REVIEW

WHAT IS INFRASTRUCTURE AESTHETICS?

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INFRASTRUCTURE AESTHETICS

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The anthology *Infrastructure Aesthetics* (2024,) edited by Solveig Daugaard, Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt and Frederik Tygstrup, is the culmination of the research center *Art as Forum*, a collaboration between academic researchers, artists and cultural workers at Copenhagen University, running from 2020 through 2024. The volume consists of approximately 400 pages of high-quality academic text as well as 14 illustrations and photos of discussed cases. It includes an introductory chapter written by the editors and seventeen chapters, three of which are written by the editors, and four co-authored, bringing the number of contributors to twenty-one in total. Such a total of contributors is not that unusual, of course—nor is it unusual that such numbers represent certain challenges. Not least given the fact that the volume simultaneously sets itself the task of developing and introducing "infrastructure aesthetics" as a new academic notion, whilst keeping all contributors somewhat aligned with this neologism. Or more precisely: the overall ambition of the anthology is to apply the notion of "infrastructure"—better known from so-called infrastructure studies, STS, ANT, non-representational theory, etc., all of which mostly deal with the question of technologies in human societies—to the areas of art, culture and aesthetic practices at large. And it generally succeeds in doing so, at least judged by the individual chapters, which are genuinely interesting and of high quality. But as already indicated, it is not without some problems at the overall conceptual level, which I will return to at the end of this review.

Infrastructure Aesthetics is divided into three parts. Part One, entitled "Art: Inversion, Invention, Intervention," opens with Line Ellegaard's reconstruction of a feminist project from 1975, in which three female Danish artists—Hellen Lassen, Hanne Lise Thomsen and Else Kallesøe—used an exhibition format to investigate gender biases that prevented female artists from receiving equal attention in museums and critical reception. Central to Ellegaard is the notion of "infrastructural (in)attention": that there are (infra)structures in the artworld that divert attention away from certain practices and practitioners, and towards others. The chapter highlights how collaborative, activist-driven exhibitions (potentially) can invert such traditional infrastructural norms and reveal systemic barriers often overshadowed by the myth of artistic "greatness"—albeit not with much success, one might critically argue, as Ellegaard's project is about exhuming a historically overlooked case.

Chapter 2, by Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt, focuses on the 2022 edition of *documenta 15* in Kassel, curated by the Indonesian artist collective ruangrupa. Schmidt explores how multiple artist collectives challenged the dominant Eurocentric model of the heroic solo artist by spotlighting the Jakarta-based organization Gudskul's *Speculative Collective Board Game*—a large-scale participatory board game that invites players to navigate the "emotional, logistic, and economic challenges" typical of collective art making. A key tension in the chapter is how the supposedly transparent structures of large exhibitions still privilege the idea of individual authorship, despite the explicit effort of the involved artist collectives to invert "the infrastructures of modern European logics and logistics in the arts" (61). In chapter 3, "Practicing a Black Women's International: Infrastructures of a Black, Left, Feminist Sensibility," Emma Sofie Brogaard examines how the perspectives suggested in the title coalesced in international solidarity networks, thereby laying the groundwork for what has come to be known as intersectionality. Brogaard traces how "infrastructural labor" in radical Black women's cultural projects challenged capitalist property models and the singular-genius view of art, while also depending itself on dense networks of uncredited labor and ephemeral support structures. Drawing on archival examples she demonstrates how "the black left feminist sensibility as an infrastructure aesthetics in and of itself" forged "a collective, coalitional, interdependent, and transnational practice of work and life" (98).

Turning to debates over contested public statues, Amalie Skovmøller and Mathias Danbolt propose an infrastructural framework for understanding monuments. Rather than viewing them merely as static objects to be analyzed in and of themselves (as autonomous artworks determined by internal/formal features), they analyze the logistics of their creation, physical maintenance and cultural justification. Citing recent controversies in Denmark concerning the so-called "bust case," where (the copy of) a sculpture of colonial king Frederik V was thrown into the harbor by an anonymous group of Art Academy students, they argue that "answering the question *What makes a monument?* is more than an academic inquiry: It is a debate that taps into social and cultural frameworks in which identities, histories, and ideologies are performed, critiqued and potentially transformed—globally and locally" (102). This chapter is exemplary, I would argue, as it offers a quite sober, concrete model for "infrastructural inversion," turning attention towards the broad relational, financial, political and ideological networks that keep statues elevated—literally and figuratively.

