

# NEGOTIATING TECHNOSPHERIC HERITAGE: (NON-)HUMAN APPROPRIATIONS OF THE "TEMPELHOFFER FELD"

Christoph Antweiler, Felix Lussem, Arno Pascht, Carsten Wergin

**Quote as:** Antweiler, Christoph, Lussem, Felix, Pascht, Arno and Carsten Wergin (2023). Negotiating Technospheric Heritage: (Non-)Human Appropriations of the "Tempelhofer Feld".

This text was written as a follow-up to the workshop "Exploring Unruly Sites of More-than-Human Entanglements", organized by the German Anthropological Association's environmental anthropology working group. In the course of several hours of explorative research at pre-selected sites, the workshop participants attempted to ethnographically approach the concept of "unruliness" in different groups. The idea was to experimentally focus on the respective site's potentially unruly aspects which destabilize boundaries between nature and culture, or human and non-human as well as to gauge in what way the concept of unruliness can be made productive for empirical, place-based research. In order to illustrate the different perspectives on the shared experience, this contribution consists of partly chronologically, partly thematically arranged patches of ethnographic notes, pictures and reflections, each of which can be assigned to one of the group members: Christoph Antweiler, Felix Lussem, Arno Pascht and Carsten Wergin. Moreover, the contribution's patchy arrangement can be read as a tentative attempt at aesthetic representation of unruly relations that blur the lines between order and chaos.

This ethnographic vignette draws on three hours of collaborative work on the Tempelhofer Feld and its significance as an (un)ruly site within the urban fabric of Berlin.

The area of the former city airport Tempelhof is located just inside Berlin's inner ring. The airport itself was decommissioned in 2008 to become a joint space for human recreation and (urban) nature conservation (Gandy 2022). It was one of four sites to explore the ideas of "unruliness" and "more-than-human entanglement" in the context of a workshop of the GAA's Environmental Anthropology Working Group.

An airport is usually a highly regulated space with a very strict regime of keeping out unwanted human and nonhuman intruders to enable the smooth travel of goods and people. Air traffic infrastructure is therefore one of the backbones of the processes coined "globalization". Many even speculated about an end of globalization when flights were drastically reduced in the course of the coronavirus pandemic. Airport infrastructures enact industrial orderings of time and space characterized by dreams of disentangling productive from unproductive elements and by practices to only permit those connections that facilitate a linear mode of progress. Following the closure of the Tempelhof airport, the material components of this regime remained and provide room for a redefinition of both form and function by different, formerly excluded actors. Despite Berlin's rampant housing shortage, plans to privatize the vast area for residential construction were thwarted by a range of civil society actors who argued for the former airport to become a space for common use.



Four of us walked the Tempelhofer Feld in Berlin the area of the former Tempelhof Airport. On 20 May 2022, we spent a few hours in summerly weather with an anthropological eye and ear. We proceeded without strict pre-planning and did not use any specific anthropological method given the shortness of time. We collected observations, thoughts and interpretations with regard to unregulated spaces, settings or places ("unruly sites"), ruderality and the anthropocenic technosphere (concrete, tarmac, buildings, infrastructure).

We get off the bus – a fence is blocking the access to the Tempelhofer Feld – after a short walk along the fence we find an entrance – initially the old buildings of the airport block the view to the airfield – a sign-board explains in detail the location of buildings, the movement area, parking space etc. – Christoph writes with the chalk we brought the word "DISORIENT" on the board – the board however resists this try to disrupt the regulatedness, we hardly can recognise the writing – we move on and finally we see a large open place, but also 'occupied' areas: a fenced circus, several raised beds – we notice two women approaching the airfield – Christoph and Arno take the opportunity for a conversation with them – Arno prepares his mobile phone to record it – we ask: why are you here? – they answer: the wide, open space, to show my guest something [special?] of Berlin, it is cleaner than the other park [Hasenheide].

Upon arrival, temperatures have risen to the point where we opt for an additional bus ride to travel as closely as possible to the entrance gates in airconditioned comfort. The signage both motivates us to take group pictures and to obscure its meaning. We add the word "disorient" to highlight our shared interest in the ways in which people infiltrate conventional infrastructures of the environment and in doing so claim Tempelhofer Feld as their own.



The former airport site has become a refuge for many different species, some of them unique to the area and highly protected. It has become a temporary space of accommodation for human refugees as well, first during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015/16 and currently mainly for refugees from Ukraine.

