Art as Infrastructure

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Abstract

This paper seeks to describe and explain the social efficacy of art by addressing it as contemporary western infrastructure for social cohesion. Social cohesion refers here not to teleological status quo, but to pluralistic, yet fairly peaceful co-habitation, allowing for gradual change while preserving continuity of the group identity.

Employing Actor-Network Theory, this paper views artistic practice as actor-network assemblage process making connections and vehicles that enable movement of ideas, values, visions and dissents throughout the community. Parallel memberships of the same actors in artistic and non-artistic actor-networks create conditions for artistic meanings to “bleed over” also into other spheres of the social life where they can gain efficacy far beyond the “art world”. Art infrastructure operates under particular “regime of art” that suspends some of the “real world” rules and sanctions ambiguity, facilitating less confrontational reconciliation of diverse and contradictory meanings than is customary in e.g. science, religion, politics, economy, railways, sewage or other infrastructures that also have impact on social cohesion. Debates about the definitions of “art” or particular objects’ belonging to “art” emerge in this perspective as debates on the scope of applicability of the “regime of art”, as it may have significant social consequences.

By outlining an infrastructural theory of art this paper seeks to fill a theoretical gap in a rather fragmented field of anthropology of art and to propose novel ways to deploy insights from anthropological engagements with infrastructure. Empirical data of this paper come from a five weeks fieldwork in Alaska.

Keywords: art, infrastructure, social cohesion, actor-network theory, Alaska
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Cover photo: A fragment of “Fragmenta” discussed within. © Justas Pipinis.
Introduction

Think of this essay as a stroll through a familiar terrain, but walking it in an opposite direction at unusual time of the day, experiencing the well-known from another angle and in a slightly different lighting. In this introductory section I am going to pace my thematic terrain guiding you towards my topic and research questions. Along the way I will point out some selected key terms, outline my perspective as researcher and discuss the overall relevance of this project. References to relevant anthropological debates will be covered in subsequent sections.

My research is about art. So what is “art”? In everyday life I use this very question to ridicule indulgently wasteful discussions. And yet, choosing art as my topical terrain, I have to try to demarcate it. Collins English Dictionary1 provides 13 distinct meanings of “art”, Webster’s College Dictionary offers 16, both referring to a rich variety of objects and skills, qualities and methods, production and classification, not to forget connotations of cunningness or states “distinguished from nature”. For avoidance of doubt, my terrain here is explicitly “artistic” one – it is not about cunning, not about “state of the art” industrial equipment, not about every thing “artificial” – although these other connotations are not completely inconsequential either, as they can easily be invoked even in discussions of “artistic art”.

This clarification may help a little, but not a lot, since all the conceptual borders of artistic art are inevitably leaking – and if any one appears not to, it will be sooner rather than later attacked by some of the artists specializing in questioning and pushing the boundaries of art2. Nevertheless, discursive attempts to reinforce or to redraw those boundaries for various theoretical, practical, political or conversational purposes are also inexhaustible. Some of them circumscribe an exclusive selection of highly priced and/or tradition-bound objects, others include any product of skillful craftsmanship that can be discussed in terms of beauty, there are also those who abandon any descriptive attempts and rely upon authority of an artist or even of the generic eye of the beholder to identify what belongs to art. What I find noteworthy is that in every case there is an entity – an institution, a connoisseur, an artist, a critic or a beholder – entitled to proclaim something as art. Nothing is thus art by itself, only by designation.

2 I have interviewed at least one Alaskan artist claiming exploration of the limits of art as his main interest.
The only more persisting boundary of art shared by most of these competing authorities that I have encountered would be that art has to be “man-made”. While references to “art of nature” (cf. Haeckel 2008) can be found, they would typically refer to something (drawings, photography, landscaping et cetera) done by humans mimicking, portraying or re-arranging “nature”, and not to their prototype that has come into being without involvement of human agency. If natural phenomena are ever being referenced as art, it is most likely in a metaphorical sense or by reduction of art to aesthetical judgment alone. Although if the beauty resides “in the eye of the beholder”, then even when meant in literal sense (cf. van den Berg & van den Berg 2011), “art of nature” is still a product of aforementioned human authority applying human aesthetic criteria to designate natural formations as art. Would human appreciator then constitute an absolute border of art? For now – perhaps, but contemporary experimentation in anthropology with “shift from anthropocentrism to anthropocircumferentialism” (Ingold 2011:218) or even odd publications like “Why Cats Paint: A Theory of Feline Aesthetic” (Busch & Silver 1994) may serve as indications from where even this “last frontier” can come to be forced.