Next, Eva la Cour's text explores her research-based collaboration with the late Belgian filmmaker and television producer Jef Cornelis, known for his experimental TV art programs in the 1970s and 1980s. Drawing upon archival footage and a live editing session at the University of Ghent, la Cour reflects on Cornelis' "parasitic" role in national broadcasting, harnessing the institutional bandwidth of the Belgian VRT while simultaneously challenging its traditional formats. She asks how image creation as an epistemological practice can be expanded, inviting collective processes rather than unilateral consumption. Here, the idea of "art [or television]-making as an infrastructural attention practice" (145) is brought to the fore. In the final chapter of Part One, Kristoffer Gansing and Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter survey how the advent of streaming, cloud storage and the dematerialization of film libraries has changed our sense of cultural preservation and accessibility. Through the artistic research project *A Video Store After the End of the World* (which is also the title of the chapter), in which the authors re-enact the VHS media vis-à-vis streaming by simply downloading, exhibiting and renting out films, they identify continuities and discontinuities—particularly in relation to how the models of platform capitalism extend the exploitative "asymmetric and often hidden labour of maintaining and caring for media infrastructures" (157). Besides being an interesting case (and a fun project), it also seems to work on a slightly different level than most of the other chapters in Part One. It both

focuses on academically scrutinizing the role of the infrastructures that condition cultural production, and at the same time opts to use art as a means to perform a so-called "double infrastructural inversion" of the platformization of media circulation—although the actual transformation of those infrastructures, of course, remains rather hypothetical (hence the typical interventionist vocabulary of "speculation," "suggestion," "generate possibilities for imagining and constructing alternative modes" (153), etc.).

Part Two, "Aesthetics: Organization, Mediation, Relation," concentrates on how infrastructures organize and mediate art's appearance—touching on exhibitions, scientific modeling in museums and the intratemporal qualities of artworks. The chapters here investigate how crises of autonomy and aesthetic relationality arise from the material conditions of production, climate science collaborations, as well as the intricacies of how art might serve as its own reflective infrastructure.

Chapter 7, "A Crisis of Autonomy: Critique of Art and Sexuality in 1974," authored by Frida Sandström, focuses on Lynda Bengalis' (in) famous 1974 provocative advertisement in *Artforum*, in which the artist posed nude with a dildo. This act "personified a changed relation between art and the market," (174) igniting debates that laid bare the interplay of sexual politics, feminist critique and the commercial underpinnings of artistic autonomy. Sandström argues that the scandal challenged the "critical subject" of modern art, revealing how "fake autonomy" and "auto-erotic critique" intersect with broader issues of gender and economics, thereby destabilizing modernist ideas of (aesthetic) purity and women's liberation. In doing so, the chapter unveils the "immanent sexual relations and capital relations" (191) of the art institution (as well as the nuclear family in general). In "Critical Zone(s) Observatories: Modelling Infrastructures of Climate Science in the Art Museum," Daniel Irrgang demonstrates how so-called Critical Zone research on Earth's fragile life-support layer intersects with museological practice. He highlights that climate change, as a "wicked problem" or an "hyperobject," is best understood via Donna Harraway's notion of "situated knowledges." By staging observatory-like installations, museums can let visitors (get a) sense (of) the patchwork of data, local measurements and system modeling that comprise Earth System Science. As the chapter notes, "it is, by definition, impossible to construct a full picture" (196) of global perturbations, so art exhibitions become partial, multi-perspectival vantage points where visitors confront

planetary complexity—as well as scientific, methodological and representational ones.