Not long after we enter the space through metal fences and gates that once might have granted access to an industrial site, we find our two female interlocutors. Those chose to escape from the nearby park Hasenheide and its dust onto the bitumen of Tempelhofer Feld, as the latter proves more sensitive to their eye and allergy conditions. While three of us surround the two women firing away eloquent anthropological questions, a fourth wanders off to a nearby gardening site.



After entering the fenced site through one of the entrance gates that are closed at night to exclude human intrusion, we encounter two visitors and quickly decide to interview them about their perspective on the meaning of the Tempelhofer Feld for the city. While this first brief interview sets the tone for the rest of our ethnographic exploration, our almost habitual orientation towards recording fellow humans' verbalized interpretations of their own actions and our shared environment makes me consider the difficult access of doing more-than-human research for anthropologists. Surely, noticing not only human relations, but human-nonhuman and nonhuman-nonhuman in "social affairs" as well is a question of methodology, but even in the most "praxis-oriented" research it seems rather challenging not to rely on the "shortcut" of other humans' verbalized interpretations to make sense of the situations observed.

Since we only had a couple of hours for our explorative research we eagerly absorb all information our interlocutors so generously gift to us. One thing that struck us was that the two women going for a walk in the Tempelhofer Feld tell us they have fled from the nearby Hasenheide park because "dust" ("Staub") was bothering them. We could not ask them what kind of dust they were referring to because they signal an emerging impatience with our questions, but since the Hasenheide – in contrast to the Tempelhofer Feld, which is dominated by tarmac and dry grass fields – is a rather green place with a lot of trees, we figure they were talking about the high concentration of pollen the city was haunted by over the last few days. This immediately connects the situation to anthropogenic climate change as a main driver for the recent increase of allergenic pollen, especially in cities dominated by a few species of trees owing to modernist convictions of urban park planning. Yet another example of modernist control running wild and becoming increasingly unruly! Ironically, the former airport that now serves as a temporary refuge from such unruly urban nature, was equally part of the infrastructure of the "Great Acceleration" and is thus itself entangled with the unfolding of the Anthropocene.

The first project we look at is one where crops are cultivated on raised beds. It is aimed at people who have dropped out of the labour market, mainly for psychological reasons. The

central idea is that the calm and at the same time regular and prolonged occupation with plants leads to greater calm and structure and prepares them to reenter the labour market without pressure.



In the meantime Carsten and Felix go to the raised beds – we follow them after the interview with the two women – we learn from the person present that it is a special project – two members of the staff of the project are called and join us – one of them tells us that this is a project of the Albatros GmbH – it is financed by the Jobcenter Berlin and aims 'to make people with physical and psychic problems fit for the labour market' – participants have the project to engage in building raised beds as well as other objects for the place and to help gardening – they call the place “Stadtacker” (urban farmland).

Individual raised garden beds are scattered around and two men are quickly identified as site managers. Their interview illuminates more on the history of Tempelhofer Feld as it continues to transform from airport to public park and garden, a process that is complicated by various laws, institutions, stakeholders and their conflicting interests. One pertinent example are the raised beds themselves that are obligatory because the pavement underneath is part of the original airport infrastructure and thus heritage protected.

The “Stadtacker” is one of the earliest projects established on the repurposed airfield and illustrates how the Tempelhofer Feld today is used as a space for people who “dropped out” of regular societal expectations. The “social entrepreneurial” project, realized in cooperation with the city administration, aims at (re-)integrating people into the labor market as productive workers. We talk to one of the participants who shows us the raised garden bed she designed, telling us about her preference to work with wood rather than practice gardening. One of the project staff then explains that they have to use raised beds for cultivation since the decaying tiles on the ground are a heritage protected part of the airport infrastructure and the soil beneath is contaminated with kerosene and rubber from former airport operation. Such productive restrictions illustrate the impossibility of disentangling revered heritage from toxic legacy that haunts industrial ruins in the Anthropocene.



Leaving the raised beds behind and with them our point of entry near Bergmann Kiez in Kreuzberg, we direct our steps towards the other end of Tempelhofer Feld that pertains more to the Berlin neighbourhood of Neukölln. The 355ha space fits the state of Monaco one-and-a-half times but with one significant difference and downturn compared to more conventional parks: There is no water. There are no artificial lakes, ponds, streams, fountains. There is only large tarmac on which planes used to land and that is now travelled by bike, in-liner, e-scooter or foot. We audiotape its soundscape putting a mobile phone on the ground, first on the bitumen and later on the grass: Scattered voices and screams, birds, wind, wheels and occasional music.

