

WHEN ATTITUDES BECOME INFRASTRUCTURE: ARTISTIC PRACTICES AT THE LIMITS OF MIGRATION SYSTEMS AND INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE

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Abstract: Understanding migration itself as an infrastructure — one that is structurally fragmented, bureaucratically opaque, and often deliberately dysfunctional — the paper explores contemporary artistic practices through the concept of infrastructural art, focusing on how artists engage with systemic failures. Using a case study approach, it analyses three artistic tactics — invasive, fugitive, and counter-infrastructure — that intervene in broken systems not as metaphors, but as operational responses. The article argues that, rather than merely representing displacement, these practices materialise alternative infrastructures of care, education, and integration.

Keywords: Infrastructural art, migration, counter-infrastructure, invasive infrastructure, fugitive infrastructure.

Infrastructure Begins Where Systems Break Down

In 2013, an emergency *Notunterkunft* (refugee shelter) was opened in the heart of Berlin's Moabit district, in a disused school building directly neighbouring the home of artist Marina Naprushkina. The site housed



around 300 people, nearly a third of them children (Naprushkina 2015). Designed as a temporary holding facility – intended to accommodate asylum seekers for no more than three months before their relocation to other federal states and more permanent housing – the temporary housing facility quickly became a symbol of systemic inertia and infrastructural dysfunction. As the bureaucratic machinery stalled, what was meant to be temporary became indefinite. Refugees were stranded in overcrowded, poorly equipped facilities, lacking kitchens, educational access, or adequate sanitation. Showers were only available in the evenings; toilets were locked and could only be accessed with the assistance of security guards. The Notunterkunft was operated by a private company, without meaningful oversight, and with no support infrastructure to speak of.

As Naprushkina later remarked, “No long-term activities were planned, it was a direct response. I was there, I met the people and realized that action was needed” (Naprushkina and Triisberg 2019). This direct response soon crystallised into a long-term counter-infrastructure: *Neue Nachbarschaft/Moabit* (New Neighbourhood/Moabit), which emerged at the intersection of artistic practice, social activism, and the sustained development of alternative infrastructures in response to the failures of state-provided support.

Then as now, Germany’s asylum system was marked by chronic delays, deliberate disconnection from civil society, and a political will to keep refugees in liminal, depoliticised spaces (Junghans and Kluth 2023). The so-called “temporal” nature of accommodation was not an unfortunate side effect, but a structural feature of migration governance. Indeed, bureaucratic regimes of waiting in the context of migration function not simply as logistical inefficiencies, but as disciplinary techniques of control and containment – techniques that regulate the mobility, agency, and visibility of migrant bodies within European urban and legal spaces (Philipson Isaac 2022: 948). As Naprushkina and others discovered, the state-operated system was largely opaque, with contracts awarded to private actors and little transparency or public oversight (Naprushkina 2025). Change requests were met with silence. Even local children, entitled to education under German law, often remained without access to schools for months due to the temporary legal status of their families.

Faced with these failures, Naprushkina repurposed her production budget for an exhibition, *Giving Form to the Impatience of Liberty*, at the Kunstverein Stuttgart (2013), into the establishment of a small studio inside the Notunterkunft. In this space, refugee women and children could gather, draw, and begin to reclaim some sense of community. Within two weeks, the studio was overflowing. What began as an

informal intervention evolved into a decentralised support network of artists, neighbours, and activists. “After a few weeks we were already a small group, working on the future programming of our community centre,” she recalls (Naprushkina and Triisberg 2019).

Protests were soon organised by the residents and volunteers, highlighting the inhumane conditions. Although residents were discouraged from participating – warned that protesting could negatively impact their asylum applications (Naprushkina 2025) – the volunteer group continued, attracting media attention and eventually prompting state authorities to conduct the first formal inspection of the shelter. Improvements followed: a kitchen was built, and water systems were repaired. But Naprushkina’s group was banned from the premises. “It became clear that we had to continue our work outside,” she notes. “People began to come to us instead.” (Naprushkina 2025)

From this moment, *Neue Nachbarschaft/Moabit* evolved into a grassroots infrastructure that continues to operate today, with over 200 active members from both refugee and non-refugee backgrounds. Its work includes German language lessons, art and cultural programmes, legal advice, and neighbourhood events. It does not operate “for” refugees, but with them. As Naprushkina explains, “My idea was that to influence the situation inside, you should start doing it from the outside.” (Talstou, n.d.)

This paper begins here because *Neue Nachbarschaft/Moabit* represents a paradigmatic instance of infrastructural art – a form of artistic engagement that not only critiques failures in migration governance but also materially builds alternative infrastructures. Here, contemporary artistic practices are examined through the lens of infrastructural engagement, with a particular focus on the field of migration. Migration, in this context, is not understood as a neutral flow of people, but as a process often entangled with catastrophe – be it war, environmental collapse, or political repression. These crisis-laden movements expose, on the one hand, the limitations and failures of existing state and logistical systems; on the other hand, they reveal the potential of contemporary art to construct alternative infrastructures, to imagine and enact systems that operate differently (Brusadin 2021: 50).

Building on this case, the article proposes a typology of so-called *infrastructural art* – artistic practices that intervene in, replicate, or construct alternative infrastructural systems specifically within the field of migration. It identifies three recurring tactical formations through which artists respond to the systemic failures of migration governance and support structures:

(1) *invasive infrastructures* that work from within institutions to rewire them;

(2) *fugitive infrastructures* that arise outside or beyond institutional control;

(3) *counter-infrastructures* that build autonomous systems of support and survival.

