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Dismantling, Disappearing, Reconstituting? Reflections on the Mackintosh Fire 2018

In this article, curator Viviana Checchia and theatre scholar Anika Marschall reflect together on their collaboration at the Centre for Contemporary Arts: Glasgow (CCA), which was affected by the fire at the Glasgow School of Art (GSA) Mackintosh building on 15 June 2018. The CCA is in close proximity to the now wrecked, and partially dismantled building complex, only a few steep steps down the hill.

On Friday, 15 June 2018, together with the artists Jonas Staal and a pan-national exhibition team, we celebrated the opening of The Scottish-European Parliament at the CCA in Glasgow -- an artistic intervention in response to the Scottish Independence referendum in 2014 and the Brexit referendum in 2016. However, later on that very opening night, the iconic Mackintosh building was being gutted by fire.

Originally, the Mackintosh building (‘the Mack’) was completed in 1909. It is a listed building of great historic importance as an example of Art Nouveau. It is located in direct proximity to another historically significant building, one by Alexander ‘Greek’ Thomson, which hosts the CCA, a multipurpose venue with a cinema, theatre, residency spaces, meeting rooms, café, bar, book and design shop and 17 other cultural tenants and organisations. The ‘Mack’ was undergoing an extensive restoration following a previous fire in May 2014; it was due to reopen in 2019. Because of the immense damage the 2018 fire caused, a cordon was in place restricting travel around the site for months. A great number of tenants, social enterprises, cultural venues and small businesses had been evacuated, people had temporarily lost their homes, income and jobs. Since the opening of The Scottish-European Parliament at the CCA, it had actually been closed until further notice. At the original time of writing this article, around Sauchiehall Street, you could still smell the acrid smoke in the atmosphere.

In this article, we reflect on the meanings and temporal layers of the Mackintosh wreckage: how can we possibly relate to a building, in which we, the authors, never set
foot in ourselves, nor studied, nor worked in, due to its restoration since 2014? We will consider how we, our critical and cultural work relate to the wrecked cultural heritage, a former site of learning, collection and cultural production. First, through performative and unwieldy co-writing, we explore the wider meanings of interpellating a collectivethrough the literal use of ‘we’. Subsequently, we make transparent our search for how to breathe new life into The Scottish-European Parliament and create meaningful public engagement with a speculative political future, when the fragmentation and schism of our communities and emotional wounds, are still so fresh. Finally, we interrogate wider notions of infrastructure and the (im)possibility of cultural production when artistic, political and methodological infrastructures are disappearing. In doing so, we ultimately seek to counter a more dominant narrative of cyclical renewal.

We take our cue from Staal, that the ‘artistic imaginary precedes political change’ (2018), and to reconstitute cultural and educational institutions such as the ‘Mack’, and political institutions such as the European Union, we must imagine this change first. Because the speculative political art project, The Scottish-European Parliament, is part of CCA’s work to engage wider publics, questions emerged in lieu of the urgency to respond to the ‘Mack’ wreckage and the cordon, which was and still is weighing on Viviana’s work as public engagement curator: the impossibility of direct physical engagement with publics and the impossibility of gathering in the designed space. Therefore, this article explores our search for critical forms of cultural production during a period when infrastructures are disappearing by drawing on our interdisciplinary congruence and divergence: bridging curatorial practice (Viviana) and performance studies (Anika).

During our collaborative writing process on this article, the CCA finally reopened in late October 2018. Belatedly, but for four weeks, The Scottish-European Parliament was being reinvigorated with new public life: gatherings, discussions, workshops, story sharing, reviews and images by Scottish civic platforms like Commonweal, grassroots groups like ‘WTF is Neoliberalism’, political representatives of the Scottish Independence campaign and the local creative community of the GSA, including former
and current students, lecturers and artists. This article presents another layer to The Scottish-European Parliament and aims to be part of its manifold uptake. However, our reflection lingers on the painful period in between its closure and reopening: on our attempts to plan, prepare, cancel, re-plan, drop, cut, narrate, manage and engage with the process and negotiation of staging wrecks. Wreckages in this case refer to the burned out ‘Mack’, the political dismantling of the body politic due to Brexit, the cordoned CCA and the stand-still of its public engagement programme, including The Scottish-European Parliament, which no person could access for the four months it was supposed to run.

