

Jane Rendell

Extracts from **Refunctioning the Infrastructure**

The Gas Pipe, by architects Maarja Kask and Ralf Looke of Salto AB, and artist Neeme Kõlm, is the Estonian exposition for the 2008 Venice Architecture Biennale. Curated by Ingrid Ruudi, editor-in-chief of the Estonian architectural review *Ehituskunst*, and commissioned by Laila Põdra, adviser on architecture, Estonian Ministry of Culture, the work places an elevated 60m section of gas pipeline at a scale of 1:1 across the Giardini park linking the Russian and German pavilions. This public installation refers to the controversial and widely contested project by Nord Stream to bring gas from Russia to Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, France, Denmark and other countries in Europe via a new pipeline to run directly through the Baltic Sea.¹

Often seemingly invisible, sometimes literally underground, behind security fences, under the earth or over our heads, infrastructure plays a key role in enabling and supporting social, cultural, economic and political activities by supplying key resources – fuel, water, food, materials and weapons – and removing waste. Beyond question and argument, infrastructure's social duty is to provide vital necessities in a continuous manner, maintaining even rates of flows, smoothing out problems in supply and demand, in order to facilitate daily life as well as the construction of other projects. In this sense infrastructure functions much like ideology – it sets itself up as the 'nature' of things. For Karl Marx, ideology distorts thought in order to conceal contradiction. In his early writings, the term ideology is not yet named, but a concept, generated out of his critique of religion and following G. W. F. Hegel's work on the state, understood as an 'inversion', one which conceals the real character of things, is introduced.²

In order to provide a context for *The Gas Pipe* this essay examines how in some key conceptual art projects of the 1970s, architecture functioned as the aspect of the infrastructural and ideological apparatus most apparent and so deserving of institutional critique. I then go on to discuss more recent artworks

that have developed this approach, making connections between architecture's infrastructural role in both the gallery and other settings, and drawing out the relation between its real and fictional status. In architecture, infrastructure's essential role as the provider of pragmatic as well as ideological functions has meant that critical discussions occupy a more difficult terrain. If in conceptual art, architecture as infrastructure is taken to be ideology made material, then in architecture, critical practice points in a different direction, beyond direct physical structures, in order to draw attention to the political operations that influence what and how it is possible to build.

Architecture as Infrastructure: The Site of Art's Institutional Critique

Buildings, understood as representing the value systems of dominant cultures, have provided opportunities for critical art practitioners to make visible such ideological structures. In the early 1970s, artist Michael Asher's work utilised the principle of material subtraction to focus critical attention on architecture as structure supporting the institutional role of the gallery. For his untitled work at the Claire Copley Gallery, Los Angeles, in 1974, he removed the partition between the office and exhibition space, revealing the usually hidden operations that allow the gallery to function economically to the viewer, but also exposing the viewer to the curator, thus making both subjects conscious of their activities as producers and consumers of art.³ For his 1976 installation at the Clocktower Gallery of the Institute for Art and Urban Resources in New York, Asher removed all the windows and doors connecting the gallery to the external environment. This opened the interior to fluctuations in temperature, direct light and moisture, thus using perceptual change to promote critical reflection on the limits of art and the viewing experience.⁴

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Locating the Site of Architecture's Infrastructural Critique

In his paper, 'Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form' (1984),⁵ citing

the work of Mies van der Rohe as an example, critic K. Michael Hays argued that critical architecture is possible and that it operates between two poles, resisting cultural determinism on the one hand and recognising that autonomy is required for engagement on the other.⁶ Eighteen years later in 'Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism',⁷ Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting rejected the critical project as indexical and dialectical, describing it as a form of 'hot representation'. As an alternative, Somol and Whiting advocated an architecture linked to 'the diagrammatic, the atmospheric and cool performance'.⁸ But the split between critical and post-critical is not simply binary, despite their rejection of the critical, some of the features attributed to the post-critical by Somol and Whiting, namely that we should move from architecture as discipline to performance or practice and regard the participation of users as integral to architectural production, echo with positions of those in the critical architecture camp, who strongly believe that the social and the cultural are highly relevant aspects of architectural practice.