These will serve as the conceptual framework of the paper, guiding the analysis of the selected case studies.

Case studies were selected according to three criteria:

(1) sustained engagement over at least three years;

(2) direct intervention in or replication of migration-related infrastructures;

(3) the existence of a material and organisational structure beyond representational artwork.

The analysis focuses on *Neue Nachbarschaft/Moabit*, *The Silent University*, *Trampoline House*, **foundationClass*, and *Solidarny Dom Kultury 'Stonecznik'*.

As the study combines curatorial and academic perspectives, it adopts an interpretive and situated approach. The aim is not to produce a representative or exhaustive account, but to propose a conceptual framework that captures the complexity and specificity of infrastructural artistic practices. The paper does not attempt to provide a comprehensive genealogy or theoretical evaluation of the concept of infrastructural art – its origins, advantages, or limitations. Instead, it focuses on how artistic practices engage with the sphere of migration by proposing alternative infrastructures of care, adaptation, and integration, and by critically addressing the structural limits of migration governance and policy.

This framework allows us to trace how artists and collectives operate at different thresholds of institutional and political systems – from embedded interventions that rewire bureaucratic structures from within, to temporary, improvised infrastructures of care emerging under crisis conditions, to autonomous counter-systems that seek to replace the failed foundations of state support.

How do contemporary artists respond to systemic failures in migration infrastructure not through representation or critique alone, but by materially constructing alternative systems of care, coordination, and survival?

From Institutional Critique to Infrastructural Thinking

To understand the infrastructural role of artistic practices such as *Neue Nachbarschaft*, it is important to shift focus away from

representational aesthetics toward what Susan Leigh Star (1999) has called the “invisible work” of infrastructure. These background systems condition participation, survival, and access. Artistic interventions in contexts of infrastructural collapse do not merely symbolise breakdown or gesture toward solidarity; instead, they often operate within and against these systems, making them visible, negotiable, and, at times, alterable. In what follows, this section moves from a broader consideration of infrastructure as a political and epistemic system to its implications for contemporary art. If infrastructures organise not only matter and movement but also imagination and belonging, then artistic practices can be read as sites where these underlying logics are both exposed and reconfigured.

Though the term “infrastructure” is widely used today about roads, pipes, networks, and platforms, its historical genealogy reveals how deeply it is embedded in regimes of power and control (Barry 2001; Larkin 2013). The infrastructure was not a neutral substrate but a strategic apparatus of war and colonisation (Bratton 2016; Cowen 2020). Its role was to guarantee mobility, control territory, and project power. From this militarised origin, the modern concept of infrastructure inherits a deeply political charge: to speak of infrastructure is to speak of logistics, governance, and domination.

Today, despite its apparent neutrality, infrastructure continues to organise and regulate life in highly uneven ways. As Brian Larkin notes, infrastructures are not simply technological systems, but “matter that enables the movement of other matter” (Larkin 2013: 331). They are relational and performative: they structure space, produce temporality, and shape possibility. Larkin goes further to call them “metapragmatic objects” (Larkin 2013: 337), not only systems of transport, flow, and support, but also signs of themselves, operating semiotically to produce specific ideological and behavioural effects. Infrastructures are not only what moves, but also how we imagine movement, access, and entitlement.

Importantly, this metapragmatic dimension of infrastructure also reveals its role in violence and exclusion. As Bani Brusadin notes in *The Fog of Systems*, “Networked infrastructures have become the main stage for key transformations in society, including the notions of citizenship, public space, democracy” (Brusadin 2021: 8). From border walls and biometric surveillance to content moderation algorithms and fibre optic cables, infrastructure is increasingly the medium through which political life is organised and contested. Its apparent neutrality is deceptive: infrastructures determine who can move and who cannot; who is visible and who remains unseen; whose data circulates and whose is filtered out. The Internet, for example, appears immaterial — reduced to

a sleek device or blinking router — yet relies on buried cables, exploited labour, and extractive supply chains. A compelling example is *Emerald Black Latency* (2024), a project by artist Mario Santamaría. Using what he terms a counter-forensic methodology, Santamaría visualised a 7 km segment of the Medusa Submarine Cable System — an 8,000 km fibre optic line connecting Europe and North Africa — by rendering it in Google Street View. The result is a strange, almost hallucinatory digital journey along an invisible infrastructure, made newly material through artistic intervention. The project makes visible the submerged systems that structure global data flows and militarised communications, pushing back against the abstraction and dematerialisation that so often characterise the digital sphere.

Seen through this lens, infrastructure appears not merely as a technical substrate but as a field of social relations, imaginaries, and affects. It is precisely this expanded understanding that enables a shift from analysing infrastructures to recognising art itself as infrastructural — that is, a system that mirrors, critiques, and, at times, replicates the organisational logics of power. The following discussion therefore turns to how artistic and curatorial practices, informed by institutional critique and participatory methodologies, have begun to operate infrastructurally.

Building on this expanded understanding, the connections between infrastructural theory and contemporary art practices become more legible. On one hand, recent theoretical discussions foreground the complex, planetary scale of infrastructures. Benjamin Bratton conceptualises this as the stack (Bratton 2016) — a layered and integrated planetary-scale computational infrastructure that governs everything from interface design to state sovereignty. Put differently, infrastructures should be considered not in isolation but in their complex interconnections and relations. In this case, the political effects of infrastructures are not always predictable, and a sense of alienation from them arises. Similarly, Bani Brusadin proposes the metaphor of fog to describe the affective and epistemological complexity of infrastructures that are “most of the time beyond the reach of our understanding, or even beyond our imagination” (Brusadin 2021: 8).