[[figure1} Centre for Contemporary Arts: Glasgow. Photo Anika Marschall.]

The question of ‘we’

In the following, we make transparent our wrestling with authorial voices and forms of co-writing, as we continue searching for new tools for something we do not yet have the capacity to comprehend. Faced with an accelerating degree of infrastructural change, this form of open, reflexive, exploratory and very slow writing about the question of ‘we’ proves to be the pivotal means of possible and new cultural production in response to the wreckages. This essayistic section illustrates the dissipation of our sense of community and communal belonging, given the spatio-temporal reconfigurations of local, urban as well as transnational, European communities and shared infrastructures. We start with a self-reflexive section on our collaborative and co-writing practice, before questioning our relation to the communities impacted by the ‘Mack’ fire.

Astrida Neimanis argues in relation to identity politics that ‘“We” is always the most difficult but necessary question’ (2015: 151). In our collaboration, ‘we’ is also the most important question. ‘We’ is one of the most difficult words to use, when writing and thinking an article together. Pragmatically, when one collaborator makes use of ‘we’, the other is immediately, albeit gently, being coerced or welcomed into this authorial ‘we’.
We, Viviana and Anika, have inherited two different bodies of knowledge and vocabularies. This article presents the outcome of our practice to collaboratively think-through-writing. For this, we agreed on specific dates and times to meet online and we literally have been writing together: two digital pens running over the blank page at the same time, from two separate rooms in the city of Glasgow (and at times other European cities). Consequently, what operates in this text are two authorial voices, which introduce each other, leave each other behind and complement one another: at times, ‘we’ also signifies a wider public collective.

Of course, our practice did not start immediately with the first paragraph, but with a conversation about the ethics of co-authorship, references, style, format and structure. Actually, even before this conversation, each writing session started with hospitable greetings and attentiveness toward the other, asking whether we were literally and metaphysically on the same page -- or, if on a different one, how we might possibly build capacity for a critical productive written dialogue with the other. This brief reflection shows that our mode of collaborative writing was affected by the change in infrastructure, the lack of shared working spaces and times. Conversing through digital writing and from a physical distance takes more rhetorical precision and more time than in person, and in addition, it leaves new archival traces of such collaboration.

The question of ‘we’ is problematic in our scholarly and personal responses to the ‘Mack’. In the aftermath of the fire, we were to witness a massive schism in the communities around the GSA and beyond. Because my, Anika’s, institutional body does not readily belong to the art school by any means, I tried to be very sensible about negotiating the terms of communication revolving around the ‘Mack’, its loss, dismantling and its speculative future. Indeed, when I listened to Robyne Calvert, Mackintosh Research Fellow at the GSA, talking publicly about the heartbreak, the incredible amount of anger, grief and despair over the loss of ‘their Mack’, I was acutely made aware of my position as one far removed from her lived embodied relation and biography entangled with that space. As Calvert argues, while it seemingly undergoes dormancy, the Mackintosh wreckage is still a living building (2018). The same could be
said about the seeming dormancy of the CCA, The Scottish-European Parliament, and the European project more widely: desperately in need of rejuvenating the networks of interrelation that make possible our experience of belonging. Thus, what do we do when facing such loss? How to make our dispersed communities invest in envisioning salvage, renewal and the possibility of political change?

The case of my, Viviana’s, own institutional connection with the art school suffers somewhat (and a quite literal suffering over these few months) from a more complex engagement with the art school. The CCA is not only in a physically contiguous situation to the GSA, but we operate at the practice edge of the same field as the school, we have ongoing collaborations and partnerships at all levels, and most of our staff are either ex-students or current part-time teaching staff at GSA. When I engage in this meditative response to the disaster at the school and in the situation in which we find ourselves in collaboration with Anika, I therefore bring a whole baggage of issues, engagements and burdens of historical and personal nature to the construction of our ‘we’. This ‘we’ then is, and always must be an odd, lopsided baggage, a forever internally unresolved collection of views, feelings and emotions, which might make it even more difficult to attain the status of ‘sensible’ opinion which Anika evokes as an aim. This ‘we’ gathers its informations and its viewpoints where it may, but if I, for example, was not present at the event where Anika heard my colleague Dr Calvert express her feelings about the loss, it may well be, nonetheless, that my relations to and opinions on that colleague’s expression would bring a slightly more nuanced position to bear than Anika’s admirably neutral speculation as above.

