

INTRODUCTION //

FEMINIST INFRASTRUCTURAL CRITIQUE. LIFE-AFFIRMING PRACTICES AGAINST CAPITAL

Feminist Infrastructural Critique is dedicated to understanding how infrastructure impacts on the condition of life and the planet. Today, bodies, minds, feelings, and spirits of living and sentient beings, including human beings, as well as environments and resources, are fully infrastructuralized. Infrastructure includes all kinds of essential infrastructure, technological and digital infrastructure, as well as social and caring infrastructures. We are all living with infrastructures, which, most of the time, are not ours, in the sense that we ourselves have neither developed nor constructed them, but also not decided over their making. *Feminist Infrastructural Critique* manifests through use and inhabitation as much as through new imaginaries and critical theories. *Feminist Infrastructural Critique* manifests through an insistence on care, repair, and maintenance, as well as through resistance, refusal, protest, or, sometimes, attack. Through practices of use and resistance, new infrastructural imaginaries come alive in order to overcome infrastructural oppression, violence, and discrimination. Daily infrastructural labors are at the heart of *Feminist Infrastructural Critique* and new infrastructural imaginaries.

— Even though most of us have not been actively involved in building the infrastructures we use, we dedicate time and energy to their maintenance and repair and engage with them through emotional investments including feelings of anger, frustration, or even despair when infrastructure fails to work. We find ourselves relying on infrastructures that have not been constructed following democratic procedures of decision-making, while often not even seeing the effects of normalization or injustice these infrastructures have on the condition of daily life. We are connected to, and through infrastructures, for which taxpayers' money is being invested, while these infrastructures often serve the interests of capital and do not follow principles of infrastructural justice and solidarity. In light of the intensification of globalized neoliberal capitalism, austerity politics, ongoing climate ruination, environmental destruction, and increased social injustice because of rampant extraction and exploitation, infrastructure has emerged as a key concern of critical theory and study beyond fields and disciplines claiming the expertise on infrastructures such as urban planning, engineering,

environmental sciences, digitalization, or policymaking. Infrastructure was seen as instruments of power in the hands of capital, planning, bureaucracy, and technocracy.

— In 2016, Bergen Assembly, a triennial international art event dedicated to new formats of artistic engagement and public events in the city of Bergen, used “infrastructure” as its keyword and wrote the following: “By looking at many different understandings of this keyword – from legacies of colonial and early capitalist systems of governance to current conditions of the financialization of the cultural field to the subversive possibilities of thinking and working with infrastructures as sites of affect and contradiction – infrastructure emerges as the invisible force of manifest culture today” (Rogoff et al. 2016; Bergen Assembly 2016). This infrastructural turn has not only led to cultural and art-based investigations of infrastructure, but also to the formation of infrastructural humanities, most broadly understood. In the contexts of art and architecture and their visual and spatial expressions with which we are concerned here, there has been much critical engagement of artists, activists, and critical spatial practitioners with the infrastructural condition, with a focus on both infrastructure for the arts, as well as how art-based practices can question, appropriate, or even destroy existing infrastructures.

— The editors’ interest in infrastructure in the contexts of art, architecture, and curating comes out of their long-term engagement with concerns of care (Krasny et al. 2021, Krasny, Perry 2023). Care always relies on infrastructure, as infrastructure requires to be cared for in order to be reliable infrastructure. During the COVID-19 pandemic, public political speech mobilized the terms “essential infrastructure” or “critical infrastructure” to make the centrality of infrastructure to human life as well as to the economy understood. The global pandemic between 2020 and 2023 also made it apparent that the interests of human life and those of the economy are not only not easily aligned, but in actual violent conflict. The pandemic also made abundantly clear that infrastructure is deeply embedded in social, ecological, and technological relations, and that infrastructure shapes and organizes the conditions of daily life under specific political and economic regimes. Living through the pandemic raised our awareness of these infrastructural entanglements and made us interested in how feminist practices in art, architecture, and curating, as well as their critical and activist scholarly study, respond to infrastructural complexities and contradictions. All of this also made us aware of the fact that there is a need for a distinctly feminist analysis and critique of this infrastructural condition.