Faced with such an unimaginable and incomprehensible scale of infrastructure, contemporary art offers critical instruments, what we might term a form of political imagination (Levitas 2013), to navigate, reimagine, and sometimes resist the dominant infrastructural logics. Speculative and open-ended, art provides tools for engaging these systems not as fixed entities but as malleable terrains of engagement (Salmenniemi et al. 2024). This is one of the important factors in the formation of infrastructure art.

The second important factor lies in re-examining art's autonomy and its socio-political and economic conditions (Berger 1972; Fraser 2012). This shift is echoed by Marina Vishmidt (2017), who links infrastructural art to the legacy of institutional critique. She argues that the move from institutional to infrastructural critique represents a turn from interrogating the museum as a site of "false totalisations" (Vishmidt 2017: 268) to engaging with the structural conditions – labour markets, property regimes, corporate power, and extractive capital – that allow such institutions to exist and reproduce themselves. Such a reframing is essential to the notion of art as an elevated, metaphysical, or autonomous realm, relocating it within the very heart of political economy. For instance, the 2025 collective performance *Our queer is uncomfortably political*, presented at Zachęta National Gallery in Warsaw, explored the precarities of artistic labour, the bureaucracies of eurocentrism, and the personal experiences of marginalised art workers. The piece, created by Viktoryia Hrabennikava, Varvara Sudnik, Oleksandr Halishchuk, and Arina Bozhok, unfolded as a public reading of email chains, gossip, and behind-the-scenes stories, weaving fictionalised texts out of lived realities of unpaid work, migration, and queer identity. Here, art functions not as aesthetic object but as self-critique – shaping, exposing, and intervening in the socio-economic processes it inhabits.

In other words, institutional critique leads to an understanding of the arts not as ivory towers, but as infrastructure embedded in the global market, political tensions, corruption schemes, and exploitation (Steyerl 2010). This critical perspective focuses on understanding art itself as infrastructure. Maeve Connolly described this as "becoming-infrastructural" (Connolly 2021), which means to shift the focus from the artist as an individual actor to art as a system of ongoing support, coordination, and socio-material entanglement. It entails recognising that artistic practices do not merely reflect infrastructural conditions but constitute them – historically, economically, and affectively. Thus, institutional critique leads to the understanding that art is not merely an autonomous field of symbolic production but also an infrastructure.

Beyond institutional critique, participatory art and art activism play a vital role in defining infrastructural artistic practice. Nina Felshin (1994) in her foundational book *But Is It Art?* describes activist art not as merely representational or thematically political but as an innovative use of public space linked to changes in the lives of particular communities. These works do not seek only to raise awareness but to create new organisational forms, new publics, and new possibilities of acting together. This approach is crucial for understanding infrastructural art for two main reasons. First, it allows us to reconceive art not

as an autonomous or exceptional sphere, but as a toolbox of practices, methods, and strategies — what Nora Sternfeld (2023) has described as the collective creation of infrastructures. Rather than existing apart from the world, art becomes a set of instruments through which social and material realities can be shaped. Second, this perspective foregrounds the potential of art to foster political and social transformation — not through representation alone, but through collective work. By cooperating closely with communities and intervening in sites of systemic failure, infrastructural art enacts change not symbolically, but operationally: it builds the conditions for solidarity, redistribution, and collective agency.

Participatory art, as Claire Bishop (2012) notes, shifts the role of the viewer to that of a co-author and the role of the artist as a mediator or connector, not a heroic figure. A significant example of how participatory art reconfigures the relationship between artist, artwork, and audience is the practice of Thomas Hirschhorn. Many of the artist's works were created in close collaboration with local communities. For instance, the long-term public project *Gramsci Monument* (2013), in the Bronx. Rather than a static monument to Gramsci, Hirschhorn created a dynamic space for dialogue, production, education, and encounter, co-constructed with local residents and sustained through daily programming that included lectures, radio broadcasts, a newspaper, and a children's workshop. This work was not simply made for a community, but with it. It demanded shared authorship and sustained engagement. His concept of the “non-exclusive audience” is key here: a term he uses to oppose the idea of a pre-determined, self-selecting, and institutionally legitimised public. This thinking is formalised in his *Spectrum of Evaluation* (2008–2010), a diagram in which he maps out the dynamics between three distinct agents: the professional art world — “the experts”, who evaluate, and the “non-exclusive audience”, who judge. His art, as he states, is made for the latter. Thus, participatory art, which rethinks the role and status of viewers and artists, becomes a precursor to infrastructure art, where the position of the artist as a connector or mediator in broken infrastructures becomes so important. And since large systems such as infrastructures cannot be constructed alone, but only collectively, people become not just spectators, but fully-fledged participants in the creation of infrastructures.

It is precisely at the intersection of institutional critique, participatory engagement, and activist aesthetics that infrastructural art finds its origins. Nora Sternfeld calls for a paradigm shift from art as representation to art as “the collective creation of infrastructures,” (Sternfeld 2023). Infrastructural art refers to contemporary artistic

practices that do not merely represent or critique existing infrastructures, but actively intervene in, replicate, or construct alternative infrastructural systems. Rather than producing discrete aesthetic objects for exhibition, infrastructural art engages with the material, social, logistical, and affective conditions that shape everyday life – such as housing, education, communication, migration, or care (Daugaard et al. 2024). These practices operate over long durations, often in collaboration with communities, and are oriented toward building platforms, networks, and forms of support in contexts where official systems are absent, failing, or unjust.

