

freethought at Bergen Assembly 2016

For the 2016 Bergen Assembly the *freethought* collective presents
'Infrastructure - in 6 chapters and 2 performative platforms'.

Why have we focused on Infrastructure, a term beloved of planners and technocrats ? and why in the context of an art world event ?

In reply we might say, because infrastructure is **the condition** of our lives: it determines spaces, disciplines bodies, allocates resources and privileges notions of progress and development without any critical interrogation. Infrastructure, being a range of linked processes, also eludes representation and so the only possibility of making it tangible is speculative research and imaginative invention.

In the contemporary art world we hear much about 'doing research' and about 'collective study'. What in fact are our options when we wish to engage in meaningful research within the public sphere ? And how can we effect a process of study beyond classrooms and degrees and evaluation ? And then there is perhaps the most important question of all - how can forms of research and study provide entry points into political urgencies ?

The conventions of research privilege its enclosure and containment within the 4 walls of institutional standards and protocols. It is this enclosure and exclusivity that give research its authority and legitimacy – its purist separation from the world. Equally we are rarely able to think study divorced from its outcomes: the qualifications we will get, the employment that might result from these, the cultural capital that being 'educated' confers on us.

But research is all around us and so is study. The more difficult the conditions of one's life the more research and study one has to engage in – where to get resources? how to become legitimate vis a vis the authorities ? how to navigate the every day violence of the public sphere ? how to think beyond the clichés being offered up by political rhetoric ? How are we imbricated in events and inequalities that seem to be beyond us ?

We have been going through a summer of discontent: Brexit, Donald Trump, police brutality in the US, extreme violence in the public sphere in Europe, presidential elections in Austria, a coup in Turkey, and the list goes on and on, every day bringing another outrage, another blow for what we may have seen as progress over the past 50 years in the West .

It is research and study that gets us beyond the outrage and the platitudes we hear from politicians about 'progressive' and 'reactionary' politics, about 'populism' and the rejection of experts and intellectual elites. Platitudes that work to mask the actual conditions that have brought about such levels of discontent and alienation. Platitudes that frame the discussion within convenient stereotypes that provide easy narratives and simple characterization.

It is for these reasons that *freethought* have focused their project for the Bergen Assembly on the problematics of 'infrastructure' . In order to see how we can understand the hidden and invisible forces that shape our world, of what Adam Smith called 'the invisible hand'. What distinguishes this 'Infrastructure' inquiry is that it is not guided by a sense of shadowy conspiracies but rather by a recognition that structures govern, just as much and perhaps more than political ideologies and rhetorics. But they govern both from above and from within – infrastructure becomes the convincing

logic by which things are developed: new cities, airports, refuse systems, capital investments that are declared to be necessary for jump starting economies, or collapsing health care systems, or failing education systems or inoperative markets. Within globalised economies the concept of 'flows' takes pride of place as the main driver and it is infrastructures that ensure that goods, services, labour, knowledge and capital circulate and flow to sustain such widespread economies. It is in fact 'infrastructure' that is currently synonymous with progress, with development and with efficiency.

Equally infrastructures facilitate cultural operations linking taste, heritage and value with market forces and bringing private sector funding into the public sphere. Ever larger and shinier museums are built, circles of collectors, patrons and corporate sponsors become the life line of public sector institutions, global franchises are pursued at a considerable cost to local cultures and exploited workforces and exhausted budgets - and these activities can only be justified by an increasingly spectacular display which satisfies the voracious hunger for 'cultural experience'.

So 'Infrastructure' goes far beyond a neutral and efficient structuring and delivery of goods, services, resources and audiences. It is in actual fact a form of bio-power in the Foucauldian sense: here bio-power is a form of power that regulates social life from its interior rather than from its exterior by following social life, interpreting it, absorbing it and articulating it. It is the operations of power through a set of internalized values that extend all the way across duty, discipline, profit, pleasure and desire. Foucault here widens our understanding of power to include the forms of social control in disciplinary institutions such as schools, hospitals, psychiatric institutions, the welfare state, research institutions and museums, as well as the forms of knowledge that circulate within them and legitimate their activities. ⁱ

Infrastructure then is an agent of governance as a form of bio-power, of habits and logics and values that have been internalised and it can never be externalized to the traditional workings of power.

