

# New Infrastructures

## Performative Infrastructures in the Art Field

*Rachel Mader & Signe Meisner Christensen (eds.)*

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## Contents

- SIGNE MEISNER CHRISTENSEN & RACHEL MADER  
5— Introduction
- ELKE KRASNY  
13— On Care and Citizenship  
Performing Healing (in) the Museum
- LUIZA CROSMAN  
29— Strategy and Spell  
Art as Infrastructural Change
- GABRIEL FLÜCKIGER  
53— Institutions as Semantic Forms  
Examples of Self-Organized Practices in Switzerland
- DITTE VILSTRUP HOLM  
67— Organizing in the Public Interest  
Participatory Organizing and Art's Organizational Turn
- RACHEL MADER  
87— Infrastructure as Chewing Gum  
Practice-based Reflections on How to Play with Institutional Parameters
- JAMIE ALLEN, BERNHARD GARNICNIG & LUCIE KOLB  
105— Interviews with the Swamp Thing, the Poacher and the Healer
- ANNETTE MAECHTEL  
119— Only Temporary. Structures in Flux  
Projects by Botschaft e.V. (1990–1996)
- SANDRA VOLNY  
137— Resound Kefalonia  
A Case Study of “The Surviving Aural Spaces”
- SIGNE MEISNER CHRISTENSEN  
157— Starting from the Middle—Handshaking in Hökarängen  
Art Projects as Working Methods for Producing the City Differently
- SARAH KANOUSE & NICHOLAS BROWN  
183— Common Tensions
- EVE OLNEY  
209— Commoning-Based Collective Design  
Moving Social Art Practice Beyond Representational ‘Rehearsals’ into Concrete Social Solutions

KATHRINE BOLT RASMUSSEN

- 233— The Art Institution as a Communist Training Ground  
On Casco's Attempt to (Pre)figuratively Become an Institution of the Commons

SEVIE TSAMPALLA

- 257— Commoning and *Learning from Athens*, Documenta 14 (2017)  
Performative Occupations, Instituting and Infrastructures

- 279— CONTRIBUTORS

# Introduction

## New Infrastructures—Performative Infrastructures in the Art Field

SIGNE MEISNER CHRISTENSEN & RACHEL MADER, *editors*

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Organization, or the ways in which art connects to its social and political surroundings, is increasingly becoming a focus of attention in the contemporary art field. Prompted by a situation in which contemporary art is simultaneously handled as a touristic device, as a value in creative economies, as a means for creating amiable socialities or as space and moment for critical reflection on social as well as personal issues, art practices and curatorial initiatives have, in recent years, placed the organizing process itself at the very center of their efforts. Thereby the term ‘infrastructure’ has become an intensely discussed issue as it is a central place for those repositionings: a very much hidden mode of operation that has only now started coming to the surface.

Infrastructure is concerned with connecting people and things, and thus constructing a common world. However, while enabling connections, infrastructure simultaneously shapes these connections, in the sense of an often hidden “protocol” (Rogoff, 2013). Thereby, infrastructure allows some ideas to become valuable and some forms of life to exist, while precluding others. As the American anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli argues, infrastructures are belated events. They can be grasped only from their tailings—or from the effect they leave behind (Povinelli, *The Infrastructure Summit*, Bergen, 2016). Similarly, urban theorist Keller Easterling describes infrastructure space as the “undeclared but consequential activities” of an organization, not the text but the constantly updating software that manages the text (Easterling, 2014, p. 23). Therefore it seems comprehensible that organizational issues—the *infrastructural*—are, as in this publication, theorized not as explicit sovereign powers, but rather as discrete operations,

looking at the ways through which juridical, spatial or logistical systems are managed and coordinated.

Responding to this, recently emerged approaches to infrastructure and organizing in the arts and critical cultural studies have attempted to redefine the meaning of practices engaging with the parameters they are interwoven with and surrounded by as critical or even radical action. Such practices even become platforms for collective, cross-disciplinary inquiries and for art and social action to merge as crucial sites of experimentation between embodied experience, social struggle, and collective appropriations of space. Increasingly, art museums and other more or less institutionalized art spaces become framed as scenes for public assemblies, social gatherings, and participatory commitments. The adaptation of “activist” strategies and co-creative practices into highly institutionalized settings is a signal of this. Irit Rogoff’s statement on the curatorial is therefore valid for those practices as well: the curatorial, she claims, has the capacity of bringing together “the necessary links between collectivity, infrastructure and contemporaneity [by] working simultaneously in several modalities, kidnapping knowledges and sensibilities and insights and melding them into an instantiation of our contemporary conditions.” (Rogoff, 2015, p. 48) It is precisely this contested and performative nature of the concept of infrastructure which this issue aims to seize upon and explore further. When considered a performative enactment, the concept of infrastructure may work as a tool to make clear what’s at stake in radical forms of organization, practices of commoning, or in curatorial experiments in the art system. Performative, then, not only means to consider the infrastructural as something fluid and constantly changing, but also as something malleable, which those living and acting within can shape. So one of the major interests in the texts gathered in this issue is the search for moments where these kinds of action are manifested and the tracing of all the different modes in which the actors themselves use or engage with their infrastructural environment for much more than just acting within it.