— The original call invited contributions that would develop a distinctly feminist critique of infrastructure. As the contributions kept coming in, we realized that together they expressed a very distinct form of critique: avoiding the lamentations of “there is no alternative” and resisting giving in to resignation and depression, the authors describe life-affirming practices aiming to re-learn, re-invent, and re-use existing infrastructures which were built in the name of capital. Life-affirming practices articulate the rights to infrastructure and render legible the “slow violence” (Nixon 2011), as well as the “continuous labor” to prevent infrastructure from failing vulnerable and precarious bodies and environments and to change the oppressive system, which is at once held by the infrastructure and holds the infrastructure. Given the catastrophic and crisis-riven conditions of our global present, it is necessary to understand the ways in which all elements of life, such as water, air, or earth, have all been historically transformed into capitalist infrastructure by colonial patriarchy. Such capitalist, colonial, patriarchal infrastructure, sometimes built or imagined centuries ago, continues to enforce superiority over living beings. *Feminist Infrastructural Critique*, as articulated in this issue, addresses such historical infrastructural violence and harm and its afterlife. The multiple perspectives brought together in *Feminist Infrastructural Critique* include dimensions of legal imaginaries, the rights of citizens, the rights of nature, and policy as a terrain of feminist intervention and analyze colonial, patriarchal, heteronormative, ableist infrastructural relations marked by power, violence, extraction, exploitation, and exclusion.

— Writing with and from practice, all the contributors to this issue contribute towards introducing and further developing a distinct notion of *Feminist Infrastructural Critique*. Infrastructures are the material legacies of modern, colonial, patriarchal capitalism and the current expression of contemporary, neo-colonial, neo-patriarchal, and neo-liberal capitalism. Feminist approaches to infrastructure show that critique is a form of practice that acknowledges infrastructure interdependencies and searches for ways to undo infrastructural violence and to re-imagine infrastructures beyond the ruling ideas and hegemonic regimes of power. *Feminist Infrastructural Critique. Life-Affirming Practices Against Capital* comprises a broad spectrum of texts as an introduction to a variety of life-affirming infrastructures. As feminism is not monolithic, all texts in this collection are situated in specific contexts and localities, some are written collectively, with living beings involved. Yet there are deeply rooted connections that we aim to make visible.

The overall questions “How are existing infrastructures used and maintained to become life-affirming?” as well as “How are existing infrastructures critiqued in order to be used otherwise?” guide this issue.

— The introduction opens up different ways of reading this issue on *Feminist Infrastructural Critique*. As editors, we bring our expertise in curating and education to this issue and invite you, dear readers, to make use of the practice-based and theoretical offerings in different ways, which highlight dimensions and strategies of life-affirming practices against capital. The longer we engaged with the different contributions, which together present contemporary approaches to what *Feminist Infrastructural Critique* does, we came to realize that there could be more than one table of contents; that is to say more than one table of contents would make sense as there are different, meaningful ways of grouping and organizing the contributions. Therefore, we have decided to share with you three different reading paths in addition to the structure of the table of contents. A reading path offers possibilities how one can read a text or, in our case, a constellation of texts that together produce contemporary *Feminist Infrastructural Critique* across art and architecture. The three reading paths open up a number of productive resonances and relationships between the fourteen different contributions written by 36 authors. They bring to the fore that distinctly feminist infrastructural concerns are shared across sites in different geographies. The three reading paths are the following: Reading Path One: Basic Needs and Political Rights; Reading Path Two: Sites and Conditions; Reading Path Three: Elements and Natures.

— In what follows, we introduce the contributions in their order of appearance in the table of contents. The structure we chose as editors followed from related infrastructural concerns and resonances we felt between the practices of the contributors. The order takes the readers to different contexts and sites and their complex infrastructural conditions. We move from plantations and gardens, which also serve as infrastructures for practicing witchcraft and gossip in the Seychelles (Hélène Frichot and Mairi O’Gorman together with Najea Barbe) to organizing resistance, research, and visual activism for Indigenous rights and against new transport infrastructure for capitalist extraction in the Brazilian Amazon (Transdisciplinary Network of the Amazon RETA) and then to ancient myths, water prayers, and other forms of lively resistance manifested in the narrations of three Indigenous women who act as caregivers of Pakistan’s Indus River, its fish, wetlands,