[...]

Refunctioning the Infrastructure

If the projects described above sound rather mild and point to a form of ideological infrastructure that appears reasonably benign, then it is important to remember that infrastructure at its most brutal is often 'rolled out' as part of a military operation. It is the underpinning provided by infrastructure that allows the actions of aggression in the Middle East today, against Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine, by the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel and its allies, to be carried out. Historical divisions enforced by colonial powers to contain people and categorize land have frequently failed. Today such lines are being drawn again to claim territories, destabilizing existing governments in order to profit from the ensuing confusion and establish infrastructures for extracting resources and materials. The boundaries created frequently exacerbate ethnic and religious differences, to name only two examples,

between Shia and Sunni in Iraq, Fatah and Hamas in Palestine. Frontiers are also currently being extended into occupied territories, in the form, for instance, of Israel's contorted and vicious wall which bites into the West Bank, resulted in the fragmentation and caging of a whole nation,⁹ reminding one of previous atrocities enacted in the name of racial purification.

So if it is high time that infrastructure is the site of critical resistance, what can be achieved in the context of an international architecture biennale? On first glance one might argue that to place a piece of work outside the defined edge of the pavilion, gallery or exhibition space follows a much older logic of resistance. When in 1965–1966 artist Robert Smithson worked as a consultant artist for an architectural firm called TAMS on designs for Dallas Fort Worth Airport. The project prompted his consideration of how artworks might be viewed from the air but also how to communicate aspects of these exterior artworks to passengers in the terminal building. This latter aspect he termed the 'non-site',¹⁰ and his interest in the 'dialogue between the indoor and the outdoor' led him to develop 'a method or a dialectic that involved ... site and non-site'.¹¹ Smithson's radical gesture intended to question the commodification of art through the gallery system, located the site of the work outside the territory of the gallery and the gallery as the non-site where the work is documented. Today the de-stabilizing potential of this dialectic has been recuperated, with contemporary commissioning processes establishing a new terminology that reverses Smithson's dialectic. Many public art galleries term those works they commission for sites outside the gallery, 'off-site', reclaiming the gallery position as the site of central importance to art.¹²

In 2001 artists Cornford & Cross were invited to bid for a commission to the Imperial War Museum, London. They proposed installing a piece of oil pipeline in Afghanistan, 'somewhere along one of the intended routes linking the oil fields of central Asia with the Arabian Sea'.¹³ *The Treason of Images* would have required careful negotiation for its realization between oil pipeline designers, the military, international aid organizations and the Afghan people.

Aesthetic reference points for this project included large-scale sculptures in the land art tradition such as Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* and Robert Smithson's *Non-Sites* and *Displacements*, which are most often known by the images of them that circulate in the cultural press rather than one-on-one encounters with the work. The artwork takes its title from René Magritte's 1929 painting, comprising an image of a pipe accompanied by the words 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe'. The proposal was turned down: the Chair of the Selection Committee argued that there was no connection between oil and the war in Afghanistan.

As we approach an era of peak oil, the key pipelines that will distribute the last of our fossil fuel are increasingly becoming sites of intense conflict and military occupation.¹⁴ The greed for oil has already prompted the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, by the United States, the United Kingdom and its allies. Iran, which guards the Strait of Hormuz, where oil from the Middle East leaves via tankers for its journey to the west, is next on the hit list. Other sites are under threat too, not necessarily from military intervention. Any part of the earth that contains oil, gas or coal – however rare the flora, fauna, and humanity it supports – is vulnerable to the polluting destruction that will come from fossil fuel extraction.¹⁵

Drawing attention to this issue by placing a piece of supply line in the cultural space of an architecture biennale *The Gas Pipe* makes a strong statement. In the art press there has been much recent debate concerning whether it is possible for the site of art's commerce – art fairs such as *Frieze* – to host relevant and proactive critical discourse that has impact outside the art world or any lasting social effect.¹⁶ And at a time of peak oil and its uneven distribution, the form of the biennale itself must surely be brought under careful scrutiny. Is the jetting of the art and architectural élite around the globe really the best use of the last of the fossil fuel? As architect Teddy Cruz has pointed out, those in the minority world of the north and south, spend their lives moving over the top of those in the middle majority who do not have the resources made available to them to fly.¹⁷ Indeed in many so-called 'off-setting' schemes, those in the majority world save energy for those in the

minority world – rather than using machinery powered by fuel to irrigate or farm, new projects are initiated which draw on their physical labour.