To delineate this field more precisely, *infrastructural art* can be understood as an artistic practice that does not merely comment on or temporarily intervene in existing social systems but operates as an enduring infrastructure in itself. In contrast to participatory or activist art, which often centre on representation, symbolic action, or short-term collaboration, infrastructural art is defined by its long-term duration, systemic embeddedness, and operational function. These practices construct or reconfigure platforms, networks, and systems that sustain collective life – such as education, housing, migration, or care – precisely in contexts where formal institutions fail or withdraw. Their aesthetic and political force lies not in visibility or protest alone, but in the material organisation of support, redistribution, and coordination. Infrastructural art thus defines a distinct field at the intersection of artistic, social, and logistical labour. It is characterised by:

- Temporal continuity: infrastructures that persist and evolve beyond the exhibition format.
- Systemic function: direct engagement with, or substitution of, institutional operations such as education, administration, housing, or communication.
- Collective authorship: production and maintenance through sustained collaboration rather than individual authorship.
- Operational aesthetics: aesthetic value emerging from the design and maintenance of systems rather than from visual form.

This approach stems from an understanding of art not as an autonomous sphere of symbolic production, but as a set of tools for mediating and reorganising the social. Accordingly, infrastructural art is not primarily created to be exhibited within biennial or curatorial frameworks; rather, the process of building and maintaining long-term communities, along with the political transformations it generates, constitutes its very form. In this regard, such practices remain marginal within the dominant politics of spectatorship and display that structure the professionalised art system. Their aim is not to produce

visibility within institutional circuits, but to sustain collective infrastructures of relation, care, and resistance — forms of social composition that unfold over time rather than through exhibitionary moments. In this sense, infrastructural art moves beyond critique toward a constructive institutional imagination — materialising alternative infrastructures capable of redistributing access, visibility, and care.

A paradigmatic example of infrastructural art is *The Silent University*, initiated in 2012 by Turkish-born artist Ahmet Öğüt. The project was conceived in response to the systemic failures of migration and education infrastructures, particularly as they affect displaced people and forced migrants. *The Silent University* defines itself as a solidarity-based knowledge exchange platform, developed and led by people who, despite having professional and academic experience, are excluded from national education systems and labour markets due to their asylum status. The project emerged from the conviction that “everybody has the right to educate” (*The Silent University*, n.d.) — and from the recognition that existing educational structures often fail to accommodate the needs, experiences, and knowledge of those in exile.

Indeed, the platform explicitly critiques the dominant model of education as centralised, hierarchical, and exclusionary. It offers in its place a decentralised, participatory, horizontal, and autonomous modality of education, grounded in mutual learning and a variety of epistemologies (Malzacher et al., n.d.). Its transversal pedagogical programmes are led by lecturers, consultants, and researchers who are themselves displaced. In doing so, it reactivates knowledge that would otherwise be rendered invisible, devalued, or lost entirely. This is especially critical given the epistemic and bureaucratic barriers faced by migrants. Professors, researchers, and teachers who flee conflict or persecution often find their qualifications unrecognised in host countries — not merely due to missing documentation, but because non-European systems of education are structurally devalued or rendered illegible within Western institutional frameworks. For instance, the *Silent University Ruhr* (2015–2020) operates through small-scale, self-organised structures involving artists, educators, and cultural workers. Its activities include workshops, public lectures, and advisory sessions. Instead of a fixed institutional location, the university appears temporarily, adapting to local contexts while maintaining its core principles of hospitality, accessibility, and peer-led education.

Crucially, Öğüt’s role as an artist is not to represent these issues in gallery spaces, but to co-create an alternative infrastructure in collaboration with displaced intellectuals and cultural workers. *The Silent University* does not simply expose the limits of the existing educational system — it proposes and performs a different model: one that

is inclusive, hospitable, flexible, and nomadic. It thus exemplifies how infrastructural art moves beyond aesthetic commentary to become a generative platform of support, redistribution, and systemic reimagination.

Migration as Infrastructural Failure

When infrastructural analysis is applied through a socio-political lens, it often foregrounds the moment of rupture — breakdown, failure, disruption — as a methodological tool to expose the hidden labour of infrastructure. As “infrastructure is a heritage of which we are usually unconscious until it malfunctions” (Robbins 2007: 34). Infrastructure is a relation, not a thing (Star and Ruhleder 1996), and often becomes noticeable only when it fails. Its operations — ordinarily mundane, backgrounded, and taken for granted — surface when something goes wrong. As the cyberfeminist Sadie Plant observes, “all are developed in the interests of man, but all are poised to betray him” (Plant 1995: 58). Failure is not incidental. It is embedded within the architecture itself, waiting to reveal itself at the moment of disruption.

