

Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Toward Infrastructural Critique

Marina Vishmidt

What would it mean to move from the practices and theories of institutional critique in the arts and expand these ideas into an infrastructural critique of the present? Could we posit such a shift within a definition of a “former West” as a temporal and historical category? There are a number of ways to consider infrastructure within the temporal categories at work in a speculative geopolitical concept like “former West.”

The passing into a condition of “formerness,” of obsolescence (or even of sublation, if we approach “former” as a kind of holding-on, the retention of an implicit or a potential) signals an operation performed by a present on a past. As such, the notion relies on a minimal armature to give it sense and provide a substratum for the elaboration of further and more complex trajectories.

“Infrastructure,” in this sense, can be considered a conceptual diagram that enables thought to develop. In the case of “formerness,” the infrastructure is a linear temporality. Here, criticality enters through a temporal cut, which reorients or disfigures the smoothness of the line. Temporality and infrastructure, however, are entangled in ways that can be generalized beyond this particular scheme. Recalling the

Kantian argument that space and time are the intuitions that make cognition in general possible, it seems that time could be defined both as an infrastructure and as something made of infrastructure. Making our incision into the topic at this level of abstraction propels us almost immediately to a much more prosaic thesis, which brings the transcendental down to the empirical. The shift in scale rather than kind reminds us of another categorical pairing, the virtual and the actual, neither of which carries a lesser share of reality than the other.

Time is an infrastructure because it is a condition of possibility for conscious perception and action; infrastructure is made out of time insofar as infrastructure is that which repeats. The repetition is normalized into everyday routine, and when it stops functioning, an aperture is cut into its artifice—through which history and power relations can be seen. Think of the global financial crisis; think of the water disasters in Flint or Detroit. The transcendental repetition is abstract (capitalism, class contempt, anti-black racism) and the infrastructural repetition is found in the material conditions of possibility (captive regulations, lead pipes, privatized governance) that sustain social relations in a particular shape over time.

To say that infrastructure “repeats” means that it works to enable a set of activities, and it works because the preconditions of its effectivity are neither visible nor relevant; these jut out when the infrastructure breaks down or if an element is isolated from the whole. The architecture theorist Reinhold Martin illuminatingly discusses infrastructure as a regime of intelligibility in terms that echo Michel Foucault’s “epistemes,” but with a more concrete mediation of the social with the technological: “The dumbwaiter, bound to slave labor, carries bottle after bottle up to Jefferson’s dining room. Its systemic properties tend to become visible only when the repetitions cease. If the wine ceases to appear, at some level and only for an instant, the entire apparatus of slavery comes into view. When you turn on the faucet and water does not flow, the entire water system leaps into the cognitive field.”¹

A literal reading of “infrastructure” as bridges, tunnels, and sewers is thus ineradicably tied to its function as a locus of social abstraction. It’s for this reason we could suggest, for example, that the dangerously frayed built environment of the United States offers one of the best views on the formerness of the “West” as a progressive theodicy, leveled down by necrocapitalist extraction, while it still exerts a disproportionate capacity to project violence across the globe and on its residents. Broken infrastructure is loquacious.²

With these motifs in place, what can we say about the putative shift

in the field of art from institutional to infrastructural critique? A preliminary reading could discern in this shift a pervasive tendency to prioritize the “real” (the irreducible, the traumatic, the chaotic) over the delimited, instrumental impact over symbolic action, agency over indexicality. “Institutional critique” is retrospectively identified with a circular or, at best, enervatingly mimetic relation with the phantom antagonist/enabler (or enabling constraint) of the institution that is also “in you,” whereas infrastructure sounds more like reality—its critique unfolds in a productive register, maybe even *as* production. Platforms can be built, and they can be negative, affirmative, or simply indifferent to the pressing questions that pose themselves in and through the field of art.

I will, however, refrain from charting some of these already well-trodden itineraries here, which would simplistically cast this shift as a narrative of expansion; from art into life (via its surrogates the community, the social, the relational), from studio practice to social practice.³ Such a shift would follow two avenues, one historical, and another that is prospective and political.