The Scottish-European Parliament

For more than a year, we have been collaborating. I, Anika, joined Viviana in August 2017 as doctoral intern and curatorial assistant, because I was eager to learn about Viviana’s curatorial work, which revolves around socially engaged arts. Viviana is public engagement curator at the CCA -- an institution which foregrounds open source programming by different individuals, communities and civic bodies. In particular, I was
interested in Viviana’s commission of Staal, because my research focuses on contemporary political performance. While Staal is based in the visual arts, rather than theatre or performance, his artworks predominantly take the form of performative assemblies. As part of the commission between 2016–18, Staal researched political engagement by Glasgow-based artists and collectives and as result he created The Scottish-European Parliament, which we will introduce from both our perspectives in the following.

In my, Viviana’s view, The Scottish-European Parliament represented a possibility to reflect upon the current socio-political situation in Scotland, and test the role art can play in society. Challenging the understanding of an ‘architecture’ falling apart was part of the objective that we, together with Staal, had envisioned. What we were unaware of was that we would witness a physical and institutional collapse just next door to the CCA. While the EU architecture was something embedded in our lives, albeit in rather intangible ways, the ‘Mack’ was something Anika and I had never experienced firsthand, though it was unfolding materially in front of our eyes. During the research period preceding The Scottish-European Parliament, together with Staal, we studied the technical details of the utilitarian architecture of oil rigs, and my understanding had been that this project would have a metaphorical relationship with the local environment. The Mackintosh fire, all of a sudden, revealed a direct connection with an existent building whose disappearance determined the closure of the show.

Visually, The Scottish-European Parliament is based in the CCA galleries as exhibition, presenting previous works by Staal and new ones, including a video simulation of a possible future parliament projected onto a gallery wall, and political symbols printed on others. The middle of the main gallery floor is marked by a cross, where two white widths of carpet converge, running from the four corners of the room. Where they cross, visitors encounter the construction of a vibrant white lectern, taking the shape of a rhomboid without any square angle. Conceptually to me, Anika, this is a utilitarian space, designed to be in use, for people to assemble and imagine possible future scenarios, like the relation between Scotland and Europe.
Interestingly, the exhibition as fixed, stable, spatial arrangement was something I, Anika, could not readily relate to with my performance lens. But because of the structures of feeling invested in the ‘Mack’ wreckage, the exhibition transformed for me poetically and politically. More recently, Lena Šimić has reminded me of the query that even when I wanted to write about the contemporary European project and the sea (which is implicated in Staal’s speculative proposal to locate The Scottish-European Parliament on a decommissioned oil rig in the North sea) in a poetic way at first, I realised that I needed to be political (2018: 75). My cultural work for the generative art project The Scottish-European Parliament would equally require me use it to vocally position myself as European migrant, committed to ufight for a collective freedom of movement and access to public infrastructure, but also working conditions, access to education and political rights.

The Scottish-European Parliament is to be made use of, to gather and negotiate political differences and start imagining a shared future. I, Anika, understand it as an artistic prompt for a larger, more sustainable socio-political infrastructure to emerge: a rebuilding of the European project, which is presumably deemed to be dismantled and to disappear as a political infrastructure from our home, from Scotland. In particular, for you, Viviana, and me, Anika, who are European but not British citizens, this intervention is deeply embedded in political power negotiations and the dismantling of infrastructures, which used to guarantee our citizen rights, support our everyday private lives and our professional working bodies, as academics and cultural workers.