If we accept humans as products and/or part of the nature, distinction of “natural” and “man-made” is no longer derived from any essential “naturalness” but from an arbitrary classification on the basis of human intervention that by analogy could also be projected upon other agencies. “Cat-made” things along with “feline aesthetics” and “cat art” become then thinkable. Yet, that does not necessarily mean that all the features and implications of human aesthetics can be transferred to feline aesthetics, just as “dogomorphism”-practicing Bekoff (2004:495) notes that “when I claim that a dog is happy, for example when playing, I am saying it is dog-joy, and that dog-joy may be different from chimpanzee-joy”. I am making this inter-species detour in order to loosen up your possible preconceptions about what art “must” refer to in an anthropological study, and to make two points: (1) “art” is an arbitrary classificatory category that can be meaningfully projected upon a variety of phenomena – but we have no reason to assume that all the meanings and connotations of art from one context would be equally valid when something is pointed out as “art” in another; (2) just as “cat art” is likely to differ from “human art”, “conceptual art” will differ from “decorative art”, “European art” from “Asian art” and “fine art” from “folk art”, while also having something in common that permits meaningful sharing of the word. But the differences, just as similarities, are not likely to be “essential”, they rather depend on who is making this classification, on what grounds and for what purposes. Which similarities and differences are
highlighted or obscured? Does such attribution follow an accepted practice (among whom, for what purpose and with what effect) or is the latter being challenged (again – for what purpose and to what effect?)? In brief, everything and anything can potentially be art, and any designation as art can also be contested.

So what could be productively studied in a terrain so vaguely outlined? My first academically conditioned reflex would be to construct a researchable object by narrowing it down through strict limitations. However, my anthropological training has also conditioned me to routinely question all the things routinely taken for granted. Therefore I intend to resist my first reflex and keep this ambiguity of “artistic art” intact, using it as a heuristic research device. In fact, I find all the attempts to define art – as well as to contest any and all of its definitions – indicative of significant social values associated with it. My inquiry seeks to identify them: What does this ambiguous entity of “art” do in the social arena that makes it worthwhile to discern it as a particular category? I think here in terms of agency of art, but this expression risks to invoke associations with a very different theorization of art in “Art and Agency” by Alfred Gell (1998) whose relevance for this project is negligible. So instead I articulate my overall topic as social efficacy of art, starting off with the question why there is art?

From there, my heuristic process has proceeded to a function-oriented assumption that art exists because it fulfills a valuable social function, eventually causing me to conceive of art as infrastructure for social cohesion. However, I have noticed that my attempts to describe art in this manner hardly ever resulted in an exclusive explanation. As soon as I say, “art does this”, I recall other ways to do the same without involving art. For a while it almost seemed like falsification of my theory, until I realized that this insight could be its very strength. It’s not that art performs a unique social function that otherwise would be left unfulfilled, but rather that art fulfills a generic function in a particular way, that in certain circumstances is more effective than other infrastructures or methods. Here I should also mention that by viewing art as social infrastructure I do not claim to have exhausted all the possible meanings and functions of all things “art”. Rather, my argument is that by looking at art as infrastructure, we can dissolve that paradoxical ambiguity of art that causes most other perspectives to circumscribe their definitions of art to only a subset of objects and practices that are socially attributed to the category. Consequently, my focus is on art as collectively held and socially meaningful category rather than on particular artworks or their individual interpretations. Yet,
I address the category through its particular real life examples rather than through semiotics or discourse analysis of the term itself.

While finer methodological points will be addressed later in the text, here I would like to provide a brief introductory description of how I position myself in the field. In order to see art as infrastructure, one needs to assume a particular position (although several such positions may be available) from which certain aspects become better visible, while others are inevitably obscured. Since infrastructure is primarily about moving stuff and social efficacy is about effects on a collective scale, I chose to “bracket out” most of the other perspectives, as e.g. art history, power relations, economy or gender in order to focus on what agents art is bringing together and apart, and how. Chronotopically, my focus is on “here and now”, which could also be described as a “contemporary western perspective”. “Western” is a tricky descriptor as its boundaries are blurred just like art’s, but just as with art I expect my readers to have a sufficiently coherent understanding of what I am pointing at with that word. So I think of myself as directing a contemporary western gaze to a contemporary western social phenomenon, in contemporary (western) English language commonly referred to by contemporary western notion of “art”. This exaggerated emphasis is meant to sensitize the reader to potential significant shifts in meaning and validity would my argument be transposed to any other context or perspective.