The Tempelhofer Feld is so large that the opposite ends are hardly discernible from the edge. Again and again we wonder how long it would take to reach certain points in the near-infinity. Thus, the Tempelhofer Feld goes beyond the usual human scale, at least for pedestrians. The size leads to the fact that one only notices some things in the course of a longer stay, especially things that restrict the width and spatial openness. This applies, for example, to the dog training facility built between runways, which is limited by a low fence.



As we move on, we see people engaging in various activities, some ride a bike, others move around on foot, others are sitting on the grass – large areas are sealed. At first sight nothing seems to be changed since this area was an airfield, other areas are grass-covered. We find markings on the tarmac that we do not understand at first. Then it becomes clear that it is a 100-meter-mark for cycling, skating, running – we come across information boards, some with historical photographs – We observe and film a cyclist who practices tricks on his bike – another cyclist passes us and tells us a joke while he drives by – we laugh and he turns back to us – we engage in a conversation. He tells us that the Tempelhofer Feld is like his terrace. His flat does not have a balcony so he spends much of his leisure time there – he explains that the Tempelhofer Feld is also like an ocean but without water – we move on to visit another project, a community garden (“Kiezsarten”) – on our way we learn from another sign-board something about the sport ‘Jugger’ for which a training area was established.

The Tempelhofer Feld consists of (a) representative buildings surrounding the former airport, (b) runways, (c) extensive grassy spaces and partly tree-covered margins and (d) smaller buildings and facilities erected after the airport's closure that belong to specific projects. The surrounding buildings and runways do not appear to have been consciously altered since the closure of the airport, except for markings for cyclists or graffiti on the asphalt. The grass in the spaces in between is mown as far as possible.



Tempelhofer Feld is a part of the city of Berlin, but as such the opposite of urbanity. In the classical view, the city is characterised by a dense population, residents who are and remain strangers to each other, and an encompassing built environment. Only the last applies here. However, on the Tempelhofer Feld it is not the notorious houses, i.e. verticality, but the asphalted surface: horizontality. Pure horizontality is open, but at the same time it isolates access to the areas of the city below that contain historical traces. The isolation is physical in nature and ecologically effective (sealing), but also effective in terms of memory culture, possibly by preventing urban archaeological activities. There is no beach under the pavement.



At our arrival at the community garden we see an area with a great number of raised beds, planted with various kinds of plants, mainly vegetables – everything looks (intentionally?) improvised – the raised beds obviously were built and are used by different persons – we see also people who lie in the grass and have a picnic – later I read about the Kiezgarten on a web page about the Tempelhofer Feld: „Der Gemeinschaftsgarten Allmende-Kontor wurde 2011 von der Gründer\*innengruppe des Allmende-Kontors gegründet. [...] Seitdem gedeiht der Garten und seine Gemeinschaft mit mehr als 250 Hochbeeten und mit über 500 Mitgärtner\*innen – selbstorganisiert! Am 5. Juni 2014 hat sich der Verein „Gemeinschaftsgarten Allmende-Kontor e.V.“ gegründet. Zu besserer Organisation sind die Beete in Farbgruppen eingeteilt und nummeriert [...] Freie Beete werden jedes Jahr im März/April vergeben (je nach Corona-Regelungen). Die Termine werden zuvor auf der Website und über Aushänge im Garten bekanntgegeben“ (<https://www.allmende-kontor.de/der-garten/>) – again everything is well organised!

On the Tempelhofer Feld, given the enormous area, there are few notices or signs to guide or control behaviour. The situation is much different in the individual projects, however, where there are sometimes extensive boards with information, but also with instructions on how to behave.





During our very conversations with several people at Tempelhofer Feld, quite a few vocabulary words and phrases came up that could be productive for discussions about unruly landscapes and unruly sites. Given the enormous scale of the former runways and the areas between them, the words "freedom" and "vastness" came up again and again. The vastness was also repeatedly associated with the idea of "sea". Since the Tempelhofer Feld does not contain any large areas of water, it could be seen as a recreational space, whereas the metaphor of "urban oasis" hardly fits. One person we spoke to called himself a "Stadtindianer" ("urban Indian") and we wondered if this could refer to the fact that in a city, the epitome of order, density and planning, there are people who presently do not fit into this order, who want to fit in (or not) and want to do something about the city.

I read on the web page of the Tempelhofer Feld more about the various projects which exist additionally to those we visited – there are several projects on education about plants, animals, 'nature', but also some sport and art projects – everything is accessible in the Internet and one can register for each of these projects.

In the case of a somewhat longer time on site, but below intensive field research, social mapping, cognitive mapping as well as transect and other participatory methods would certainly be productive as short-term methods, bearing in mind the spatiality. Given that Tempelhofer Feld is a former transport infrastructure, newer methods such as infrastructural go-along would also be applicable.