In the 2023 exhibition *If Disrupted, It Becomes Tangible: Infrastructures and Solidarities Beyond the Post-Soviet Condition*, which I curated with Aleksei Borisionok at the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius, we dedicated a chapter to “Disruption as Method” (Borisionok and Stebur 2023). Drawing on Paul Virilio’s concept of the *integral accident*, we explored how every technological system contains within it the conditions for its collapse: to invent the plane is to invent the crash, to invent the internet is to invent the blackout (Virilio 2007). But what happens when infrastructural breakdown is not a crisis to be resolved, but a *modus operandi*? This question becomes central in the context of migration infrastructures. As Dominic Davies asks in *The Broken Promise of Infrastructure*, “What happens when infrastructure failure becomes the norm?” (Davies 2023: 15). Migration infrastructures, immigration systems, asylum procedures, residency regimes, often do not disrupt accidentally. They are designed to fail, or more precisely, to appear to be failing while efficiently serving the goals of deterrence, exclusion, and control.

Contemporary data supports this claim. While the global number of migrants has steadily risen — from 173 million in 2000 to 281 million in 2020 (Ahmad Yar and Bircan 2023) — access to asylum and legal residence has become increasingly restricted. In Germany, for instance, 96 percent of Syrian applicants were granted refugee status in 2015; by 2016, that number had dropped to just 57 percent (Haller

and Yanaşmayan 2024: 1910). In July 2025, the German government announced a full suspension of its voluntary visa programme for refugees (Alipour 2025). These changes are part of a broader logic described by Harsha Walia (2021) as prevention through deterrence – the systematic construction of bureaucratic and legal obstacles to inhibit migration. Within this system, disruption is not a malfunction – it is policy. For instance, the use of temporary residence permits rather than permanent ones, frequent legal revisions, deliberately opaque criteria, and recurring document renewals create a mode of governance based on continuous administrative circulation (Philipson Isaac 2022). Rather than being stabilised by the system, the migrant is produced as a subject in flux.

In the case of migration, disruptions, mistakes, delays, bureaucratic confusion, and administrative obstruction are not accidental malfunctions but structural features of how migration infrastructure operates. These dysfunctions are deployed deliberately to restrict access to asylum, residence, and citizenship. Migration infrastructures are often designed to be opaque, fragmented, and error-prone, thereby functioning as technologies of exclusion rather than support. For many migrants, navigating visa procedures, submitting residency applications, or renewing temporary permits constitutes not just a technical process but a defining aspect of the migration experience (Haller and Yanaşmayan 2024). These procedures actively shape the temporal, emotional, and legal trajectories of individuals. The bureaucracy and paperwork that accompany this form of governance are often characterised by confusion and vagueness, which creates space for interactions based on emotions and ethnic prejudices in decision-making processes (Geoffrion and Cretton 2021).

Migration infrastructure operates through planned failures and disruptions, in which the uncertainty of rules, instability of rights, and bureaucratic overload serve to continuously delay and frustrate the migrant's progress. This leads to a paradoxical system in which the appearance of failure is actually the mechanism of control.

One of the most articulate artistic critiques of malfunctioning asylum infrastructure can be found in *Refugees' Library* (2013–2019) by Marina Naprushkina. This project presents an archive of court drawings and transcripts produced during asylum hearings at the Berlin Administrative Court in Moabit (Naprushkina, n.d.). Naprushkina regularly attended hearings as a silent observer, documented the proceedings artistically, anonymised the names and personal details of asylum seekers, and made the material freely available in multiple languages, translated by volunteers and freelance translators. The goal was to make visible the otherwise opaque workings of a critical yet inaccessible institution.

Although asylum hearings in Germany are formally open to the public (Federal Republic of Germany, n.d.), they are conducted in near-total solitude. Despite the legal transparency of the process, there is a conspicuous absence of public observation or journalistic scrutiny. The central role that administrative courts play in determining whether individuals will be granted the right to remain is exercised largely without witnesses, beyond the judge, legal counsel, and the applicant themselves. This structural invisibility gives rise to what might be called a form of political melancholia — a condition in which the mechanisms of exclusion are technically knowable, but rarely seen, challenged, or collectively felt.

Refugees' Library breaks this institutional opacity. By attending and recording hearings, Naprushkina disrupts this quiet, institutional loneliness, insisting that these hearings do not disappear into procedural abstraction but enter the public archive and the social imaginary. One illustrative example from *Refugees' Library* captures a courtroom exchange from the 2016 case of Afnan — plaintiff, a Palestinian asylum seeker:

Judge: No, I wanted to know why you are only starting your apprenticeship now. Why didn't it work out before?

Plaintiff: I started doing a year of voluntary social service in the hospital, but I broke it off. My colleagues weren't nice to me. Then I found an apprenticeship. But I received less than 200 Euro per month and my brother said that it was too little and that I should look for something else. I tried to complete my high school diploma (MSA) but I didn't manage it. It was too difficult for me. I have now started doing an apprenticeship in a nursing home and I like it a lot!

Judge: Unfortunately, that does not explain the matter. I actually wanted to dismiss your appeal.

Lawyer: We will take back our appeal and then file an action after the plaintiff has finished her apprenticeship pursuant to s. 25b (granting residence in the case of long-term integration). This paragraph did not exist before.

Judge (to the Plaintiff): Make sure that you get your act together and work. Your arguments: "Too hard, too difficult, too little money...*" These arguments are so worn out" (*Refugees' Library*, 2016).

This brief transcript reveals the temporal liminality that defines the lives of many forced migrants: a perpetual state of deferral, impermanence, and administrative suspension. Legal categories such as "tolerated stay," "temporary protection," or "asylum seeker" produce an extended present in which individuals are stuck waiting for decisions,

extensions, or permissions — unable to plan a future or stabilise the present (Boccagni and Righard 2020).