The bulk of my empirical material is collected in Alaska (Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, Sitka, Valdez) during two rounds of fieldwork in May 2015 and April 2016. However, I am not aiming to characterize Alaskan art, but rather using it as a sample of contemporary western art. Notable presence of Alaskan Native artists (who nevertheless are also westerners) in my selection does not make this paper “about Native art”, since distinction Native / non-Native is irrelevant for my research agenda. At the same time, discourses making this distinction and mapping it onto social structures and processes provide analytical opportunities akin to a lab environment where social efficacy of art can be traced in relation to the social patterns rendered visible by discursive Native / non-Native distinction. Yet, I want to emphasize that all the artworks discussed in this paper, while having varied relations to respective “tradition”, were produced in our contemporaneity, i.e. around the time of my fieldwork or within a decade prior to that. Thus I am looking exclusively at the contemporary western art, seeking to construct a narrative that can assess social efficacy of art based on what art can be seen accomplishing from my vantage point of today.
The societal relevance of the study could perhaps be best hinted at by one of my collocutor’s (playwright, Alaska) reaction to an early account of my work: “The part I found most interesting was the one about the people [for whom] money was their knee-jerk reaction to being asked why [art] matters… made me sad”. Another collocutor (dancer, Minnesota), upon hearing my overarching research question, immediately remarked: “[it is] interesting that art thrives most in a depression… it struggles most (in our capitalistic society of America) when economy is high and strong, as artists are forgotten as important”. Thus, certain exceptions notwithstanding, there appears to be a gap or even a negative correlation between perceptions of economic and non-economic value of art. My analysis of the social efficacy of art will hopefully shed some light on this peculiar mismatch.

While I am personally interested in arts and do sympathize with many artists, this work is not an advocacy for any cause. I am simply genuinely interested to understand what art does – including what it does to/for me as a member of society – thus I embark upon this journey as a curious researcher and not as a convinced activist.

Academic positioning of this study is primarily within the subfield of anthropology of art, but through consideration of art as infrastructure, connection is also made to anthropological studies of infrastructures. These links are further elaborated in the next section presenting the literature review.
An undertheorized perspective on art

In this section I am going to review the literature in relation to which I am structuring my research design. Literature of primarily methodological utility will be covered in the next section on methods.

It is almost startling how a loose assemblage of discussion clusters can be presented as “anthropology of art”, suggesting a coherent body of work. While obviously sharing objectifying thematic attention to art, many of these clusters are so specific in their particular interests and perspectives (e.g. cultural meanings of particular artifacts or value creation process within contemporary art institutions) that they seem to have stronger affinity to other thematic subfields (e.g. rituals, material culture, semiotic anthropology or anthropology of institutions) than to each other. One explanation to such disparity could be found in shifting anthropological focus. If in the early days it was directed toward the “primitive” or “exotic” artifacts originating from, and therefore expected to shed some light upon, places and times distant from the researcher’s subject position, contemporary anthropology is less concerned with early origins and more with the issues of power relations, agency, circulation and valuation of various artifacts in contemporaneity.

In general, the bulk of anthropology of art seems to be pre-occupied with decoding (be it emic or etic) and comparison (be it in order to trace diffusion, hegemonic discourse or value attribution) of aesthetic forms. To a large extent it is also focusing specifically on “visual arts”, i.e. largely static two- or three-dimensional representations or objects made for visual appreciation – cave paintings, oil paintings, sculpture, ornamentation of utilitarian objects, body adornments etc. Literary fiction, aural and performing arts have not completely escaped anthropologists’ attention, but tend to be viewed as parallel subfields, e.g. anthropology of sound or anthropology of dance.

In this mix it is hard to locate any meta-discourse that could productively conflate those specialized debates into a consistent platform for anthropological engagement with art matching perspective from which I articulate my research question. By that I do not mean to claim that issues that I find interesting have never been addressed anthropologically. They have been, but in different and somewhat more scattered efforts than I would have expected. I hope therefore to be able to contribute a conceptual piece that might facilitate better
connectivity with and among other fragments of this still rather patchy jigsaw puzzle called anthropology of art.

