

Gate crashing

Contributed by Kris Vagner

Airport? Art project? Impromptu theater? International Airport Montello is a collaboration between New York artists and a Nevada town of 67 people

Story and photos by Kris Vagner

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At 11:45 a.m., I already had one foot over the threshold of the Cowboy Bar in Montello, when, by raw coincidence, a white van with Utah plates pulled into the lot. I'd hoped to glean from the bartender if there really was such a thing as International Airport Monetello, but the fortuitously timed arrival of an airport shuttle van answered my question.

The "airport" is an art project. It appeared to involve some sort of performance based on some hard-to-discern set of pretenses. The project's web site lists fictional amenities (a budget plane-cleaning service employing trained lizards to lick off dirt), businesses that are verifiably real (the Cowboy Bar) and a range of facilities of indeterminate tangibility, such as the Skyview Dinner Club, documented with photographs of a picnic table under a Photoshopped, atomic-colored sky.

I bee-lined to the van and introduced myself to Hajoe (sounds like Hi-yo) Moderegger, the serious-looking European running the show. Understandably, he'd been hoping to avoid gawkers. The cameras and booms surrounding his entourage belonged to Sundance Channel filmmakers and an Artforum magazine blogger, all welcome participants. Hajoe reluctantly agreed to let me follow along.

Follow along to what? I had no idea. But International Airport Montello was backed by dependable credentials. The project was commissioned by Art in General, a lower-Manhattan arts organization that does not fear the challenging, the unusual or the hard-to-quantify. The resumes of Hajoe and his artistic partner, Franziska (Franzy) Lamprecht, were equally reassuring. The Queens-based German artists, who collaborate under the name "Eteam," claim a decade of experimental, way-off-the-gallery-walls art projects and an affinity for the idea of the rural West as a wide-open canvas. They've purchased small chunks of Nevada and Utah on Ebay. They've projected their land via live video-feed into gallery spaces in Brooklyn and Germany. They've tried to stop trains in the desert by setting up a lemonade stand. In 2004, they choreographed the performance piece, "Artificial Traffic Jam," also near Montello. They enlisted the help of locals, who showed up in pickups and cars to help congest a lonely dirt road.

A small caravan pulled out of the Cowboy Bar, sped north on Highway 223 like it was the Autobahn, then turned onto a dusty, gravel road. Views of the overcast sky and wide, gently rolling valley were unencumbered by trees, houses or anything but sagebrush.

The Skyview Dinner Club, it turned out, is for real. Sort of. It's a patch of dirt outside the home of Nevada Red and Darla, who generate their own electricity and run a web design business from a single-wide trailer a few miles from town.

Flight attendant (and Art in General Programs Manager) Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, looking swank in a smoky-blue, vintage stewardess uniform and heels, ushered seven paying art patrons/passengers and the media crew out of the van. Coffee percolated over a campfire. A few passengers exchanged New-York-gallery air kisses. Darla, who cooks professionally for cowboys, whipped up an elaborate brunch buffet on her outdoor stove. As the chilly morning turned to chilly afternoon, Red kept the coffee flowing, and weary travelers feasted on thick, buttery French toast.

Sofia, Red and Darla kept playing the roles of airport personnel without really acting like they were acting.

I concocted my own premise, hoping an active role would help counteract my unceremonious intrusion: My traveling partner and I were reps from the Regional Nevada Hospitality Committee. Which meant we'd share our somewhat-cold cans of Tecate in exchange for the privilege of continuing to tag along.

Another gate-crasher, University of Utah art history professor Monty Paret, had a better story: he and his wife, who are New Yorkers at heart, and their two young children had been trapped in a three-year layover in Salt Lake City, so they'd diverted their itinerary and come to Montello.

"They're playing with discursive space," he surmised. Exactly.

"That's artspeak for, 'It exists in your f…ing mind,'" said my traveling companion, Elaine Parks, an artist who was schooled in Los Angeles and de-schooled in the tiny Nevada town where she now lives.

Monty's academic terms and Elaine's anti-academic terms were both dead-on. International Airport Montello (Its acronym spells, "I am," clearly no coincidence.) is complex and theoretical enough to hold its own in the international art world, accessible enough to make sense in a Nevada town with a neighborhood of single-wides, a neighborhood of double-wides, a few century-old houses, a two-block long commercial strip, and 67 residents.

The day-long layover is a little like a play with no script. It's a meditation on unfulfilled expectations that unfolds kind of like a more fun, less lonely *Waiting For Godot*. Loosely organized activities take place in actual or made-up locations. Characters are real or fictional, costumed or not, whichever they like. Ongoing sub-plots continue on IAM's website, such as that of the airport shoe shiner, who wasn't there that day but accepts shoes by mail order. It's a game for whoever wants to play, an in-joke for whoever comes in.

After brunch, the group headed back to town. Airport Manager Ron Abbott, an affable hypnotherapist and minister (for

real) in a bomber jacket, led a tour down Montello's wooden sidewalk. Abbott's confidence was emphasized by a hairstyle so neat and stiff it would not be compromised by the relentless wind for the rest of the day.

A black Volkswagen Golf pulled up. An antenna made of a vegetable steamer and a fishing net poked through the sunroof. The driver, Bay Area artist Kristin Lucas, called out bingo numbers over a megaphone. She distributed her hand-printed bingo cards to anyone wanting to join the game.

The group convened on the "runway," a few miles away, to enjoy some afternoon coffee and shoot passport photos of every New Yorker, Montellan, gate-crasher, dog, or child who showed up. The sole layover support crew member, Brooklyn artist Jason Dean, distributed safety-orange flags and instructed everyone to stand along the runway in the hope of flagging down a plane, which never arrived. Friendly Montello ambassadors Henry and Sarah manned the portable, occasional business, Juan's Coffee Shop, a folding table with snacks, warm beverages and gust-proof streamers anchored by large rocks.

Evening approached. Passengers, art-directors, uniformed participants, taggers-on and neighbors who'd shown up in pickup trucks all drove back to the Cowboy Bar for a festive, pot-luck dinner, compete with a gray-frosted, airplane-shaped cake and pie-judging contest. One Montellan observed, "The bar hasn't seen this much activity since Fourth of July." A young cowboy made a spectacular entrance on horse, ducking to fit through the front door.

Under Hajoe and Franzy's meticulously organized but light-handed cruise direction, the evening proceeded just like an artists' reception (I exchanged numbers with new acquaintances from Boston or San Francisco) and just like any busy night in a remote Nevada bar (hearty mustaches, home-made chili, talk of moving to Montello to escape big towns).

Afterward, the out-of-towners would continue to the motel next door, then to Las Vegas, by actual airplane, and back home to New York to process this experiment in art and cultural exchange.

Elaine and I drove back home that night, musing on what a delightful series of surprises the day had been.

At least one passenger, a woman from Pittsburgh, agreed. "I missed Paris in the '90s and New York in the '20s," she said earlier in the day. "I'm glad I made it to this."

*(Editor's note: This article was originally published on NVToday in September 2006, only to be erased from cyberspace

a few weeks later in one of those small digital tragedies of the sort that afflict each of us from time to time. In the course of reloading it for the archives we republished it for those who may have missed it before.)