At the same time, we witness how depersonalisation operates through bureaucratic breakdown. The judge's fatigue is palpable: another file, another testimony, another person whose claim is perceived as repetitive. For the judge, this is routine; for Afnan, the process determines whether she will be allowed to stay in a country or face deportation. Her exhaustion is physical and existential. She is compelled to narrate her life repeatedly in ways that fit the logic of credibility, productivity, and performative resilience — while simultaneously being dismissed for lacking precisely those qualities.

This asymmetrical exhaustion demonstrates the infrastructure's dual operation. For the judge, Afnan becomes a procedural burden — an administrative object rather than a subject. For Afnan, the asylum system constitutes an overextended mechanism that not only delays access to rights but demands constant justification for one's presence, value, and future. This suggests that migration infrastructure may be understood as deliberately programmed for dysfunction — a system designed to malfunction in order to regulate access to asylum, citizenship, and social inclusion. Constant legal reforms, vague eligibility criteria, protracted waiting periods, understaffed welfare offices and inconsistent documentation protocols are not anomalies but intrinsic components of how the system governs. The logic of malfunction is systemic.

What does this mean for contemporary art? If failure, error, and disruption are not deviations but constitutive elements of infrastructure, then institutional critique — directed at isolated sites of authority — is no longer sufficient. Critiquing a single court, office, or policy cannot address the structural violence woven into the fabric of the entire system. Likewise, participatory art — often based on short-term representational collaboration — falls short when facing infrastructures whose dysfunction is permanent, dispersed, and normalised. In such cases, it is not a matter of repairing infrastructure, as one might patch a leaking pipe. Unlike a pipe that once worked and now must be restored, migration infrastructures have never functioned equitably to begin with. Their “normal” is already defined by failure. Therefore, they cannot be fixed; they must be reimagined.

It is precisely here that infrastructural art opens new political and imaginative horizons. Rather than striving to represent failure, it builds counter-systems: not to restore functionality, but to articulate alternative logics of operation. *The Silent University*, for example, does not replicate the form of the university — it radicalises it, proposing new foundations for knowledge, authorship, and pedagogy. Similarly,

Refugees' Library is not an isolated project but part of a broader ecosystem anchored in *Neue Nachbarschaft//Moabit*. Its critique of asylum bureaucracy is not aimed at reform, but at constructing other infrastructures of integration, cohabitation, and mutual support at the neighbourhood scale. In this context, infrastructural art does not ask what needs to be repaired, but what needs to be invented. It reveals that in places where official systems are designed to exclude, art can operate as a practice of infrastructural imagination – not symbolic, but material, collective, fragile but sustainable.

Tactics of Infrastructural Art

If we understand migration as an infrastructure whose dysfunction and disruption is not incidental but structurally programmed, then the responses of contemporary art to this condition can also be approached infrastructurally. Within this framework, infrastructural art does not merely represent crisis – it operates tactically within, against, or alongside broken systems. This article identifies three tactical formations that recur across contemporary art practices: *invasive infrastructures*, *fugitive infrastructures*, and *counter-infrastructures*.

While other taxonomies could certainly be drawn, these three configurations reflect recurring strategies that transcend isolated interventions or particular artistic practices. They are not simply discrete but rather materialise in multiple practices, articulating distinctive modes of relation to broken systems – within, together with, or outside of them. What unites these tactics is not a unified aesthetic form, but their shared temporal and organisational commitment to re-configuring infrastructures over time.

Invasive Infrastructure

The first tactic, *invasive infrastructure*, operates by embedding itself within existing institutional or bureaucratic systems and reconfiguring them from within. These practices do not seek to create alternative structures from scratch. Instead, they intervene in the failures and inconsistencies of official infrastructures, redirecting flows of access, authorship, and recognition. If, as Lauren Berlant suggests, infrastructure comprises not only objects but “the patterns, habits, norms, and scenes of assemblage and use,” (Berlant 2016: 403) then *invasive infrastructure* modifies those very patterns from inside existing ecologies.

A compelling example of this tactic is **foundationClass*, established in 2016 at Weißensee Kunsthochschule Berlin. This educational platform and resistance toolkit was created to support people affected by racism and forced displacement in accessing art education and reclaiming space within German academic institutions (**foundationClass*, n.d.). Founded by artists and educators with migration and refugee experience, **foundationClass* uses the infrastructure of Weißensee itself not as a site of assimilation, but as a terrain of intervention.

**foundationClass* did “not emerge from a democratic process, but is itself the result of social conflicts, struggles and resistance” (Soltani 2021: 38). It does not function as a guest or auxiliary initiative within the Western-domination institution, but as a structural challenge to show its exclusion mechanisms. The project reclaims space through participation, subversion, and direct democracy – not through violence, but through everyday practices of occupation and redistribution. In their own words: “We are far more than Just Students because we operate from an unjust place, we are the consequences of global injustice” (Halbouni 2021: 2).

This tactic is invasive in its material interventions: shared studio space, peer-to-peer pedagogies, collective authorship, and horizontal governance. As participants assert, “a space cannot be taken for granted [...], it still has to be repeatedly claimed, designed and defended, thus becoming part of a long history of experiences and struggles” (Kersten et al. 2021: 14). Here, infrastructure is both a site of contestation and a fragile political resource. In this sense, **foundationClass* reveals the critical potential of invasive infrastructure: it works inside failing or unjust systems, not to repair them, but to transform from within, it intervenes in existing established material and symbolic flows for a more equitable redistribution within the existing infrastructure. However, this embeddedness also implies risk. The project is dependent on the very institution it critiques, vulnerable to institutional fatigue, budget withdrawal, or co-optation. Its survival is never guaranteed – it must be continuously defended, renegotiated, and restaged. Thus, in this context, invasive infrastructure carries a positive connotation, as it intervenes in and disrupts already dysfunctional systems in order to enable fairer, more transparent modes of operation.