**Functionalism and functional perspectives on art**

As I intend to inquire into art’s social efficacy by assessment of what it does or is used for, in other words its social function, it seems appropriate to consider the functionalism school first. Among structural functionalists interested in art we find Roy Sieber who in a piece “The Arts and Their Changing Social Function” explicitly avoids sub-divisions of art by geographical, cultural or market categories and on a higher abstraction level suggests that “the arts … are symptomatic of cultural values … and … for the most part [are] oriented positively … towards man’s search for a secure and ordered existence” (1962:654). Svášek (2007:25) uses Sieber to endorse functionalist refusal to trade in ethnocentric Western definitions of art, but criticizes “functionalist linkage of art to culture” where “art not only helped to maintain social stability, [but] it also reinforced cultural distinctiveness” (ibid., p.26). She also laments that functionalists did not acknowledge differences in styles, thoughts and feelings.

Now while the Sieber’s quote can be seen as characteristic of a functionalist bias towards teleology of social stabilization, the majority of his text, including its title, is about the change rather than stabilization; it also exemplifies how differently individuals or groups are coping with change. On artifact level Sieber notes how African Igala masks have nearly disappeared as their former social control function has been taken over by magistrate courts; how wooden clogs, wooden bowls, hand-woven cloths et cetera were replaced by imported or locally industrially produced goods. On societal level, while concluding that “for the most part the African feels he urgently needs roads, hospitals, and schools but not the arts”, Sieber notes that among younger Nigerians there are also those who have re-oriented their traditional skills to produce tourist or export objects and those engaging with “imported aesthetic” of painted signs, grave sculpture or “architectural decorations in cement for the new middle class” whose effect “will remain obscure … until those ideas and the associated esthetic become more fully assimilated and integrated” (1962:657-8).

Based on this example, my problem with Sieber’s functionalism would be of quite different nature than Svášek’s rather weakly substantiated criticism. While nominally refusing ethnocentric Western definitions of fine art, and acknowledging that “African modes of
distinguishing relative esthetic importance have not been recorded” (ibid., p.653), Sieber is ready to include any product of Nigerian craftsmanship into the category of “art”, which then amounts to equally Western-ethnocentric identification of “folk art”, or reduces art to material culture in general, either way creating uncertainty of whose function is being studied and in what context that category is relevant. It does not help that Sieber suggests that “art itself can have a social value” – “[t]hat is, in addition to the utilitarian or associative character of the arts, their very existence indicates that a premium is placed … on the aesthetic of and for itself” (ibid., p.658). He relies here on one informant who attributed efficacy of Igala masks not only to their functional associations but also to their “well-carved goodness”, and on the “sheer quantity of traditional arts that once existed” (ibid.). But if loss of social function is being pointed out as the main reason for disappearance of “art”, its aesthetic aspect does not seem to weight very heavily in that equation. At the same time aesthetics of the new objects from the Native point of view is not seriously considered, occasionally being brushed aside as “decidedly inferior manufacture”, yet followed by a contradictory comment that imported goods may be substituted for the traditional ones on the grounds of status or prestige. Doesn’t it indicate that “art” (whatever that may be) maintains more of its social functions (e.g. as a marker of social status) than the author is willing to admit, while it is population’s aesthetic preferences and values that are changing?

Against this background I would like to articulate my positioning towards functionalist view on art. I believe that its supporters and opponents alike tend to miss a mark by choosing too narrow perspectives. I do believe that art can have – whether intentional or not – stabilizing effect on collectivities. Just as it can have de-stabilizing effect, as Nigerian example of “imported aesthetic” above has indicated. Yet, this de-stabilization of the old ways or old collectivities is at the same time stabilization of the new collectivities, or, possibly, stabilization of the old collectivities around the new ways and objects (e.g. new ways to make a living, or a new type of residential building). In my view, there is nothing inherently problematic in analytical focus on social functions of various objects, phenomena or categories etc.; nor there is anything intrinsically wrong with assumption of mutual causality between art’s social function and its continued existence. The functional perspective does not by itself make diversity, agency or change invisible. Most of the objections duly raised by Svašek can be traced instead to unfortunate choice of the unit for functionalist analysis, most typically and notoriously, “society” or “culture”. It is only when these abstractions are imagined as overly concrete change-resistant forms and theoretical teleological mechanisms.
are constructed to reify them as such, that functionalism freaks out and deserves fundamental criticism. I intend thus to assume a functionalist perspective that does not predict an infinite endurance of fixed collectivity or cultural patterns. However, considering historical shortcomings and consequently prevalent connotations of functionalism, neither engagement into a deeper dialogue with this school of thought, nor labeling of this study as a functionalist one would seem sensible.