and mangrove forests (Marvi Mazhar). Slovene artist Robertina Šebjanič's work is used to discuss infrastructural dimensions of water in relation to feminist approaches to human-animal relations (Mojca Puncer). Curatorial and artistic practices open up uses and imaginaries for urban infrastructures under pressure because of capitalist extraction, exploitation, and speculation in cities in Slovakia, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Germany and Hungary (Ecologies of Care – EOC, Urška Jurman, Vida Rucli, Joulia Strauss, Rosario Talevi, Inês Moreira, Alessandra Pomarico, Gabi Scardi, Nada Rosa Schroer, and Eszter Erdosi). From water we move to seeds and earth. The seed practices introduced by artist Jumana Manna connect diverse sites such as seed vaults or research centers in Norway, Lebanon, Syria, and Morocco (Lilah Leopold). Clay and ceramics are introduced as vital elements of how Puerto Rican ceramic artists work out pre-colonial, colonial, and decolonial dimensions of domestic labor (Emilia Quiñones Ota). From the sites of reproduction in the home, we move to squares and streets in Buenos Aires as this public urban infrastructure is appropriated for feminist mass protests for reproductive rights (Verónica Orsi). Infrastructure for the arts, which was provided by the San Marino Pavilion at the 2023 Venice Biennale, was used as a starting point for hosting under conditions of hostility particularly in relation to marginalized people, migration, displacement, and refugee care in Venice, Brussels, and Nablus (Luce Beeckmans, Alessandra Gola, Shila Anaraki, Tasneem Nagi, and Heleen Verheyden). Infrastructure in relation to conditions of displacement and the life of refugees takes us to Gaziantep at the Turkish-Syrian border and the idea of unconditional hospitality based on local infrastructures of communal kitchens (Merve Bedir). Public artworks in Vienna are used to discuss public art as caring for social infrastructure beyond the normative expectations of policies that regulate what public art should provide in public space (Miriam Kreuzer). From the physical realm of public space, we move to the digital public space and its knowledge infrastructure exemplified by the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, which is critiqued through self-organized feminist workshops (Hannah Schmedes). From the digital public realm, we move back to the physical urban realm, which is critiqued and joyfully inhabited differently in collective public performances that take back the night and counteract the patriarchal supremacy and oppression of public infrastructure (Elke Krasny, Claudia Lomoschitz, and Sophie Lingg) and re-appropriated with a focus on using public art to redesign outdoor spaces, making them useful as infrastructure for neurodiverse publics (Lindsay Harkema).

—— Reading Path One: Basic Needs and Political Rights focuses on how infrastructures provide for the basic needs of bodies, how infrastructures enable bodily sovereignty and are a prerequisite for public political life and articulation. Reading Path Two: Sites and Conditions focuses on how specific sites were shaped by colonial and patriarchal capitalism and provides examples of how feminist care, repair, maintenance, and resistance transform the conditions of these sites. Reading Path Three: Elements and Natures considers how the regime of capitalism has transformed elements like the air, water, and the earth, as well as plants and animals, into Man-made natures as infrastructural resources and includes new perspectives on restoring these natures' liveliness. Emphasizing that the contributors approach the themes of three different reading paths by way of focusing on different infrastructural dimensions, we seek to raise awareness for the complex resonances and multiple learnings opening up between the different essays.

READING PATH ONE: BASIC NEEDS AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

INFRASTRUCTURES FOR NOURISHMENT AND HOSPITALITY ——

Emilia Quiñones Otal; Luce Beeckmans, Alessandra Gola, Shila Anaraki, Tasneem Nagi, and Heleen Verheyden; Merve Bedir; Hélène Frichot and Mairi O'Gorman together with Najea Barbe; Lilah Leopold; RETA Network; Marvi Mazhar; Urška Jurman – EOC; Joulia Strauss – EOC; Rosario Talevi – EOC; Eszter Erdosi – EOC

INFRASTRUCTURES FOR HEALTH AND REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE ——

Hélène Frichot and Mairi O'Gorman together with Najea Barbe; Verónica Orsi; Luce Beeckmans, Alessandra Gola, Shila Anaraki, Tasneem Nagi, and Heleen Verheyden; Merve Bedir; RETA Network; Lindsay Harkema; Emilia Quiñones Otal; Marvi Mazhar; Gabi Scardi – EOC; Eszter Erdosi – EOC

INFRASTRUCTURES FOR THE RIGHT TO EXIST AND APPEAR IN PUBLIC SPACE ——

Verónica Orsi; Luce Beeckmans, Alessandra Gola, Shila Anaraki, Tasneem Nagi, and Heleen Verheyden; Merve Bedir; Hannah Schmedes; Lindsay Harkema; Feminist Nightscapes; Miriam Kreuzer; Joulia Strauss – EOC; Alessandra Pomarico – EOC

INFRASTRUCTURES FOR KNOWING OTHERWISE ——

Hélène Frichot and Mairi O'Gorman together with Najea Barbe; RETA Network; Emilia Quiñones Otal; Verónica Orsi; Mojca Puncer; Lindsay Harkema; Luce Beeckmans, Alessandra Gola, Shila Anaraki, Tasneem

Nagi, and Heleen Verheyden; Hannah Schmedes; Feminist Nightscapes; Marvi Mazhar; Joulia Strauss – EOC; Merve Bedir; Lilah Leopold; Urška Jurman – EOC; Rosario Talevi – EOC; Nada Rosa Schroer – EOC; Eszter Erdosi – EOC; Vida Rucli – EOC; Alessandra Pomarico – EOC

READING PATH TWO: SITES AND CONDITIONS

PUBLIC SQUARES AND STREETS — Feminist Nightscapes; Miriam Kreuzer; Verónica Orsi; Luce Beeckmans, Alessandra Gola, Shila Anaraki, Tasneem Nagi, and Heleen Verheyden; Merve Bedir; Marvi Mazhar; Lindsay Harkema; Urška Jurman – EOC; Joulia Strauss – EOC; Rosario Talevi – EOC; Alessandra Pomarico – EOC