Fugitive Infrastructures

Fugitive infrastructures describe alternative, temporary, and often improvised forms of infrastructure that emerge under conditions of exclusion, crisis, or systemic absence – particularly among marginalised communities. These are not simply makeshift responses to institutional

failure; they are practices of autonomy and resistance, shaped by necessity and sustained through collective coordination. Fugitive infrastructures often appear outside official governance, operate informally, and evolve in the shadows of dominant systems. They create material and immaterial forms of support that challenge the spatial and temporal logics of state institutions and repressive management.

This concept is grounded in the work of scholars like Deborah Cowen, who argues that “Infrastructure is not only a vehicle of domination and violence. It is also a means of transformation. Alternative worlds require alternative infrastructures, systems that allow for sustenance and reproduction” (Cowen 2017). Fugitive infrastructures, in this sense, are not only substitutes for absent services; they are blueprints for new forms of life. These formations are often “undocumented,” “unauthorised,” or “invisible,” yet they sustain communities in the face of legal, bureaucratic, or social abandonment. They arise in the interstices of urban space, migrate with displaced populations, and reconfigure what infrastructure can mean beyond state and establishment. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney suggest in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013), fugitive infrastructures are not concerned with restoration or recognition. Rather, they rely on movement, concealment, and repetition — operating outside official protocols, evading governance, and resisting capture. These formations emerge not as utopian projects or mechanisms of repair, but as strategies of survival, withdrawal, and quiet endurance.

Crucially, fugitive infrastructures do not reject the idea of infrastructure altogether. Rather, they intensify and radicalise its latent potential. They take the core principles of infrastructure — distribution, access, maintenance — and rearticulate them through collectivist, solidaristic, or revolutionary aims. Their power lies not only in substituting for failed systems but in reimagining infrastructural logics altogether. In doing so, they often expose the violent exclusions of official infrastructure and reassign its functions to serve those structurally excluded from its benefits.

A notable example of such fugitive infrastructural practice is the initiative *Solidarny Dom Kultury “Słonecznik”* (Solidarity House of Culture “Sunflower”), which emerged in the days following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Though hosted by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, *Słonecznik* operated independently of institutional planning and rapidly transformed the museum’s administrative headquarters into an emergency solidarity infrastructure. It provided warm meals, medical and psychological aid, clothing, workshops, and informal networks of care — initially entirely through unpaid volunteer work and community donations.

As co-organiser Jakub Depczyński recalls, “The beginnings of the ‘Sunflower’ were so intense and tense that we barely remember anything from those early weeks” (Depczyński 2022). In those chaotic days, the museum space became a hub for artists, cultural workers, and refugees, functioning as a site of mutual aid and political assembly. It was formally authorised, nor prohibited – it simply happened. The place, dormant during the pandemic, was reoccupied and repurposed, not by curators or administrators, but by people responding to crisis. The organisers themselves referred to it as a “metaphorical occupation of the institution” (Stefańska 2024: 167).

Importantly, *Słonecznik* defined itself not as a humanitarian relief centre but as a *Solidarny Dom Kultury* – a “Solidarity House of Culture.” The more common English translation, “Solidarity Culture Centre,” fails to capture the specific resonance of the original term in the Polish context. These cultural centres are reimaged ruins of socialist Poland’s infrastructure. That is why it is important that *Słonecznik* takes the form of a House of Culture – controversial, but potentially emancipatory. It does not simply use it, but appropriates and radicalises its meaning (Kusztra, n.d.). Rather than serving a passive or aesthetic public, it shifted focus to care, support, and protection.

Emphasis on care and hospitality, however, must not be mistaken for apolitical service provision. In the case of *Słonecznik*, care is redefined as a radical and collective practice of solidarity. As Taras Gembik, one of the core initiators of the project, reflects, “I asked myself: what is art and what can I do when war breaks out? Not everyone can fight, but everyone can get involved and do something. I do not mean empty gestures or naive texts” (Mazur 2023). This shift was reflected not only in symbolic terms but in practice: instead of delivering standard public programming, *Słonecznik* offered legal consultations, medicine, and meals. In doing so, it directly contested the illusion of institutional neutrality and redefined the cultural institution as a site of urgent solidarity. This marks the moment where fugitive infrastructure becomes political – not simply a response to crisis, but a radical rearticulation of institutional purpose, audience, and responsibility in times of displacement and disaster.

Counter-Infrastructure

The third and final artistic tactic discussed in this paper is that of counter-infrastructure. In contrast to invasive or fugitive forms, counter-infrastructure entails the deliberate creation of autonomous systems that do not merely resist or bypass state and institutional logics,

but offer structural alternatives grounded in principles of solidarity, horizontality, and mutual aid. These practices emerge not to supplement or repair existing infrastructures but to replace their failed foundations with radically different logics.