There are also anthropological schools whose very perspectives allocate their study objects an implicit social function by default. E.g. symbolic anthropology would consider art as communication system, ethnoaesthetics would conceive of it as expression for emic understanding of beauty, from Marxist perspective art “functioned as a medium of alienation by reproducing and mystifying the social reality of inequality” (Svašek 2007:42), Foucauldians are likely to view art as a discursive formation through which power can be studied, while for feminists it can easily constitute just another arena where universal female subjugation is being manifested. I take such perspectives into consideration, since whether as reflections of reality, or through the sheer agency of scholars, they are all valid partial answers as to what art does. Yet, to directly assume any of these perspectives would also imply a buy into their respective standard answer to my question, obscuring other perspectives and making further analytical work redundant. For that reason I am not going to include them into my toolbox.

Contemporary anthropological debates on art

Let’s consider then more contemporary state of the subfield. In the Annual Review of Anthropology art is a peculiarly rare category – there is only one article containing the word “art” in the title, and even that one is ironically enough called “Beyond Art” (White 1992); six articles list “art” among their keywords, but in very particular contexts, e.g. body art, museology or soundscapes. At the same time, there are two articles whose titles refer directly to “dance”, two to “music”, one to “ethnoart”. Perhaps, for many anthropologists who traditionally concern themselves with particularities, art in general appears too unspecific as a research object, making its narrower subsets more approachable. If that is so, what escapes their radars is that despite its many shapes, art is not just a lax collective term denoting an immensely rich variety of attributes, objects and activities, but also a fairly distinct category
that can be addressed anthropologically without losing particularities out of sight, as I intend to demonstrate.

Above-mentioned White (1992), in his critical engagement with the body of work on “Paleolithic art” pursuing general “origins of art” could be expected to operate on the “right” abstraction level for our purposes. However, his main critical points – against the tendency to model artistic beginnings on developmental psychology (art as self-evident utility in terms of pleasure) and restriction of art to “graphic depictions” (he insisted on inclusion of “personal adornment”) – only illustrate the narrowness of art in that debate. Then again, an inquiry stretching some 40,000 years back in time has obvious limits as to what it can credibly access. Nevertheless, White’s conclusion that “two- and three-dimensional representation was an invention and like all inventions had to be coherent in and useful to its cultural context in order to be adopted” (ibid., p. 558) is built on the same logic that I intend to employ in my study, explaining art’s existence by its utility. His perspective on art as “material forms of representation” that should be understood as “metaphorically based, socially meaningful constructs” (ibid., p. 537) finds its utility conditioned in “this complex amalgam of technological innovation, increasingly strained human/land relationships, and the emergence of an internally and externally differentiated sociopolitical world” that people of Paleolithic era and their descendants were facing (ibid., p. 560). More directly it seems to point towards the value of artistic marking of identities and social positions, cross-generational knowledge transfer and facilitation of technological advancement. While describing the times long gone, considering impossibility to observe them directly, one may wonder to what extent these suggestions could be seen as author’s projections of or extrapolations from his understanding of contemporary values of art, making them tentatively relevant comparison points even for the outcomes of the present study.

In Coote & Shelton (1992), introduced by the publisher as a “collection of essays on anthropological approaches to art and aesthetics … first in its field to be published for some time”, Sir Raymond Firth offers an overview of anthropological interest in art from his perspective of over sixty years of personal engagement. He admits that art is “a conventional category of great diffuseness” that for anthropologist “is essentially to be viewed as a social product” and calls for “awareness of a social, ritual, and economic matrix in which the object has been produced” (Firth 1992:15). Firth lists a number of anthropological perspectives historically employed – “art as enlargement of experience” attributed to Redfield, “art code …
as … a skilled message about the interface between conscious and unconscious thinking” attributed to Bateson, art as utility vs. non-utilitarian art, complex relationship of art with religion (Firth considers himself “unorthodox enough” to claim religion as human art), art’s association with freedom from restraint, questionable contrasting of art with nature, art’s relation to culturally defined beauty standards etc. (ibid., pp. 15-20). In his own understanding, “art is part of the result of attributing meaningful pattern to experience”, yet art itself “is essentially form; but only when the form is mobilized for human purposes, given meaning in human terms by comparative associations, can one properly speak of art” (ibid., pp. 16, 18).

