



## ON LOCATION HELEN LESSICK

### Beta Test: Innovation in administration at San José, California's Norman Y. Mineta Airport

**San José, the legendary capital** of Silicon Valley, is California's third largest city and the tenth largest in the United States. It's home to the corporate headquarters of Adobe, Cisco, and eBay, and major facilities of Hewlett-Packard, Hitachi, IBM, and Lockheed Martin. Apple and the Googleplex round out Silicon Valley's bright lights. Smaller stars of twenty-first-century technology abound, ready for their close-up and shot at fame.

It stands to reason the City of San José's Public Art Program would commission innovative tech-based projects for the city's new airport. But the real star of the Norman Y. Mineta San José International Airport art program is in public art management.

#### Masterpiece: The Master Plan

In the United States, municipal percent-for-art uses a formula of pennies on the dollar spent on above-ground construction to fund artists' commissions. In contrast, airport public art funding typically comes from airport user fees. The users, including tenant airlines, on-site car rental agencies, and chain restaurants, recognize public art as an enhancement for paying customers. Airport art funding has a flexibility befitting the client-based attitude of the businesses paying user fees.

The visionary leadership of Barbara Goldstein, San José's public art program director, reified by Mary Rubin, airport art program manager, resulted in a new and flexible commissioning partnership. The visionary airport public art master plan posits allied and evolving innovation in art and technology as the starting point.

Created by the Rome Group in close partnership with the city's creatives in diverse industries, the plan reflects Silicon Valley's innovative attitude. It provides artists a framework to use new technology and to change and diversify commissioned artworks as technology changes. Permissive, not proscriptive, the plan encourages partnership between industries, artists, and the multiple communities using the airport. Artists, graduate students in public art, critics, and anyone who opines that administrators are not creative must study San José's Airport Public Art Master Plan ([www.sanjoseculture.org](http://www.sanjoseculture.org)).

Artists always stretch boundaries, explore, and think of ways to break the system. The meta-commission of the public art master plan is its "art activation infrastructure," by the technical team of Gorbet+Banerjee (G+B). The plan stretches the very canvas of the public art experience through its visionary infrastructure design for future commissions; it exceeds and extends twentieth-century art support systems and challenges artists to field-test media art.

#### Entering the Digital Valley

In Silicon Valley, tech professionals and media artists talk about data: digital representations of phenomena and formula. It is not a substitute for experiencing stuff, but a new perspective: the stream of stuff-data. This leads to engaging data content, sometimes at the expense of physical and visual experience.

An installation called *eCloud*, by Nik Hafermaas, Dan Goods, and Aaron Koblin, is a phenomenological cluster of small rectangles of switchable privacy glass. Sited high above the concourse, the glass squares alternately appear clear and clouded. The amorphous cloud is as compelling as twinkle lights, and as resonant. Real content lies in the pedestrian level where meteorological data from around the globe are displayed on a flat screen. Is it cloudy and cool in Moscow, Russia, and lightning in Moscow, Idaho? That is interesting. The wired cloud sculpture is two dimensional, a shadow of the global perspective NOAA satellites deliver in real time.

More artistically successful, funny, sinister, and meaningful is Ben Hooker and Shona Kitchen's *Dreaming F.I.D.S.* The artists took the phenomenon of airport surveillance to absurdity. An aquarium stocked with live fish and submerged plants graces the concourse. Nonhuman life is remarkable in any U.S. airport, whether a lost sparrow or foraging rat. The aquarium draws harried travelers to its calming presence. The fish, however, are working a sting. Come close and they capture your image for display inside their tank. It is a delightful entrapment: Curiosity earns you a perp walk for the underwater set.

Equally playful and smart is *The Wunderkammer* by SuttonBeresCuller, a three-person collective. Their alternative curiosity cabinet comments on the pace of technological innovation. Witty and multifaceted, this cabinet recycles material from the past century when motherboards were plate-size and camera lenses were larger than your thumb. Old computers were harvested and cut like so many quilt squares. Silicon chips and cathode ray tubes were sorted and rewired into dimensional trees and folk art computer "bugs." *The Wunderkammer* is a quilted diorama of used tech posing as landscape and furniture, drawing in geeks, grans, and kids alike.

The team of Banerjee, Gorbet, and Gorbet (BG+G) contributed prototype artworks as well as the infrastructure. *Convey*, over the baggage conveyor belt, projects text and emoticons on luggage when an arriving plane disgorges its hold. Experienced by a visitor without checked bags, it is a slight graphic. Maybe the anxiety of waiting for your luggage adds to the work's frisson. This platform may improve if a future commission includes a creative writer, typographer, or graphic novelist as a contributor.

BG+G's *Chronos and Kairos* is much more successful. For this project the team included Margaret Orth, a weaver with a sense of physical texture and sculptural presence. This ceiling artwork consists of rows of articulated mechanical claws, opening and closing in a rhythmic pattern interrupted by a momentary clutch of jaws. It is mesmerizing and slightly scary, like the experience of the open ocean or time itself.

Similarly, Camille Utterback's *Shifting Time* tames technology to create an experience exceeding its data. Blending screens of twentieth- and twenty-first-century San José, this mural-sized projection is smart. The images split and weave, shift between color and black and white, invoking loss and possibility, site and memory. Activated by passing travelers, *Shifting Time's* technology truly serves the artist's vision.

The current temporary artworks, on display for two years, are great accomplishments. But better than these parts is the whole: artists and industry truly collaborating on a living public art platform.

**HELEN LESSICK** is an artist, public art activist, and consultant. Her artworks have been experienced in the United States and Europe. She has managed public art efforts across the country, and consults and writes on civic art issues from Los Angeles.



ABOVE: Ben Hooker and Shona Kitchen's *Dreaming F.I.D.S.* is a new take on the aquarium. MIDDLE: In *Dreaming F.I.D.S.*, surveillance software tracks both fish and traveler. BELOW: Banerjee, Gorbet, and Gorbet, with weaver Margaret Orth, *Chronos and Kairos*.



Camille Utterback's *Shifting Time*, which layers contemporary and archival photographs of San José, is an interactive piece triggered by the viewer's movement ([www.camilleutterback.com](http://www.camilleutterback.com)).