Counter-infrastructures operate with a set of distinguishing characteristics. First, they replicate certain core functions of formal infrastructure — distribution, coordination, support — but do so through alternative organisational principles. Rather than relying on hierarchy and bureaucratic rationality, they are typically decentralised, horizontal, and sustained by trust and collective labour. Second, they are inherently political in their orientation: not only do they refuse the technocratic neutrality often associated with state infrastructures, but they actively challenge the ideological underpinnings of those systems — particularly their complicity in processes of exclusion, racialisation, and precaritisation. Finally, they are grounded in collective care: their purpose is not symbolic critique, but the redistribution of life-sustaining resources and the construction of communities of survival.

An emblematic example of this approach is Marina Naprushkina's *Neue Nachbarschaft/Moabit* case from which this research began. Rooted in Naprushkina's broader critique of existing both migrant and artistic infrastructure, *Neue Nachbarschaft* exemplifies a form of cultural work that consciously positions itself outside the conventional circuits of exhibition-making. As Naprushkina explains, "I have never questioned art itself as a method. But for me its history, institutional and academic field, is a zone of constant critical rethinking. And it is in this process that the initiatives and projects I launched and am involved in are rooted" (Secondary Archive 2022). Rather than seeking to reform existing cultural infrastructures from within, *Neue Nachbarschaft* builds its own — anchored not in the legitimising power of the art world, but in the everyday struggles and solidarities of migrant life.

A second example is the *Trampoline House*, established in 2010 in Copenhagen by a collective of artists, curators, asylum seekers, and activists. The project was conceived in response to Denmark's increasingly restrictive asylum and immigration policies, and emerged from a prior initiative, the *Asylum Dialog Tank*, where asylum seekers were positioned as knowledge producers and experts on their own experiences. The proto project was organized by artists Morten Goll and Joachim Hamou and curator Tone Olaf Nielsen (*Trampoline House*, n.d.a.). The choice of the name *Trampoline House* itself reveals its oppositional logic: as one participant recounted, the Danish Minister of Integration had referred to integration policy as a "stepping stone" into society. In contrast, the participant declared: "After nine years in the camp system, I need more than a stepping stone — I need a fucking

trampoline” (Trampoline House, n.d.b). This refusal to accommodate the minimalism of state provisions reflects the core ethos of the project: to build systems capable not only of resilience but of propulsion – social, political, and affective.

Over the course of a decade, *Trampoline House* became a multi-functional space offering legal counselling, language instruction, childcare, job search assistance, artistic programming, and collective governance via weekly meetings. It was a civic infrastructure constructed by and for refugees, operating in open defiance of the state’s fragmentary and punitive asylum system.

What unites these projects is not only their infrastructural character, but their explicit refusal to align with the expectations of the art world. Like *Neue Nachbarschaft*, *Trampoline House* blurs the boundary between cultural production and social work. This ambiguity, however, is often met with scepticism or erasure within dominant art discourses. As Frida Sandström has noted, projects like *Trampoline House* demonstrate the Janus face of artist-led activism: if your need for the resources that are provided as part of a project is urgent, it might be hard to also experience that project as art (Sandström 2022). Such projects elude clear categorisation within the framework of artistic practice. The traditional approach to art criticism renders these practices invisible.

Yet as Morten Goll, one of *Trampoline House*’s co-founders, argues, such criticism misses the point. The project deliberately dismantles the dominant aesthetic of individual authorship and proposes instead a collective, processual model of art-making. “What if the artwork is made by the audience?” Goll asks. “What if *Trampoline House* was created and is recreated every day by all the people who have ever worked and work in *Trampoline House*?” (Goll et al. 2022: 248). In this formulation, counter-infrastructure is not an art object, nor even an artistic intervention – it is a durable, evolving infrastructure built through sustained collective labour and necessity.

Counter-infrastructure art thus insists on autonomy, not for the sake of withdrawal, but to reimagine the terms of belonging, authorship, and care. It exemplifies what infrastructural art can become when it is not merely embedded within broken systems or hastily mobilised in times of crisis, but built from the ground up as a collective refusal and reconstruction of the conditions of social life.

Conclusion

Across the tactics of invasion, fugitivity, and counter-construction, artists propose to reconfigure the infrastructures of migration from

within and without. Their practices do not merely represent displacement or critique the bureaucratic violence of asylum regimes; they act upon the material and institutional failures that shape the migrant condition. By transforming sites of exclusion into spaces of learning, encounter, and collective agency, infrastructural art operates as both a response to and an intervention within the broken architecture of migration governance.

These infrastructures of solidarity, however, remain fragile and contested. They rely on precarious forms of labour – volunteerism, mutual aid, emotional investment – that both sustain and exhaust their participants. Their existence depends on temporary funding, personal commitment, and collective trust, making them vulnerable to burnout, co-optation, and institutional fatigue. Yet precisely through this vulnerability they reveal a different logic of endurance: one that prioritises care, reciprocity, and interdependence over efficiency, control, and hierarchy.

Returning to the initial question – *How can art operate when migration systems fail?* – the answer proposed here is that art can become an infrastructure itself: a social and affective apparatus that enables collective survival in conditions of displacement. By constructing autonomous networks of education, hospitality, and support, artists and cultural workers develop counter-systems that reimagine integration and belonging beyond the confines of policy and bureaucracy.

In this sense, infrastructural art within the field of migration does not promise a utopia or an institutional alternative; it performs the ongoing work of reassembling the possible. It builds, however provisionally, the worlds that migration regimes systematically deny – worlds of shared responsibility, situated knowledge, and collective care.

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