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.”

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 narrative of expansion; from art into life (via its surrogates the community, the social, the relational), from studio practice to social practice. 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. A more useable history of institutional critique would thus include the Art Workers’ Coalition, Women Artists in Revolution, Adrian Piper, Cildo Meireles, 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” 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.

Now comes the question of whether a more productive re-versioning 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 reflects 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 Suhaib 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 possibly one could point already to some experiments underway, becoming riot or becoming political theory, which, in turn, does not 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, 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, 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, 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, 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, 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, the term “art” can be substituted for “capital” to see if the analogy holds as a description of a certain orientation within this tendency.

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 naïveté 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.
4. For “false totalization,” I call on the insightful discussion in Endnotes, “Error,” in *Bad Feelings*, ed. Arts Against Cuts (Lo. or acount WORKY, 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.
5. 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.