First, a shift in historiography, from a history of institutional critique to one of infrastructural critique. Indeed, the critique of infrastructures has, to a greater or lesser extent, often already been present in the critique of institutions in art practice.⁴ A more useable history of institutional critique would thus

include the Art Workers’ Coalition, Women Artists in Revolution, Adrian Piper, Cildo Meireiles, Tucumán Arde, Lygia Clark, David Hammons, PAD/D, Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), and Gulf Labor Coalition, as well as Michael Asher, Andrea Fraser, and the Guerilla Girls.

Secondly, a shift would be required in the current priorities for art practices. At minimum, the shift from institutional critique to infrastructural critique as I’m defining it is the move from the institution as a site for “false totalizations”⁵ to an engagement with the thoroughly intertwined objective (historical, socio-economic) and subjective (including affect and artistic subjectivization) conditions necessary for the institution and its critique to exist, reproduce themselves, and posit themselves as an immanent horizon as well as transcendental condition. These conditions include local and global labor markets, corporate power, property development, inasmuch as they manifest the structural violence of capitalism, racism, and gender, which is so often mediated by the reckless expansionism of art markets and spaces.

Overall, the shift pivots on the legacy of two senses of the transcendental lodged in the project of critique. Canonical institutional critique adopts a broadly Kantian sense of critique (although Pierre Bourdieu is the more frequent reference), preoccupied with defining and tracing the boundaries of that which is legitimately subject to critique in

terms of the implicated subject of knowledge. Infrastructural critique is broadly inspired by the Frankfurt School (Marxian, Klugean), preoccupied with highlighting the structural conditions for the possibility of critique and for its objects alike, with more activist dispositions involved here as well, if often at odds with institutional reckoning as a relevant sphere of activity. And yet, both of these traditions encounter an immanent limitation to their emancipatory agendas so long as they defend the horizon of disclosure or *deixis* as the normative one for art. In this schema, art can point, but it can’t grab.⁶

Now comes the question of whether a more productive reversioning of artistic agency in the infrastructural mode is rather a case of a frontal assumption of political or economic sovereignty, as most recently witnessed in the work of Jonas Staal and the New World Academy or the post-Rimbaudian jungle entrepreneurialism of Renzo Martens and the Institute for Human Activities (of course, to speak more generally, fictional and/or pragmatist artist-made institutions are a vast “genre,” too legion to invoke here). Superficially speaking, what seems to be transpiring in these cases is the enactment of a desire for power in and over the real, which can form a common pact with “the institution” that desires to expand its scope of social action beyond the exhibition and discussion of artistic positions. Tendentially, this is a process that both exceeds the institution and turns it into a different type of infrastructure.

In the framework of a “former West,” which inflects the argument to a more geopolitical pitch, a shift from the critique of institutions to the critique of infrastructures can paradoxically also mean the building of institutions—even if it is institutions of negation, as the art critic Suhail Malik has evocatively proposed in a series of talks at Artists Space in New York in 2013, entitled “On the Necessity of Art’s Exit from Contemporary Art.” Institutions of negation, however, need the affirmative moment that is infrastructure—both the technological and the social infrastructures, situated as they are within a global crisis of infrastructures for life, which are ecological and political. We will see what this looks like, although possibly one could point already to some experiments underway, becoming riot or becoming government. If the former signifies ephemerality and the latter stability, with each threatening to veer into the other,⁷ the biopolitical question of reproduction over time is often what is either hypostasized or elided in political theory.⁸ Yet, at issue in both is the relationship of temporality to infrastructure, with infrastructures here enacting the material guarantee of a movement’s persistence in time, the durable pathways and affordances for development, crystallization, and reconfiguring. This reproductive aspect of infrastructure, however, has to retain an openness to the “temporal cut,” which undoes crystallizations and institutions in the attempt to realize the desires that were the initial impetus for their establishment,

and which this establishment tends to block over time as they are subordinated to the survival of the institution. Infrastructure might be that which repeats, but this repetition is not without difference: it can monotonously produce the same differences (such as infrastructures that reproduce social inequalities), but it can also be a means of ensuring the reproduction of a wholly different form of social life over time. Finally, it is infrastructure’s transitive character—between the material and the possible, between machines and working drawings, between cognitive maps and what is pictured on them—that enables it to ask political questions that can no longer be replied to in the abstract, with the false totalizations of rejection or complicity.