Chapter 9, "The Intratemporal Work of Art," by Tanya Ravn Ag, discusses how artworks produce and mediate unique experiences of time. The text investigates the "intratemporal" aspect of artistic objects—how they disrupt linear chronologies and situate viewers in overlapping temporal registers: personal, historical and environmental. The central argument is that the "intratemporal" is itself an infrastructural phenomenon, since art depends on myriad networks (archives, display spaces, participant engagement) to emerge as a layered temporal experience.

Next, drawing in particular on anthropological theories of (secular) rituals, Laurent Berlant's notion of "affective infrastructures" and "sense genres," as well as Kant and Hegel ("reflexive externalization" through artworks), Mathias Overgaard proposes that art functions as "reflective infrastructure." Art, he argues, as a ritual, creates "a momentary state of exception where people and things are experienced differently" (255), and thus can be discussed, maintained or transformed. When people gather around artworks, he notes, "we gather around shared images for making sense of ourselves and the world we inhabit" (238). Artworks not only appear as objects of contemplation but actively rearrange the social and conceptual frameworks around them. Hence, art is not purely representational. It reorganizes and reflects the social systems that sustain it (the artworld, but potentially also society at large), making those systems more visible, and at times reshaping, the social conditions that produce it. Obviously, one could argue, this kind of self-reflection seems more pertinent to some types of artistic expression (and consumption) than to others.

Similarly, Frederik Tygstrup's concluding chapter in Part Two posits that aesthetic phenomena themselves also function like infrastructures by connecting "different spheres of reality" (269) and facilitating flows of ideas, images and people. Citing Gilbert Simondon's *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (1958), Tygstrup asserts that artworks, far from being static objects, foster reconfigurations in the cultural landscapes they inhabit. "Aesthetic appearance," he argues, involves a transformative capacity—shaping new habits, altering horizons and reorganizing social relations, thereby reconfiguring the social and material networks it engages.

Part Three, "Politics: Institution, Reproduction, Support," shifts to artistic and cultural institutions, focusing on questions of resource distribution, social reproduction and the political stakes of hosting, curating and supporting art in publicly or privately funded contexts. The chapters analyze the "infrastructural switch" in poetry (e.g., the case of Yahya Hassan), gendered biases in the Danish music industry, the politics of emotion in *Brown Island Floating in a White Sea*, youth-centered collaborative art/sport protests, and more. The two final contributions consider the museum as a site of infrastructural friction and propose new hosting models that reframe institutional resources around collective capacity and critical engagement.

In "Poetry as Infrastructural Switch: Yahya Hassan and the Politics of the Danish Literary Circuit," Solveig Daugaard investigates Danish-Palestinian poet Yahya Hassan, emphasizing how his poetry became an infrastructural "switch" that exposed racial and class tensions within Danish literary culture. Poetry here also operates through digital circuits and media infrastructures, raising fundamental questions about representation and structural inequality. Kristine Ringsager and Katrine Wallevik's chapter examines the Danish music industry through a feminist lens, focusing on work of The Music Movement of 2019 (*Musikbevægelsen af 2019*), a group advocating for gender equity by fostering feminist collective capacity. The authors critique the industry's entrenched gendered norms—quoting Gry Harrit on how these norms paradoxically "have actually prevented the market from working," (311) thereby highlighting their economic absurdity. They document how feminist collectives can disrupt established patterns through activism, advocacy and collective organizing.

In the next chapter, "Brown Island Floating in a White Sea: On Affective Infrastructures," Anna Meera Gaonkar explores racialized experiences within Scandinavian art institutions through the example of the collective *Brown Island* at Konstfack in Stockholm. Gaonkar highlights how emotional experiences and racialization are deeply infrastructural, and how a so-called *Handbook for Collective Practice* developed by Brown Island can serve as a guide for navigating and surviving such institutional racism by developing "tactics to transgress institutional boundaries, while collectively demanding and creating spaces where we can dwell" (339). The following chapter is a conversation between Stine Marie Jacobsen and Joana Monbaron, who discuss the project *Group-Think*, a collaborative youth project presented at the Manifesta 13 biennial in

Marseille in 2020. Combining art, sport and protest, the project worked to connect the infrastructures of the art institution with other contemporary welfare state infrastructures in addressing issues of collective sensitivity, safety and education. In doing so, it critiqued neoliberal educational reforms and the infrastructure of art institutions in their handling of youth protests.