The issue with discussions of infrastructure as they exist in the realm of planning or in the logistics of bureaucracy is that these are judged entirely by whether they 'work' or not, whether they provide an efficient delivery of what is deemed necessary for the next phase of development. Rarely are infrastructures discussed as making things difficult or impossible, of ruining the conditions of people's lives or affecting interventions at the level of subjectivity. For the 'Infrastructure' project we wanted to explore the subjectivities at play within layers of more visible infrastructure. Building on some of the remarkable work done by Saskia Sassenⁱⁱ and Keller Easterlingⁱⁱⁱ, *freethought's* inquiry marries questions of political economy with manifestations of cultural subjectivity, capturing the multi layered polyphony of feelings and cultural expressions that make up our present 'infrastructural condition'.

When *freethought*, a loose collective of thinkers, curators, researchers, educators and activists, came together in 2011, it was with the aim of taking our work out of the university and addressing urgent issues in ways that were not common to academic research and with a set of collaborators that were not common to a notion of 'inquiry'. In addition it designated the world of creative practices and artistic research as the site for how to know differently, without containment or disciplinary designation. In addressing the elusive concept of 'infrastructure' we have tried to marry concrete research, invented archives, unidentifiable practices and leaps of faith.

In Advance

In advance of the actual opening of the Bergen Assembly 2016 *freethought* established a 2 year 'City Seminar', a regular gathering of artists and researchers working in Bergen and interested in laying down a foundation of reading and discussion on critical understandings of Infrastructure. Over this period we read numerous historical and contemporary texts and conducted related discussions bringing in many locally relevant examples. These seminars were followed by '*freethought* invites...' a series of public dinners and lectures presented by some of the most exciting thinkers, makers and writers working internationally today on aspects of infrastructural culture. It has been the cumulative impact of these seminars and lecture series that allowed *freethought* a discussion community for their concerns in Bergen over these past 2 years. The topics raised for discussion and the readings for the seminar can be found in Hagerupsgarden, 2nd floor under the title of 'Moments of Study' and the related research collection.

1. The City Seminar 2014-16

2. *freethought* invites...

During

During the Bergen Assembly period a series of 6 installations will be displayed in 3 venues:

1. **The Museum of Burning Questions (Firehouse and Bergen Konsthall)**

The Museum of Burning questions emanates from the history of fire fighting in the city of Bergen and from the long term occupation of the old Firehouse by the retired firemen of the city. It performs a temporary alliance with the firemen and their struggle for a museum of fire and it opens questions about how to recognize the burning issues of the day. The project pre-enacts the future Fire Museum by offering guided tours of what it will be.

Nora Sternfeld with **Isa Rosenberger**, **Ariel Schlesinger** and the retired **firemen of Bergen**,

2. **The End of Oil (Hagerupsgarden)**

The End of Oil project explores possible future scenarios linked to the end of oil in Norway as a way to talk about broader social and political issues. It consists of 2 films and a research environment.

Oilers – a film by **Massimiliano Mollona** and **Anne Marthe Divy**.

'*Oilers*' follows the construction of an oil platform in the Norwegian offshore yard, Kvaerner Stord. Shot over one year, the film shows the workers' experience of work in the context of the global decline in the price of oil, rising unemployment and changing relationships between union and management.

Delete Beach – **Phil Collins** (location ??)

Delete Beach is an animated short realised in the style of Japanese *anime* which combines elements of sci-fi and fantasy to tell a story set in the future around Bergen and the Hardangerfjord in the context of the decline of oil-based economy in Norway.

3. **Shipping and the Shipped (Hagerupsgarden)**

A history of shipping cannot be separated from a history of the shipped. Nor can the shipped ever really be separated from the ship. With the African slave trade as the first massive logistical movement, the infrastructure of capitalist accumulation was put in place. Not only did this slave trade infrastructure inaugurate the plantation societies of the global south, perpetuated to this day by ongoing shipping of the indentured. But also they disrupted and deprovincialised the old sea coasts of Europe and their own shipping subaltern. Inspired by Norway's grip on the sea, *Shipping and the Shipped* is for all those who long to be transported and all those who have long been transported.

Shipping and the Shipped was conceived in conversation between by **Stefano Harney** and the Mumbai-based artist **Ranjit Kandalgaonkar** with additional work by **Arjuna Neuman** and **Wu Tsang**.

4. **Spirit Labour** ((Hagerupsgarden))

What kind of labour is it, to work communally with the bodies, movements, expressions and affects of others, to dedicate one's lifework to the othering that issues from these relations? Is a life, especially a life spent making, learning, giving and transforming oneself with others, a kind of infrastructure?