So eventually we reach that generic perspective I am looking for, but on the level of “meaningful aesthetic forms” that potentially may include the whole of the universe, effectively disabling any further productive analysis unless these forms, their meanings, purposes or comparative associations are again taken down to the level of particulars. Once they are, relevant suggestions may be made – e.g. “Maori art is part of mana Maori, a symbolic display of the power and authority of a growing Maori nationalism” (ibid., p. 35, referring to Sidney Mead, italics in original), but also on a level equally specific, far from sufficient for extrapolation of the reasons for existence of art as a category.

In the same volume, Gell (1992) declares anthropology to be “essentially anti-art” which also may be a reason for art being “neglected topic in present-day social anthropology” (ibid., p. 40). By this dramatic rhetoric he advocates disregard for aesthetic aspects of art in anthropological analysis, just as anthropologists of religion should not “adopt the premises of the religion” under study. It is a bold suggestion in a discipline habitually preoccupied with aesthetic forms. Gell adds further drama: “we are most unwilling to make a break with aestheticism … simply because … we have sacralized art: art is really our religion” (ibid., p. 42). His alternative proposition is to “consider the various arts – painting, sculpture, music, poetry, fiction and so on – as components of a vast and often unrecognized technical system, essential to the reproduction of human societies”, which he names “technology of enchantment” (ibid., p. 43). In-between these lines we can already glimpse the infrastructure I am proposing, but Gell himself moves on in a different direction, deep-diving into “enchantment of technology” that peculiarly oozes of the same aestheticism he just warned against. His elaboration of art’s efficacy eventually also leads to teleological circularity – “As a technical system, art is orientated towards the production of the social consequences which ensue from the production of these objects” (ibid., p. 44).
A few years later Gell further develops his anti-aesthetic anthropology of art where “The art object is whatever is inserted into the ‘slot’ provided for art objects in the system of terms and relations envisaged in the theory” (1998:7). This positioning of art as contextualized category is, however, only a maneuver to bypass the notorious difficulty to define art, as Gell does nothing more with the category itself and immediately moves on to outline and standardize “art nexus” – typified social relations that any artwork is supposedly embedded in. The agency of art is considered primarily on the level of particular objects (as index or mediator of agency originating from elsewhere), leaving art as distinctive category indistinguishable and rendering Gell’s approach inadequate for my purposes.

Morphy & Perkins (2006) agree to a degree with Gell (1992) on the necessity of “aesthetic agnosticism”, but “do not go as far as he does in ruling aesthetics to be outside the province of an anthropology of art” (2006:14). They see the subfield having entered “an exciting stage … in the moving from its place as a minority interest that most anthropologists could neglect towards a more central role in the discipline” (ibid., p. 1). Thus they attempt to strengthen the momentum by providing anthropology of art with definition and direction. For working definition of art they suggest one developed in Morphy (1994:655): “art objects are ones with aesthetic and/or semantic attributes (but in most cases both), that are used for representational or presentational purposes”. Then they excuse themselves that definition is not intended to be exclusive and that despite its reference to “objects” only, it “applies with little modification across different media of communication” (2006:12). However, the way I read it, this definition does not exclude whiteboards, TV-sets or representation dinners either. And later commentary makes art reducible to media of communication, just as authors also “acknowledge that the study of art can be nested within an anthropology of material culture” (ibid.), effectively showing how their approach fails to discern art as a particular category. It is peculiar, considering that one of the authors just a bit over a decade earlier argued against absorption of art by material culture – “this would be to miss the point of what we have learned about the category of art – culture-bound it may be, imprecise it may be, but it does refer to a set of objects that cannot be included together in more narrowly defined functional categories, and on the whole people appear to be able to allocate objects as members of the set” (Morphy 1994:654).