GARDENS AND PLANTATIONS — Lindsay Harkema; Joulia Strauss – EOC; Urška Jurman – EOC; Lilah Leopold; RETA Network; Alessandra Pomarico – EOC; Emilia Quiñones Otal; Hélène Frichot and Mairi O’Gorman together with Najea Barbe

DOMESTIC INFRASTRUCTURES — Merve Bedir; Luce Beeckmans, Alessandra Gola, Shila Anaraki, Tasneem Nagi, and Heleen Verheyden; Hélène Frichot and Mairi O’Gorman together with Najea Barbe; Emilia Quiñones Otal; Verónica Orsi; Urška Jurman – EOC; Vida Rucli – EOC

KITCHENS AND TABLES — Emilia Quiñones Otal; Merve Bedir; Luce Beeckmans, Alessandra Gola, Shila Anaraki, Tasneem Nagi, and Heleen Verheyden

FORMER INDUSTRIAL SITES AND MINES — Rosario Talevi – EOC; Alessandra Pomarico – EOC; Gabi Scardi – EOC; Inês Moreira – EOC

PRODUCTION AND TRANSPORT — Verónica Orsi; RETA Network, Lilah Leopold; Marvi Mazhar; Alessandra Pomarico – EOC; Gabi Scardi – EOC; Inês Moreira – EOC; Nada Rosa Schroer – EOC

BORDERS — Merve Bedir; RETA Network; Luce Beeckmans, Alessandra Gola, Shila Anaraki, Tasneem Nagi, and Heleen Verheyden

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE — RETA Network; Miriam Kreuzer; Hannah Schmedes; Feminist Nightscapes

COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURES — Merve Bedir; Luce Beeckmans, Alessandra Gola, Shila Anaraki, Tasneem Nagi, and Heleen Verheyden; RETA Network; Rosario Talevi; Alessandra Pomarico – EOC; Nada Rosa Schroer – EOC; Joulia Strauss – EOC

READING PATH THREE: ELEMENTS AND NATURES

AIR — Gabi Scardi – EOC; RETA Network; Feminist Nightscapes

WATER — Marvi Mazhar; Mojca Puncer; Nada Rosa Schroer – EOC; Eszter Erdosi – EOC; Rosario Talevi – EOC; Inês Moreira – EOC

EARTH — Hélène Frichot and Mairi O’Gorman together with Najea Barbe; RETA Network; Emilia Quiñones Otal; Verónica Orsi; Luce Beeckmans, Alessandra Gola, Shila Anaraki, Tasneem Nagi, and Heleen Verheyden; Marvi Mazhar; Joulia Strauss – EOC; Merve Bedir; Lilah Leopold; Urška Jurman – EOC; Rosario Talevi – EOC; Gabi Scardi – EOC; Inês Moreira – EOC; Nada Rosa Schroer – EOC; Eszter Erdosi – EOC

ANIMALS — RETA Network; Mojca Puncer; Marvi Mazhar; Urška Jurman – EOC; Vida Rucli – EOC; Joulia Strauss – EOC; Rosario Talevi – EOC; Gabi Scardi – EOC; Inês Moreira – EOC; Alessandra Pomarico – EOC; Nada Rosa Schroer – EOC; Eszter Erdosi – EOC

PLANTS — Hélène Frichot and Mairi O’Gorman together with Najea Barbe; RETA Network; Lindsay Harkema; Vida Rucli – EOC; Alessandra Pomarico – EOC; Joulia Strauss – EOC; Urška Jurman – EOC; Gabi Scardi – EOC; Rosario Talevi – EOC; Emilia Quiñones Otal; Lilah Leopold; Luce Beeckmans, Alessandra Gola, Shila Anaraki, Tasneem Nagi, and Heleen Verheyden; Feminist Nightscapes; Miriam Kreuzer

— While we hold that there is still much work to be done to further develop the concept of *Feminist Infrastructural Critique* and life-affirming practices against capital, we also want to acknowledge the work of many theorists and practitioners who have raised awareness of infrastructural concerns, infrastructural violence, and infrastructural ethics. Working toward the novel idea of *Feminist Infrastructural Critique*, we hosted and organized a reading group in the context of the symposium *Feminist Infrastructural Critique* at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in 2022. We want to share here in the form of an extended reading list some of the texts we

discussed in the reading group, but also other references seminal to critical infrastructural thought. An exhaustive overview of articles, books, artworks, architectures, spatial practices, and exhibitions dealing critically with infrastructural concerns goes far beyond the space of this issue.

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// Further Readings, Recommendations and Our Starting Points for Working on *Feminist Infrastructural Critique*

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