These questions form the core of **Adrian Heathfield** and **Hugo Glendinning's** film, which traces and connects some exemplary artistic figures of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, whose art practice escapes identitarian culture by being tuned to a set of barely visible, relational and dispersed activities. Articulating the artists' work as a form of what Heathfield calls 'spirit labour,' the film acts as a powerful counter to notions of art as subservient to the spirit of capital. In so doing *Spirit Labour*

traces a genealogy of creative practices inclined to elemental exposure and non-human forces, as renewals of the passage of humans toward their outsides.

5. Archives of Substance (Hagerupsgarden)

An assemblage of archives that make concrete some moments which do not have a clear history, a stable form or a clear identity. The 4 archives in the chapter turn atmospheres into political histories and indicate that sometimes small scale activities that seem quite peripheral: having a coffee, looking at an exhibition, taking part in a festival, engaging in an intellectual discussion, deciding to work together on something for no good reason - actually capture the political moment so much more than bombastic rhetoric. These 'archives of substance': The Shiraz Festival in Persepolis, The Partisan Coffee House in London, a set of exhibition experiences around the world, the course of collective study in Bergen , help us grasp how content, desire, aspiration and shared hopes can become a form of 'substance infrastructure'.

**Irit rogoft, Mike Berlin, Vali Mahlouji, *freethought* ,
Curatorial/Knowledge London, RA London and CuMma, Helsinki**

6. Infrastructures of Feeling

This is an apparatus that enables one to feel and think about sound and its relationship with infrastructure.

The project is a response to the emergence in recent decades of new kinds of cognitive infrastructure intended to support and augment how individuals sense and make sense of the world around them. The field of contemporary music for example is shaped by new methods of payment, distribution,

categorisation and analysis as much as aesthetic changes in musical form itself.

The apparatus revolves around a specially produced piece of software programmed to listen to music and analyse the material for mood and sentiment content. Here the experienced mood state of the music is visualised through colour and becomes the basis for an autonomous purchasing process acquiring books for a library contained within the space. The music that stimulates the system is a series of 6 continuously playing recordings of Norwegian music covering Folk, Choral Music, Classical, Avant-Garde, Pop and Doom Metal roughly corresponding to different moments in Bergen's economic history.

Louis Moreno, Paul Purgas

The 2 performative platforms taking place during this period are

1. The Infrastructure summit

freethought's programme for the 2016 Bergen Assembly launches with **The Infrastructure Summit**, a two-day discursive and performative event with internationally renowned writers, curators and artists investigating the nature of infrastructure in times of economic disparity, ecological catastrophe, expulsion and forced migration. Talks and intensive discussions led by the *freethought* collective and many exciting guests are complemented by food, film, live performance and music. The Infrastructure Summit gives unique individual voice to the

ways in which we are all subjects of infrastructure and the gestures and languages we develop to articulate such immersions.

3.4 September, **USF Verftet, Bergen,**

Convened by Adrian Heathfield and Eva Rowson.

2. The Partisan Café

3. The Partisan Café, a central site for gathering and study located in the occupied fire station during the Bergen Assembly. The title ‘Partisan Café’ borrows directly from “the Partisan Coffee House” – a space for conversation and debate in London’s Soho in the late 1950s and recognized as the birth place of the New Left. The term ‘partisan’ is taken up as another form of dissidence, one that refuses the co-opted notion of ‘participation’ which has become so central to neo liberal modes of reorganizing and instrumentalising the social sphere. Enacting situated knowledges, radical hospitality and collective study the Partisan Café will be a shared space and a meeting place, open to the public and hosting a programme of events, discussions, screenings and music to explore the political, urban and cultural dimensions of our infrastructural condition.

The Partisan café team of educators and café workers are **Tora Endestad Bjørkheim, Freja Bäckman, Kabir Carter, Johnny Herbert, Jenny Moore, Arne Skaug Olsen, and Nora Sternfeld**

Afterwards

Afterwards and Following the 2 years of research and production at Bergen, *freethought* plans to work through what we have learned from the project and how we can bring it into other modalities of knowledge production. In 2017 we will be working towards the production of a book entitled '**The Infrastructural Condition**' where insights stemming from this collective research in Bergen will be fleshed out, gathered and accompanied by conversations with kindred spirits and friendly provocateurs.

freethought, 2016

ⁱ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979*. Palgrave 2008.

ⁱⁱ Saskia Sassen "Globalization, Territory, Authority, Rights" 2011

ⁱⁱⁱ Keller Easterling,
"Enduring innocence" 2009
"Extrastatecraft" 2014