By focussing a lens on disappearance to reflect on the The Scottish-European Parliament’s period of closure, questions of temporality emerged. Pace, timing, slowness, patience, as well as ruptures and fast-track decision making marked our experiences of working throughout the months after the Mackintosh fire. The acceleration of ad hoc management and the painful slowness of healing hybridised. The Scottish-European Parliament was being researched, planned and prepared over a working period of two years, and presented a distinct pan-European art space for
responses to the ongoing Brexit negotiations. However, the immediate cordon placed around the CCA and exhibition, have forced the intervention into a different narrative. The planned public engagement programme, which to me, Anika, lies at the very heart of the exhibition concept, was cancelled. The Scottish-European Parliament as a site to be filled with political and creative life was locked down.

In the introduction, we posed the question of how to breathe new life into this collaboration at the CCA and create meaningful public engagement when wounds are so fresh. Due to its open source programming, the CCA offers various communities, groups and individuals a cultural home, a space for dwelling, to reconvene daily, weekly or monthly; to work, make art, imagine, learn new skills, produce, perform, assemble, discuss, gather, be nurtured and stimulated. Because of the cordon around the CCA, our emotive awareness about the urgent need for a shared and durable space to enable a communal healing process was ever more heightened. To be working in solitude, scattered over private apartments and cafés in Glasgow, made every face-to-face meeting and conversation more meaningful and at times more difficult, too.

Because it was stuck in-limbo, The Scottish-European Parliament changed its narrative frame to wider, translocal political transitions: the future of the European project but also the freedom of movement, the rights and conditions for pan-national cultural work and the future of artistic education. The act of imagining lies at the heart of what it means to make such political change possible and to reconstitute institutions at-large in all three fields: the arts, politics and education. Reconstituting demands a shared period for healing; attentiveness, care and patience by and for a (local and non-local) community. Re-constituting therefore seems to be of another quality than constituting: it requires a negotiation with what remains, a negotiation much slower than the urgency of immediate hands-on responses needed in the moment of a fire. In specific reference to the ‘Mack’, Johnny Rodger has reflected on the ‘practical necessity to assess whether the building can be rebuilt from the ruins, what type of reproduction is desired and/or possible, and what sort of materials are available in the wreckage, in the archives and in store to assemble the expertise, know-how and understanding that would allow for any
rebuilding’ (2018: 2). A hands-on practice of building more sustainable future infrastructures is not readily analysed with only a performance studies lens, because such a lens usually focuses on ephemeral events, temporary encounters, affects coming and going. But rather than a reassessment of the Mackintosh heritage, our reflection revolves around modes of ad hoc cultural management to forge an imaginary of provisional being-with, sustaining the ‘meanwhile’ community residues.

All three sites, the art school, exhibition and even the European project, constitute cultural collectives which reach beyond our individual life span, the scale of the body and the authorial voices represented and inscribed in the authorial ‘we’ we introduced before. In all three, we have and we are witnessing an infrastructural collapse ‘from bridges to systems to fantasy’, which, as Lauren Berlant has argued, ‘leads to a dynamic way to disturb the old logics, or analogics, that have institutionalized images of shared life’ (2016: 403). Although Berlant thinks through austerity, her discussion of infrastructure helps us rethink the disruption of cultural life; what appears as a process of disappearance and what is performed in the meanwhile.

Infrastructures

While being displaced from the CCA, while the ‘Mack’ was being dismantled brick-by-brick, while Brexit negotiations continued to be disjointed, distracting and disconcerting, and while The Scottish-European Parliament was gathering dust, instead of being enlivened and put to use, time passed with no outcome. Days turned to weeks turned to months. During the prolonged wait for an agreed reopening date, in our search for critical and possible forms of cultural production, we turned to the notion of infrastructure and shared acts of imagination. In Berlant’s words, we questioned how to ‘forge an imaginary for managing the meanwhile within damaged life’s perdurance, a meanwhile that is less an end or an ethical scene than a technical political heuristic that
allows for ambivalence, distraction, antagonism and inattention not to destroy collective existence’ (ibid: 394).