As we agree upon during our exploration we clearly cannot define the entity designated as "Tempelhofer Feld" as an unruly totality – not least since the completely fenced area has become highly "securitized" and is only accessible to the public from dawn to dusk. However, its abandonment opened up a moment for articulating alternative forms of governance which are not primarily guided by the accumulation of private profits and reach out into the fabric of the city at large. Instead of a highly sophisticated infrastructure that subjects the vast area to a "monocultural" regime of channeling goods and travelers, we now find many different spatiotemporal regulations that sometimes stand in tension with each other like for example human recreation and nature conservation.

It is the intention of the Tempelhofer Feld programme that there should be little external intervention. This distinguishes the Tempelhofer Feld from many other formerly used and "left open" but de facto controlled or domesticated areas in Berlin. At the same time, it is a huge area that was levelled during the construction of the airport and is largely asphalted. This makes it an area that, in anthropogenic terms, represents technosphere in its purest form. The Tempelhofer Feld is part of a technosphere whose development as part of this technosphere was aborted: in this respect, it is a relic. Today, this relic is overwritten by other uses or valorisation (leisure, recreation, sport, meeting). Regular grass mowing prevents the establishment of a broad spectrum of ruderal plants.



Tempelhofer Feld on the one hand continues to be transformed by situated interventions. On the other hand, its future is framed by manifold rules, institutions and needs of its occupants. Reaching the improvised allotments on its Neukölln-end we feel less unruly (i.e. unregulated) than tamed by both the heat and the urban environment. Our visit to this 'landscape multiple' was joyous, longer than expected, and ended with a promise to keep track of its (heritage) future ([Wergin 2022](#)).



We experienced the open space and wideness of the Tempelhofer Feld, the flat but different surfaces of a large area and we met people who were attracted and who were enjoying these material qualities. The infrastructure of the former airport is now used for very different, originally not intended purposes and has thus been transformed by people using it into something completely new. Our short field trip shows that numerous regulations are in place in various forms: specified and fenced areas, rules, regulated and well organised projects etc. Nevertheless, the impression during the short field trip prevails that people perceive the Tempelhofer Feld as space for creative and uncontrolled use for various activities. Do the various interactions of people with the materiality of the Tempelhofer Feld, seen as assemblage or as network, create 'unruliness'?

The Tempelhofer Feld is hardly comprehensible using the polar terminology of orderly/ruled vs. unruly/unregulated such as in the dual notion of "Stadtacker". It is a deliberately only partially regulated, technospheric and infrastructurally shaped urban landscape with strongly domesticated natural components and spatially smaller mostly nature-related projects.

Our experience already reveals that the current global change is more than atmospheric warming. The Anthropocene is more than global warming. In light of this huge space of Tempelhofer Feld we might imagine the following: If you take all humanly transformed materials together and flat them out on this planet's land surface you will get 50kgs/m<sup>2</sup>. The so called "technosphere" amounts to 50kgs on every square *meter*. It is hard to believe it, but this was demonstrated by using hard data (Zalasiewicz 2017).

Engaging with ambivalent more-than-human entanglements of toxic hauntings and messy refuges might lead us to better notice unruliness in and across diverse projects of control - possibly even as potential to articulate different orders. While we experienced the Tempelhofer Feld as a contradictory place of various functional regulations and reinstitutions of order, it is also a place for personal realization and public negotiation of the common good, which begs the question if, without such sites, would there be less space for imaginations of other futures?

Wergin, Carsten (2022): All Landscape is Collaborative: Re-Mobilizing Care and Concern on a Damaged Planet. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 35(3): 445-459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2022.2095991>

Zalasiewicz, Jan, Mark Williams, Colin N. Waters, Anthony D. Barnosky, John Palmesino, Ann-Sofi Rönnskog, Matt Edgeworth, Cath Neal, Alejandro Cearreta, Erle C. Ellis, Jacques Grinevald, Peter K. Haff, Juliana A. Ivar do Sul, Catherine Jeandel, Reinhold Leinfelder, John R. McNeill, Eric Odada, Naomi Oreskes, Simon J. Price, Andrew Revkin, Will Steffen, Colin Summerhayes, Davor Vidas, Scott Wing & Alexander P. Wolfe (2017): Scale and Diversity of the Physical Technosphere: A Geological Perspective. *The Anthropocene Review* 4(1): 9-22.

Gandy, Matthew (2022): *Natura Urbana. Ecological Constellations in Urban Space*. Cambridge/London: MIT Press.