1. Isabelle Graw, Reinhold Martin, and André Rottmann, “Do Media Determine Our Situation? Reflections on the Transatlantic Reception of Friedrich Kittler,” *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 98 (June 2015), p. 76.
2. See also the work of research agency Forensic Architecture, online at: <http://www.forensic-architecture.org/>.
3. A fiercely honed and irreplaceable challenge to the *structural* no less than locutionary naiveté of many sponsored social practice projects can be found in a post on the *-empyre-* mailing list, in a discussion of social practice and social reproduction by Dont Rhine, a veteran member of the militant sound research collective Ultra-red: “As artists and petite bourgeois intellectuals . . . all too often we give minor consideration to how our forms function within a larger political strategy or analysis. Consequently, we rarely possess the capacity to assess the efficacy of our forms because we lack the conception of (or political accountability to) the larger strategy articulated by a community in struggle for its very existence. ‘What was most important was that I did something.’ In the arena of

social conflict where the stakes related to failure can be existential, ‘doing something’ without thought to strategy, analysis, or accountability, can have devastating consequences for the most vulnerable. One such consequence is gentrification.” Dont Rhine to *-empyre-* mailing list, 2 May 2016, online at: <http://empyre.library.cornell.edu/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=1198&start=0>.

4. See Zöe Sutherland, “The World as Gallery: Conceptualism and Global Neo-Avant-Garde,” *New Left Review*, no. 98 (March/April 2016), pp 81–111. “If, that is to say, in conceptual tendencies from Duchamp down to 1960s and 70s institutional critique, the modernist self-interrogation of art had crossed over into an avant-garde probing of art’s institutional conditions, here such activities were undergoing a further shift toward a kind of general social critique, in which art as such was no longer the fundamental stake.”
5. For “false totalization,” I call on the insightful discussion in Endnotes, “Error,” in *Bad Feelings*, ed. Arts Against Cuts (London: Book Works, 2016). In the case of institutional critique, the term “art” can be substituted for “capital” to see if the analogy holds as a description of a certain orientation within this tendency. Concomitantly, the reasons that false totalizations often prevail in institutional critique is a matter both of analogy and discrepancy: these are not wholly unlike the reasons the critique of the social relation, that is, capital is prone to false totalization *and*, at the same time, they have to do with the extent and granularity of the capitalist totality that shapes art’s agency as an institution—the art institution is being analogized with capital, but it is actually just a limited instance of it. Thus, the false totalizations of institutional critique are metonymic as well as symptomatic: “If capital is the motive factor in shaping social forms which in turn leave their imprint on all the stuff of the world, we would of course be distinctly overestimating its spread and power if we really thought that there was nothing here that was not referable to—and explicable in terms of—capital. To theoretically project capital’s totalization beyond what capital can legitimately explain is to make a false—merely imaginary—totalization. The crud of the world, with its limits and affordances, extends far beyond capital’s horizon. Yet there’s a truth pictorialized in such false totalizations. While it doesn’t

encompass all the world’s stuff, capital’s self-totalization involves an inner tendency toward expansion, and the value form it autonomizes projects itself as the potential universal to all the world’s particulars. Capital thus makes a claim—however spuriously—to logical universality, while it subordinates one aspect of social reproduction after another to its prerogatives.”

6. See artist Irena Haiduk’s fantastic “Bon Ton Mais Non: Eighty point manifesto on (Polite) Art,” in *Irena Haiduk/Spells*, ed. Karsten Lund (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015). See, especially, pp. 97–100: “Polite Art points. It points at things that stand out. Hasn’t your mother taught you that it’s rude to point? Pointing is only good for assassinations or picking groceries.”
7. Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), pp. 277–300.
8. Hypostasized in various perspectives around the “commons” and “social reproduction,” which sideline the “cut” of political subjectivation from their account of social change, relying exclusively on an idealist organizational framework of “need”; elided in liberal political theory, which, in turn, does not see the economic and the social as appropriate terrain for political prescription.