Given that the performative aspects of curation are only a part of the curatorial work, for me, Viviana, operation in my field indeed always entails a strong presence of the meanwhile, and in that meanwhile, as a public engagement curator, the political is the poetic. There is no separation between those two, and the ongoing work of curation, which involves selecting, interpreting, organising and presenting, is always a work in progress in the meanwhile towards constructing an infrastructure which is a linguistic apparatus. It involves engagements with people, places, concepts and objects to negotiate ways in which they can acquire or reveal their significance in public life, in political, social, cultural and economic discourse which enrich and empower the communities in which they are situated. An advantage the curator has in dealing with this type of extraordinary and emergency situation might be that the meanwhile is their proper territory, the contingent is a strength in seeking to break with predictable means of communication and systems of meaning, and to make new stories with new and often improvised infrastructures.

Infrastructure might be a term more often used in the curatorial field than in performance studies, yet it is employed in that latter discipline inasmuch as performance is ‘conceptually unruly’ (Larkin 2013: 329). Infrastructures technically mediate ‘exchange over distance, bind people and things into complex heterogeneous systems’ (ibid: 335), and at the same time have an aesthetic or poetic dimension which operates relatively autonomously from their technical function (ibid: 336).

To me, Anika, ‘structure’ resembles something robust and neat, it is there when needed, it holds you, it gives you support, it can be clearly mapped out, it is architectural or geographical. But the concept of ‘infra-structure’ points to a different kind of structure, an undergirding structure under the sentient body. Although humans map and visually document sub-structures, such as infrasonic sound or infrared light, they inherently expose the limits of human capacity, in this case human hearing and seeing. However,
in our different sentient body parts, both sub-structures can be felt, when their waves are intense enough. Thus, this reference colours the concept of infrastructure, including its affective qualities.

As the field of science and physics suggests, infrastructure presents not simply a scaffold, but enables our political capacity to act. The artworld, as Irit Rogoff has summarised, already comprises a certain amount of infrastructure, including available gallery spaces, budgets, publicity machines, established formats like exhibitions, lectures, publications, and a built, constant audience made up of art students, cultural workers, artists (2008). In relation to infrastructure, Rogoff has argued that contemporary curators and artistic educators like Viviana, find themselves in demand to plot out the dualities between academic institutions of knowledge-production and conditions of production in the artworld (2017). This mode of curatorial plotting out is not just a mode of accessible, reiterative communication, but a search for what it means to display research -- beyond well-known narratives and forms of storytelling that are well grounded in ‘endless lineages of academic referencing’ (ibid). Therefore we ought to research from embodied conditions of our lives (perhaps from a performance-oriented perspective) conditions which are in and of themselves ‘fundamentally at odds and are not subsumed by the same logic’ (ibid). According to Rogoff, emerging modes of collaborative critical thinking revolve around notions of permission. Permission is essential, not a given, and a continuous communicative exchange with the protocols of knowledge -- as we did in writing this article: permitting each other to make use of ‘we’.

In our interdisciplinary thinking, the idea of infrastructure, initially proposed by Viviana’s curatorial practice lens, meets Anika’s field of research: the ephemeral bodily encounters in and of performance -- its constant transformation. Rogoff’s lecture title ‘The way we work now’ (ibid) immediately produces for me, Anika, the reference to Shannon Jackson’s article ‘The way we perform now’ (2014). Here, Jackson reflects a shift towards interdisciplinary collaboration across the arts, emphasising that the post-Fordist turn towards immaterial economies has long been part of performance studies thinking about labouring bodies, social encounters and the production of affects (ibid:...
Jackson defines a top-ten list of occupational hazards, problematic recurrent habits when we engage scholarly with interdisciplinarity in performance, curation and visual art (2014: 55–60). What her list exposes is the perception of power relations between visual art worlds and performing art worlds: ‘The sense that Power Is Always Elsewhere will inevitably boomerang back to the recognition that power is also right here at home.’ (ibid: 60) Therefore, Jackson points us to the larger question of how we can survive together (here it comes again to the tricky, culturally, temporally, geographically unspecific and gray term ‘we’); or less drastically, how an interdisciplinary ‘we’ creates the capacity to imagine political futures collectively. Berlant explains that for surviving, it is necessary to build ‘affective infrastructures’ (2016: 414), which maintain space for ambivalence, because we ambiguously feel both the need to be accommodated in a different, new world and the intrinsic resistance to adapting to such a new world.

