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Infrastructure & Future Library. A Reflection on "Scaffolding, Hard and Soft"

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PAULINA MICKIEWICZ

INFRASTRUCTURE & FUTURE LIBRARY – A REFLECTION ON “SCAFFOLDING, HARD AND SOFT”

Infrastructure is everything. At least that's how I felt immediately after reading Shannon Mattern's thoughtful piece on both hard and soft infrastructure. Of course, infrastructure is not everything, but it is one of those terms that so frustratingly encompasses so many aspects of our lives from the roads we drive on to the technologies we use, from the ways in which our cities are organized to the natural resources we use, from the books we read to how our ideas form and circulate. I use the term “frustratingly” because it is so difficult, as Mattern rightly points out, to begin to break down and disentangle infrastructure from its past and future roots. This frustration is exacerbated by the fact that as Brian Larkin notes, infrastructures “are things and also the relation between things. As things they are present to the senses, yet they are also displaced in the focus on the matter they move around. We often see computers not cables, light not electricity, taps and water but not pipes and sewers”¹. Mattern's ability with words allows her to draw us a verbal map of all the different kinds of infrastructures (hard and soft, material and immaterial, technological, human, institutional, and intellectual) that exist and that we should consider in order to take a more critical, responsible, and most importantly, accountable approach to the ways in which we design and develop future infrastructures. Mattern reminds us that infrastructures are generative structures; we build upon old structures to generate new ones, meaning that we have both a stake in and a chance to create a new infrastructural order. For John Durham Peters the addition of the “ism” to the term infrastructure denotes our current academic captivity with

1 Brian Larkin, „The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 42, 2013, pp. 327-343, p. 329.

infrastructure. Infrastructuralism's "fascination is for the basic, the boring, the mundane, and all the mischievous work done behind the scenes. It is a doctrine of environments and small differences, of strait gates and the needles eye, of things not understood that stand under our worlds."² It is precisely those characteristics of infrastructures, the fact that they appear to be mundane, boring, basic, the "tinkering" done behind the scenes that Mattern and infrastructural scholars alike identify, as what makes them so powerful.

In *Scaffolding, Hard and Soft*, Mattern therefore calls upon us – human agents, engaged citizens – to attempt to uncover the nature of infrastructures, to make the invisible visible, to promote an infrastructural literacy in order to make their future designs perhaps that little bit less path-dependent, that little bit less deterministic. She argues that critical-creative practitioners, in particular "artists, media-makers designers, critical engineers, digital humanists, and their colleagues"³ have a particularly useful perspective to offer when it comes to promoting infrastructural literacy, in that artists and designers, those creative practitioners, have the "potential to go beyond the representation of infrastructure to the design of infrastructures themselves – more efficient, effective, accessible, intelligible, and just infrastructures."⁴

We cannot forget, as Larkin notes, that "[i]nfrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter."⁵ *Scaffolding, Hard and Soft*, places an emphasis on the fact that infrastructures are not only networks of "heavily material stuff"⁶ that enable the movement of goods and people, but infrastructures equally facilitate the flow of ideas. Mattern's article calls upon the academic community in particular "to consider the infrastructures undergirding and shaping their own fields of study and practice – or what we might call the 'cultural techniques' for making knowledge and generating work within a field."⁷

In 2014, Berlin-based Scottish visual artist, Katie Paterson, in collaboration with Bjorvika Utvikling and the city of Oslo, began an art project called "Future Library" – Framtidsbiblioteket. Future Library is an art project that is intended to span over 100 years. A forest with 1,000 trees has been planted in Nordmarka, Norway, in order to supply the paper to print an anthology of books that will be read in 100 years' time. "Between now and then, one writer every year will contribute a text, with

2 John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clods: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2015, p. 33.

3 Shannon Mattern, "Scaffolding, Hard and Soft", p. 2.

4 Ibid., p. 4.

5 Brian Larkin, 2013, p. 329.

6 Mattern, p.1.

7 Ibid., p. 5.

the writings held in trust, unpublished, until 2114. Tending the forest and ensuring its preservation for the 100-year duration of the artwork finds a conceptual counterpoint in the invitation extended to each writer: to conceive and produce a work in the hopes of finding a receptive reader in an unknown future.”⁸ Margaret Atwood is the inaugural writer for the project and has already submitted her manuscript entitled “Scribbler’s Moon.” In 2015, David Mitchell took on the charge of being Future Library’s second writer. The goal is to have the manuscripts displayed (only revealing the authors’ names and titles of their works) in the New Deichmanske Public Library in Bjorvika, Oslo, scheduled to open in 2019. The room they will be displayed in will be designed by Katie Paterson and will be lined with wood from the Nordmarka forest (old trees were cut down in order to make room for the new forest).

Although not initially conceived of as such by the artist herself, Future Library is an example of a generative infrastructure in the making. While it is a critical reflection and commentary on our old infrastructures of knowledge. Will the book in paper format still exist in 100 years’ time? If it does, will there be anyone around to read it, or will there be anyone who can read it? Will reading remain what it is today? The project also poignantly highlights the relational qualities of infrastructures of knowledge. It emphasizes not only the obvious complicated transfer of knowledge and ideas within a span of 100 years’ time (a carefully chosen one by the behind-the-scenes work of human infrastructure) but it also underscores the complexities of having a fledgling forest growing within our contemporary infrastructural frameworks. In other words, the forest’s existence is subject to whatever happens to our environment over the span of the next 100 years. Whatever political or economic decisions are made, whatever natural disasters it might be subject to will have a bearing on whether and how our present ideas are circulated in the future. In a film about Future Library, one of the project’s participants says, “That’s what forestry is about, and that’s what city planning is about. We are making decisions today that are extremely important for two generations to come, not for us only, but the next generations.”⁹

It would seem that artists such as Katie Paterson are indeed tangentially taking up Mattern’s call to think infrastructurally and, out of this, to generate new orders of infrastructural possibility. While this is one node in an expanding network of creative activity that situates infrastructural concerns within their field of vision and action, I think it

8 Katie Paterson, *Future Library*, 2014.

Available at: <http://www.katiepaterson.org/futurelibrary/> [accessed June 23, 2016].

9 Katie Paterson, *Future Library*, Katie Paterson, 2014.

Available at: <https://vimeo.com/97512418> [accessed June 23, 2016].

provides a hopeful gloss on Mattern's opening up of collaborative and informed infrastructural design practices. Taken in the temporal terms of material infrastructures, Future Library and its full generation of ageing wood, words, and spaces of knowledge preservation, highlight how it could just be enough time for our ways of making knowledge, academic and otherwise, to evolve into an expanded field of infrastructural agencies; both the established forest of tradition, and Mattern's new trees of change.