Rasmus Holmboe examines TOVES, a Copenhagen-based curatorial/artist collective (2010 to 2017) known for engaging directly with commercial and institutional infrastructures. Their final project, *THE SALE*, culminated in the group selling itself to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde. Holmboe argues this provocative act exemplifies an "infrastructural inversion" that critically exposes the hidden economic and institutional frameworks sustaining contemporary art—particularly as the museum is unable to continue the activities of the acquisitioned work. The final chapter by Xenia Brown Pallesen, "Infrastructural Orientations in the Exhibition," reframes the seemingly neutral design of art exhibitions as an active network of infrastructural "switches" that choreograph both movement and meaning. Drawing on the Danish term *formidling* (the mediation of knowledge or relevant perspectives to an audience), she shows how every label, wayfinding sign and wall-text functions much like road signage—directing where visitors go, what they look at and take interest in, and how they understand what they see. In this case, such curatorial choices end up reproducing nationalist and imperialist discourses and narratives.

CONCLUDING (AND CRITICAL) REMARKS

Overall, *Infrastructure Aesthetics* argues that art must be understood not only through what is visible on the walls or in performances, but also by tracing the hidden networks of labor, resources and social codes that shape production and circulation. In the words of Susan Leigh Star—whose approach features prominently in these essays—paying attention to "the activities involved in keeping infrastructure (and the objects embedded within it) functional" (102) shifts focus from singular, static objects to be subjected to hermeneutic scrutiny, towards dynamic relations unfolding over time, across distance and between human as well as non-human actants. Readers who have never encountered these perspectives before will find a wide array of case studies demonstrating such deep entwinements of art, infrastructure and society. Collectively, these chapters demonstrate how both artistic practices and academic analysis critically engage with—and often challenge—underlying infrastructures of

race, gender, institutional power and political activism. They underscore the capacity of art and art criticism/theory to reflect, disrupt and transform the social fabric; but also, at least potentially, how this critical engagement itself—both within art and academia—is shaped by such infrastructures.

The fact that the anthology draws on existing theories from adjacent fields is, of course, quite normal—so is the import of academic concepts/notions. In fact, one might occasionally wonder if it is not primarily the notion itself ("infrastructures aesthetics") that is novel, rather than the academic insights it affords. Much of this seems quite reminiscent of so-called "new sociologies of art," which could broadly be described as "Howard Becker, but with more attention to more-than-human aspects than he is typically thought of dealing with." And Becker is indeed a frequent reference in the volume—in particular his notion "art worlds." Following this, one might even wonder if the notion of "infrastructure"—let alone *aesthetic* infrastructure—is a useful analytical concept. What does it add, for instance, in comparison with Becker's *art world*, the *art institution* (Danto and Dickie), *assemblages* (Deleuze & Guattari), *actor-networks* (Latour, Hennion), etc.? And at what cost? If the concept were to succeed academically and become a stable reference point in academic discourse, would we, for example, now forever be condemned to distinguish explicitly between, on the one hand, *material* infrastructures (i.e., the physical and tangible systems most people associate with the term, such as the so-called "*critical* infrastructures" currently dominating geopolitical discourse), and on the other hand, the broader, more abstract sense proposed here—encompassing intangible, immaterial, ephemeral, cultural and ideological (non)stuff? Have we, with the neologism "infrastructure aesthetics," gained a word in our analytical vocabulary—or have we, in fact, lost one?

Another pressing question concerns the consistency, meaning, and coherence with which the term "infrastructure" is employed. Can "infrastructure" simultaneously be applied to describe: (1) All those things that makes things art (and maintain it as such). (2a) That which artworks examine—including both self-reflexive art labeled "institutional critique" (or here: "infrastructural art")—*and* (2b) the artistic practices that deal with other, non-art infrastructures. (3) As well as an infrastructure in and of itself, that is, art as a relational forum—whether in relation to art as a field or to a specific artwork? Is this conceptual application perhaps too broad and diffuse, one might

ask? Can it yield anything analytically useful? What does this to do its critical aptitude? And if so, how much extra preliminary spelling out of definitions and distinctions would that entail? The same concern applies to the addition of "aesthetics" (which seldomly adds much precision to discussions, anyway). For instance, what might be labeled "the aesthetics *of* infrastructures"—i.e., how tangible or nontangible infrastructures address themselves to our senses (or not), or even possess some strange kind of beauty to us, however traditionalist such a term might sound—play a surprisingly minor role here, although it is occasionally used in this sense, but typically then with no discussion of how this is related to the novel conception thereof suggested in the anthology.