This issue on *New Infrastructures* sets out to map an emerging field of experimental infrastructures in the art field. As an interdisciplinary endeavor

it includes perspectives, tactics and attitudes by artists and curators, as well as from the fields of geography, architecture, anthropology and organizational theory. It gathers theoretical as well as practice-based perspectives and close readings of case studies. Thereby the contributions trace all kinds of different negotiations between the involved stakeholders, pointing to all those moments where it is possible to shape and reconfigure infrastructural parameters instead of understanding them only as limits.

The structure of the issue thereby encompasses diverse attitudes and strategies of how to interact with the infrastructural:

### **Appropriation of Infrastructure**

In the past two to three decades the art world has witnessed an astonishing rise of new infrastructural settings, such as large-scale institutional constructions like museums or biennales, but there has also been considerable growth in the sector of small spaces and initiatives. Whereas a lot of the smaller initiatives have been funded with a spirit of self-determination, this attitude of political/institutional agency has, to an increasing degree, migrated to the larger institutional structures as well. This is due to actors coming from self-organized structures and introducing the same attitudes within larger and more traditional institutions. As a consequence of this quantitative rise of, and experimentation with, institutional form we find quite a number of modes and models of reinterpreting different levels of institutional conditions. These engage with space, time, economic means, communication, display, public imaginaries and all the other material and immaterial resources that go into institution making.

In “On Care and Citizenship: Performing Healing (in) the Museum” Elke Krasny discusses the use of the museum as a ‘third space’ where it is redirected not only for issues that are neglected in the common social sphere, but also these issues are addressed in a way that would not have been possible within this sphere. The project she is discussing—Simone Leigh’s *The Waiting Room* (New Museum, New York, 2016)—links care and health issues with aspects of political mobilization and practices of empowerment. The museum, according to the author, acts as a space in

which these issues can be brought together, where new ideas of citizenship can be discussed and thereby the traditional institution experiences a self-reflection with reference to its own history.

Artist Luiza Crosman's essay also looks at how art spaces/institutions can be treated as "potentialities." Her point of departure, though, is her own artistic practice. She uses this practice-based approach to interact with an existing infrastructural framework, with the aim of opening up these structures for experiments. Linking her own practice with theoretical reflections on "systemic thinking" and the "post-contemporary time complex" she pleads for working with a "speculative" attitude, which allows concrete situations to be handled with reference to global-scale questions.

A similar interest, though again argued from a different perspective, is brought in by Gabriel Flückiger. In his text, "Institutions as Semantic Forms. Examples of Self-organized Practices in Switzerland," he looks at how 'real' institutions are used as "semantic forms" for introducing new infrastructures by self-determined organizational bodies. Thereby "institutional imagination" grows on existing infrastructure, simultaneously not accepting its boundaries, but rather using only its scaffolding as points of reference from which to develop new forms of organization each time.

In "Organising in the Public Interest" Ditte Vilstrup Holm dismantles the question of infrastructural power from the familiar realm of institutions in order to engage with the question of organization in participatory art projects that take place beyond the traditional space of art institutions and in relation to multiple partners. Employing John Law's concept of "modes of ordering," Holm takes an organizational stance in arguing that when entering a collaborative situation beyond the art institution, participatory art practices are required to adapt to agendas of public interest emanating from the collaborating institutions.

## Playing Formats

Playing with established formats—be it on the level of organization or with reference to contexts you have to provide as parts of your task—is an interesting and promising approach for interacting with fixed infrastructural settings, even though the question of this being read as a political,



even subversive, attitude will never find an easy answer. A number of texts look at this potential, asking not only for gaps in infrastructural settings but also articulating modes of how to 'play' and/or destabilizes them from within. In "Infrastructure as Chewing Gum. Practice-Based Reflections on How to Play with Institutional Parameters" Rachel Mader suggests that institutional framing should not be considered as a stable structure even though it is represented as such in organigrams and similar representation, but instead should be considered more as a scaffolding with loopholes that bear the potential for emancipatory appropriation. Looking closely at her own institutional framework (an art school) she not only offers insight in the logic of this specific institutional self-understanding, she also describes ways in which she deals with nonsensical regulations while using these gaps. In "Interview with the Swamp Thing, the Poacher and the Healer" Jamie Allen, Bernhard Garnicnig and Lucie Kolb design three semi-fictional "characters" in order to discuss ways of how individuals engage with and perform the institution in a self-conscious and critical way. Thereby, they plead for a "curatorial" attitude and self-understanding starting point from which to interact with the parameters institutions are built on.