Jackson, is a key figure for thinking about infrastructure from a performance perspective. She has argued that performance is not just ephemeral and fleeting or made of air, from a romantic, creative void. Instead, performance is rooted in and organised through the labour of bodies, material, objects and crucially, through support systems. While performance is often discussed as disruption and dematerialization, I am more interested in how we might think about performance’s ‘infrastructural politics’ (Jackson 2011: 29), the ways performance can be sustaining, nurturing, coordinating, building and re-materialising. To think of performance as one affective experience at a time, as that which, in Peggy Phelan’s infamous words, it ‘becomes itself through disappearance’ (1993: 146) and thus calls for a negotiation of its infrastructure.

Performativity of Disappearance

Bridging curatorial practice and performance studies in our reflection on the ‘Mack’ wreckage, we prompted each other to rethink infrastructure, its embodiment and intangible matter. In doing so, we reflected on how the ‘Mack’ weighs on the capacity—
building for collaborative, intellectual and creative labour. At the same time, the ruptured cultural infrastructural conditions are disclosing themselves as an imaginary of sustainable stability: infrastructure in its embodied form actually demands a constant activation of the sense of ‘we’, of mutual interdependence. Further, the temporary loss of a stability, which the CCA as institution affords to its staff, resident artists and communities, including the qualities of local accessibility, have forced us and others to look for unused infrastructural capacity in unexpected places and in unexpected times. Clearly, the cordon and closure was not so much a definite, certain disappearance, but a mode of disappear-ing: an ongoing process with an indefinite end. While public discourse on the Mackintosh fire has put emphasis on issues of place and site, the ruptures in the ways we used to move and work in the cordoned area have made us turn to temporality. Indeed, infrastructures for artistic collaboration, for making and performing, include material systems and physical spaces, but importantly, they are performed through sociality. With that, our experiences of waiting, preparing, everyday working rhythms and means of communication, have revealed the importance of ‘when’.

‘When’ is the question that has kept weighing on us as heavily as the ‘Mack’ wreckage. Performance is by definition processual and temporary. Theoretically, where a performance takes place might not be as important as when a performance takes place. Performance plays out through time. Usually, performances are prepared and presented through a time-limited access to a space, rather than a long-term occupation or dwelling, they happen outside of the ordinary, interrupt everyday life and its usual rhythms. Performance means ‘meanwhile’. Performance thus can help reflect our mutual interdependence during the meanwhile and beyond. Ultimately, the support of an embodied ‘we’, of a collective subjectification is at stake in disjointing sites of power and knowledge: in ‘our’ case a school, an exhibition, a parliament.

Since the Mackintosh fire, what has become ever more palpable is that our creative communities sustain themselves through relatively stable, albeit not stand-still, infrastructures, including durable time regimes and accessible spaces. John Bingham-Hall and Adam Kaasa have analysed that a stable cultural infrastructure for
performance rehearsals and art making does neither mean the inverse of temporality nor does it mean permanency (2017: 57). Beyond access, infrastructures are also dependent on the imaginative, poetic and affective qualities we ascribe to them, which we do as collective and which do not just happen because of some 'equilibrium of time, energy and focus' within and between physical spaces (ibid). Regardless of its material impact, the 'Mack' wreckage thus does not simply present an architectural or heritage issue, but an infrastructure which we have come to understand as generative force, one that is productive of difference and creative interjections. As such, the concrete wreckage site is not just generalized or abstract nodal point, but produces the political ties between cultural communities, their claiming of rights and new forms of association and activity. Engagement with infrastructure -- wrecked or not -- plays a pivotal role in collective organisation.

In this article, we have sought to reflect on the ways in which the Mackintosh wreckage affects on how we move from a visible, accessible and tangible curatorial display of community in form of the exhibition The Scottish-European Parliament, from the everyday making of infrastructure as Viviana’s work in her role as public engagement curator, towards new forms of working under the radar, negotiation and uncertainty about a dissipating community, one that feels more speculative than real. In our case, the open, reflexive and exploratory writing in this article proves pivotal for unlocking capacity for a shared imaginary, and equally provides the critical means to continue bringing cultural infrastructure and possible communal interaction, a ‘we’ back into urban display in/with/or against a dormant, cordoned, wrecked environment.

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