It seems as if this imprecision—paradoxically, but also quite informatively— may be the product of the very infrastructures from which the anthology itself emerges: a collective academic research project taking place over five years, involving academics and practitioners from different perspectives, likely with divergent agendas. Following this, one might further argue that the anthology neglects to mention, or simply overlooks, how it is itself infrastructurally entangled with—and perhaps even conditioned by—a set of quite particular ways of talking about the art world that at present are most available to us (whilst others less). Discourses loaded with reference to certain theoreticians and concepts (of a certain origin, observation and gender), which themselves are interlaced with broader agendas, challenges, and fashion fads within Academia. Symptomatically, when reading the book, I occasionally felt this perverse craving—which I otherwise never would—for someone to mention unfashionable theoreticians like Jürgen Habermas or, worse, Niklas Luhman. Thankfully, one of the editors, Frederik Tygstrup, does in fact in his own chapter break the ranks by referencing (albeit briefly) the former—while still showing the decency *not* to bring up the latter. Similarly, someone like the once so-often quoted Nicolas Bourriaud is remarkedly absent in the volume, despite the historical and conceptual relevance to the chapters of Tygstrup and others. But perhaps it is much too recent, that he has fallen from infrastructural grace?

In addition, it is occasionally unclear whether "infrastructure aesthetics" is primarily an analytical or interventionist/ideological concept. Clearly, the anthology displays an enduring drive to challenge Western, heroic notions of the predominantly male artist—a project well-suited to an infrastructural perspective. Simultaneously, however, the almost exact same figure is often reproduced, even

re-romanticized, in ways not so different from what is being dismantled. Artists—sometimes individuals, more often collectives—occupy the role as super-agential subjects performing infrastructural inversions that reveal the hidden mechanisms of the artworld that no one else supposedly could detect. At other times, artists and artistic practices rather seem to function as puppets in some sort of ventriloquist performance in which they (are brought to) "speak on behalf" of an academic-slash-ideological agenda. Along the same lines, there is a tendency to romanticize collective production at the expense of individual artmaking, not least the heroic conceptualization thereof. There are of course good reasons for criticizing many of the assumptions underpinning the latter—especially the basic fact that such autonomous individualistic production ever happens, which it rarely does, even regular/old-school human-centric sociology of art would argue. Yet, it is less clear why collective processes should *a priori* be more just, balanced, or free of asymmetrical relations as well as of other forms of exploitation and oppression, etc. This slant is particularly dominant in part three of the anthology, where, as the introduction summarizes, all contributions "critique neo-liberal extractivist technologies and institutional staleness at work in the art worlds" (21), but this agenda permeates many of the other chapters as well (perhaps especially those of Ellegaard and Schmidt). Obviously, these things are (knotty) facts and deserve to be subjected to "infrastructural inversion." But as a consequence, the artworlds described in the anthology (except from in a few chapters) tend to come across as rather unpleasant arenas of human (and non-human) interaction *tout court*. Ideally, I would argue, a concept like "infrastructure aesthetics" should also be capable of capturing some of the *less* problematic aspects of those worlds in which art functions as forums for interaction that truly are worth pursuing? Otherwise, why should we—as artists, audiences, critics or academics—even bother engaging with it?

That being said, engaging with the anthology *Infrastructure Aesthetics* certainly is worth the effort—especially for those wishing to keep track of where the contemporary frontline of cultural and aesthetic analysis is at these days. And setting up and maintaining infrastructures that allow to diverging academic perspectives is, in itself, praiseworthy.

Jan Løhmann Stephensen