The oppositional strength of "purely temporary structural fixations" is at the center of Annette Maechtel's interest. Looking at the transdisciplinary collective Botschaft e.V., which was active in East Berlin in the early nineties, she discusses how their activities oscillated between "institutionalizing and instituent practices." At the same time, they tried to resist representational lectures of their work in order to preserve a self-determined scope of action as well as the authority on how they would be told.

### **Situated Practices**

Despite often being globally shared critical debates, infrastructural issues are to a broader extent locally and/or nationally embedded. As such, the actors translate their discursive sensitivities into a local practice. A couple of authors look at these specific constellations by not only analysing the individual case, but trying to link those situations to a theoretical framework. In both Sandra Volny's and Signe Meisner Christensen's texts, infrastructure is associated with the material, sensorial and social constal-

lations of spaces. Performative infrastructures are here identified with the possibilities of connecting differently to a location. In “Resound Kefalonia,” Sandra Volny reflects upon an artistic experiment on the Greek island of Kefalonia. Through the embodied practice of listening to sonic traces of the past, Volny argues that hidden stories residing in the background noise of a place can be revealed. Signe Meisner Christensen, on the other hand, in a case study of the art project *Home Works* at Konsthall C in Stockholm, analyses how artistic and curatorial forms of responsiveness to a location may enable new collective imaginaries of how to inhabit a neighborhood.

### **Strength of Informal Ties**

In recent years, quite some metaphors, e.g. network, platform, interpretative community (Stanley Fish), cluster—to name a few—have been used to describe new ways of how gatherings based on shared interests or concerns are organized. Their fluid and open configuration was set as an alternative against rigid structures, thereby establishing new modes of interaction and production that often aren’t stable, but rather subject to constant negotiation. At the same time, these informal ties request a lot of knowledge and communication in order to be visible. What does it take for such kinds of informal ties to be a perceivable mode of organization? In Sarah Kanouse and Nicholas Brown’s text “Common Tensions” informal networks are the locus through which decolonial practices of land can be explored and worked out. In the personalized format of an epistolary account, Kanouse and Brown document their experiences with healing relationships to land in a site-specific project situated in the Kickapoo valley in southwest Wisconsin. Here the informal becomes a methodology for fabricating an alternative infrastructure which connects settler environmentalists, Native Ho-Chunk activists, as well as artist-researchers around the question of land management.

### **Commoning Practices**

As non-representative strategies for organizing collective action, commoning practices have influenced activism and social movements during the past decade. In commoning practices radical politics emerge as immanent

to the life forms that such practices invent. These experiences have been adopted into the art field and into institutional practices as well. Thereby they have responded to local urgencies as well as having tried to interact with established institutions. The latter especially necessitated strategic negotiations between the involved actors, where tensions arise, due to the hierarchies that are structuring the field.

Eve Olney's article "Commoning-based Collective Design. Moving Social Art Practice Beyond Representational 'Rehearsals' into Concrete Social Solutions" traces such a process by looking at two art exhibitions centered on precarious living conditions and two communal projects wherein the "commoning-based collective design" is practiced. By referring to a theoretical framework (including, among others, Cornelius Castoriadis and Murray Bookchin) the author suggests a "new field of discourse" where usually separated areas like architectural and artistic practices are brought together as interwoven and interacting.

In her text, "The Art Institution as a Commonist Training Ground," Katharine Bolt Rasmussen analyses a recent example of institutional experimentation—the Utrecht-based exhibition platform CAI Casco Art Institute, which in 2017 launched a series of events that were to remodel the institution as a common property according to ideas of commoning. Bolt argues that by turning decision-making processes that normally take place behind the closed doors of the institution into a collective, democratic issue, CAI succeeded in proposing an alternative model of institution, one that challenged the values of professionalization and productivity, which have come to dominate art institutions today. The question of what it takes to common an art institution also runs through Sevie Tsampalla's article "Commoning and Learning from Athens," a case study of Documenta 14 in Athens. Tsampalla suggests that, in the context of Athens, commoning should be understood as a sharing process with the context in which it takes place. She argues that even though the temporary biennial structure of d14 carried a potential for establishing alliances with local communities and grassroots movements, the biennial as a whole fell short of implementing commoning structures. Ironically, it was only after d14 had left Athens that

self-organized events, independent of curatorial intentions, employed the biennial infrastructure for commoning purposes. \*

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