Cornford & Cross's *Treason of Images* relocates art from the gallery to the site of the location of the infrastructure that supports it – quite literally in terms of lighting, heating, the provision of materials to construct the buildings and the art within it. For *The Gas Pipe*, the site of the infrastructure is relocated to the space of the exhibition. Although in architecture, the exhibition of architectural drawings and the documents describing the construction process and finished product can be equated with Smithson's institutionalized gallery or non-site, it is also possible to think of things the other way around and to consider the site of the architectural exhibition as the location from which the building itself can be critiqued.¹⁸ In professional practice, architectural drawings describe an intended physical construction, whereas in the context of the exhibition, critical practitioners can use the same codes to question the assumptions implicit in architectural discourse. In providing places to explore the critical and conceptual potential of architecture, the site of the architectural exhibition is essential to professional design. In *The Gas Pipe*, relocating this piece of infrastructure has defunctioned it – in the cultural space of the biennale it is not used to carry fuel – but it has instead been refunctioned – to perform a new function as critique.

¹ See for example <http://www.nord-stream.com/en/> and <http://www.gazprom.ru/eng/articles/article18466.shtml> (accessed 18 July 2008). For a critical review of the proposed pipeline and the associated security and environmental issues see for example http://www.robertamsterdam.com/2008/07/nord_stream_responds_to_grigor.htm (accessed 18 July 2008).

² For an overview of a marxist definition of 'ideology' see *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, edited by Tom Bottomore (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991) pp. 247–252.

³ See for example Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (ed.) *Michael Asher, Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979* (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1984) pp. 76–81.

⁴ See Kirsi Peltomaki, 'Affect and Spectatorial Agency: Viewing Institutional Critique in the 1970s', *Art Journal* (Winter 2007).

⁵ K. Michael Hays, 'Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form', *Perspecta*, v. 21 (1981) pp. 14–29.

⁶ Hays, 'Critical Architecture', p. 27.

⁷ Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, 'Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism', Michael Osman, Adam Ruedig, Matthew Seidel, and Lisa Tilney (eds) *Mining Autonomy*, a special issue of *Perspecta*, v. 33 (2002) pp. 72–7.

⁸ Somol and Whiting, 'Notes around the Doppler Effect', p. 74.

⁹ For a discussion of the wall in terms of architectural discourse, see Eyal Weizmann, *The Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007).

¹⁰ Robert Smithson, 'Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site' [1967] Jack Flam (ed.) *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) pp. 52–60. See also Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002) pp. 55–58.

¹¹ Robert Smithson, 'Earth Symposium at White Museum, Cornell University' [1969] Flam (ed.) *Robert Smithson*, pp. 177–187, p. 178. For specific descriptions of his site/non-site dialectic see Robert Smithson, 'The Spiral Jetty' [1972] Flam (ed.) *Robert Smithson* pp. 152–153.

¹² See Rendell, *Art and Architecture*, pp. 23–40.

¹³ See <http://www.cornfordandcross.com/> (accessed 18 July 2008).

¹⁴ See for example, Richard Heinberg, *The Party's Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies* (Forest Row: Clairview, 2005).

¹⁵ For just one example of a region under intense threat, see 'Viva Yasuni! Life vs Big Oil', *New Internationalist* (July 2008) pp. 5–20.

¹⁶ For example see the critical discussion between Peter Suchen and Lisa Lefebvre in *Art Monthly*, n. 307 (June 2007) p. 39; *Art Monthly*, n. 308 (July-August 2007) p. 19; and *Art Monthly*, n. 309 (September 2007) pp. 13–14.

¹⁷ See for example http://www.world-architects.com/index.php?seite=ca_profile_architekten_detail_us&system_id=14396 (accessed 18 July 2008)

¹⁸ See, for example, Jonathan Hill, *The Illegal Architect* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1998).