the only tangible model of the airport’s operations. Unlike the evident success of the fly strip (a device for permanent delay), Montello does not easily attract travelers or businesses. Montello’s residents are a curious mix of transients and outsiders, whether intentional or not, from the global community, who arrive and sometimes get stuck for a time. These people include Miner John, who worked on runway maintenance, or Nevada Red and his wife Darla, who lived off the grid outside town. A UFO buff, Nevada Red created many of the animations for the IAM website and with Darla hosted the airport’s Skyview Dinner Club. Or Bobby Kent, a musician who made several records in the 1970s before disappearing, and who gave a rare performance at an airport potluck at the Cowboy Bar. Even Computer Ed described his twelve years in Montello as a kind of exile. It is clearly not just airplanes, or flies, that are delayed in Montello, but people as well. As eteam explains: “IAM is a place where layovers are common. According to a long term airport representative they can last anywhere from a couple of hours to 25 years.”

The most elaborate performance of delay at International Airport Montello was the September 2006 IAM layover when a chartered flight with passengers from New York arrived via Las Vegas for a one-day layover in Montello. Diverted to the airfield in Wendover, the plane’s New York passengers were transported by airport shuttle vans to Montello, where they waited for a connection that would never come. I also became a layover passenger, together with my wife and children, after joining the stranded group in Wendover and continuing with it by shuttle to Montello in the vain hope of finding a connecting flight to get us out of our own long layover in Salt Lake City. It did not work. “Expect delays,” eteam had warned me.

The layover event was all about delays. The planned layover experience was supplemented by many other logistical breakdowns and delays, which were unplanned but perhaps not unwelcomed. For starters, the airport shuttle got lost on the unmarked dirt roads leading to the Skyview Dinner Club. But as the artists later recalled: “No one noticed being lost for a long time.” Out on the runway a plane was spotted in the sky, but the ground crew and waiting passengers were
eteam, Flystrip in the Pilot Motel and Bobby Kent at IAM Potluck, from International Airport Montello, 2004–7 (artwork © eteam)

21. For a more threatening experience of an art-world tourist in Montello, see Erin Hogan, Spiral Jetty: A Road Trip through the Land Art of the American West (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 40–60.

unable to signal it to make a landing. Given meal and drink vouchers, the layover passengers were instead taken to the Cowboy Bar and eventually shuttled back to Wendover, where they caught their connection and flew away.

The spectacle of the IAM layover event highlights some of the fault lines in eteam’s multiyear relationship with Montello and particularly the ethical risks of artists adopting an ethnographic authority while working in disadvantaged or impoverished communities.20 To some extent this concern is countered by the self-determination of Montello residents in creating their own roles, participating or not, fully embracing the ironic operations of IAM or insisting like Marilyn did, as already noted, that “there is no freakin’ airport here.” Neither their agency nor deep collaboration, however, fully insulates the local residents from being staged as others, something like authentic, modern-day primitives.

This was especially the case with the layover event when passengers from New York descended on Montello during their ten-hour delay. The layover passengers appeared less like stranded travelers than they did privileged tourists on an exotic but safe expedition, an almost colonial encounter that brought them face-to-face with an authentic, other culture (in this case the proud, sad, impoverished, mostly welcoming and sometimes meth-addled culture of rural America) before they were whisked away again when the show was over.21 This belongs to what Carol Becker over a decade ago termed “the romance of nomadism” in contemporary art, when art-world interlopers, part of the nomadic elite of global culture, invade an “other” space.22 The unevenness of places, people, and development in the era of go-go globalism that has recently been only temporarily delayed is surely one of the concerns of an aesthetics of delay.

Reenactment

At its most straightforward, the aesthetics of delay operating in International Airport Montello responds to the actual, lived experience of delay in local and global
travel. But the idea of delay also extends metaphorically to the crippled economies of rural communities like Montello and the people who live there. More broadly, the aesthetics of delay extends to the idea of belatedness as it operates in modernism and globalization. Montello, a defunct railroad town with an abandoned airstrip, is a relic of a forgotten modernity. Indeed, eteam has sometimes described the airport in terms of a reenactment:

It’s August 23rd, 2005.
It’s a state of mind.
It’s a few people with many memories.
It is a reenactment.
It is 4,236 feet above sea level.21

It is worth noting that Smithson’s Spinal Jetty might also be understood in somewhat similar terms of historical reenactment. As Jennifer Roberts has compellingly argued, Spinal Jetty finds part of its meaning in relation to the nearby Golden Spike National Monument marking the completion of the transcontinental railroad (of which Montello was also a part). Countering the conventional representation of the railroad and American history as a linear, rational progres-
sion moving steadily toward the crowning moment of the “Wedding on the Rails” between the east- and westbound trains, and the singular aestheticized object of the commemorative Golden Spike, Spiral Jetty. Roberts suggests, instead offers a spinning, entropic road to nowhere, and with it a more complicated model of history and art as a dispersed, unresolvable object.

Thinking of eteam’s International Airport Montello as a reenactment opens up an additional aspect of the aesthetics of delay. As a reenactment, IAM operates along the lines of the psychoanalytic notion of a return of the repressed. What has been repressed in this case would be Montello’s modernity, its stunted and abbreviated life as an early-twentieth-century railroad town, a modernity that has been delayed and deferred and now reappears in the displaced and grotesquely distorted form of IAM. As eteam puts it:

It’s always delayed. . . .

It’s a question that keeps coming back.

Area code 775.

It’s navigated by a windsock.

It’s an attempt at least.

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