Svašek (2007:4), following up her review of historical literature on anthropology of art endorsed by Schneider (2012), draws on Errington, Appadurai, Gell, Foucault and Bourdieu
and advocates a processual relativist approach, “instead of considering art as a universal category … stress[ing] the processual nature of art production”. One of her key concepts is aestheticisation describing a process how “certain artefacts, and not others, are aestheticized as ‘art’” distinguishing “art by intention” and “art by appropriation” (ibid., p. 11). This perspective is of relevance for my study, which thinks of art in terms of arbitrary objects and activities being purposefully designated as “art” in order to create certain social consequences. However, Svašek employs it in Bourdieuesque fields pursuing Foucauldian manifestations of power, tracing “transitions and transformations of objects” in “evolving art worlds” while considering art to be a “changing, historically specific discourse” (ibid., pp. 218-9), making her overall theoretical conceptualization not very compatible with my research agenda.

Schneider (2012) in his attempt to “delineate and assess the future potentials of the main fields of the anthropology of art” highlights above-mentioned Gell (1998) as “the most important recent theoretical contribution to the field” providing foundation to the field entitled “agency and relationality”, other such main fields being named “artworlds”, “mimesis and appropriation”, “materiality”, “phenomenology, skills and creativity” and “practice”. If I would try to position my envisioned study in relation to this outlook, my contribution would be closest to “agency and relationality” field, as it intends to examine agency of art as category within social collectivities, yet in a manner distinctly different from Gell’s.

**Relevant perspectives on art from other disciplines**

Art sociologist Howard S. Becker has made significant impact also to anthropology of art through his volume “Art Worlds” (1984), also acknowledged by Schneider (2012:58) who mentioned “artworlds” as one of the main research fields even in the future. Becker’s contribution is to see art “no longer … as an autonomous product, the outcome of individual creativity, but as the interplay of various actors within the institutional framework of the artworld: for instance, artists and their assistants, gallery owners, collectors, museums, and art critics” (ibid.). This description is highly relevant for my study as it outlines the social embeddedness of art, listing many participating actors and varied nature of their agency. What I find problematic is that this concept seems to draw a line between the “artworld” and the rest. That line is not explicit, maybe it is not even considered, but if we would trace and include everything that is somehow contributing to artistic production (not only producer of the brush, but also his supplier of the hairs, the latter’s supplier of animal food etc.), the
artworld would coincide with “the world”, loosing any distinction. While a borderline may be productive in tracing of institutional networks, at some point it would sever links with “the rest”, which is not productive for my research agenda considering art as inseparably internal to the social world. What I take from Becker is thus not the concept of the “artworld” itself, but the general processual social embeddedness of art underlying this concept (or, if you whish, my “artworld” coincides with “the world”).

I also find curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud immensely useful for his definitions of art. Let’s consider the first one – art as “a set of objects presented as part of a narrative known as art history” (2002:107). With very economical means it describes art as a category discursively produced on the basis of an arbitrary assemblage of objects rather than trying to find their common denominator in terms of their intrinsic features or conditions of their production and consumption. Clearly, this definition points primarily towards “fine arts”, yet it could be extended to the same effect on art in general by substituting “Western public discourse on art” for “narrative known as art history”. But Bourriaud has an even better suggestion for our purposes – art as “activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects” (ibid.) or, more economically expressed, “art is a state of encounter” (ibid., 18). This one is too wide to discern exclusively artistic activity, but it positions art as something intrinsically social – production of relationships and encounters – which is the very reason why I intend to examine its social efficacy. So articulated it also relieves us from coding/decoding compulsion inherent in evolutionist, semiotic or ethnoaesthetic conceptualizations of art. Combination of the two – “activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects, discussed within the discursive formation of art” – could then outline an approximate working definition of art implicitly employed in my study.

In this context I should also mention “Art as a Social System” by sociologist Niklas Luhmann (2000), who operates on a relevant abstraction level dealing with art from system theoretical perspective. Yet, characteristically asserting that “we are not primarily concerned with … society’s influence on art and of art on society” (ibid., p. 134), Luhmann decisively moves to even higher abstraction level from where particulars of anthropological interest become virtually invisible.
Re-casting art as infrastructure

What I have said so far is that I am looking for a more uniting macro perspective in the highly fragmented field of anthropology of art dominated by debates on coding/decoding and comparison of aesthetic forms along with examination of the conditions of their production, consumption and valuation. From among the works reviewed I find most affinity with those addressing art on a higher abstraction level - functionalism’s functional perspective (less its misdirected stabilizing teleology), Gell’s view on art as “unrecognized technical system” for social reproduction (but not reproduction alone!), Morphy’s acknowledgment of art as sufficiently distinct category for people to allocate objects to, Svašek’s processual view on “aestheticisation” of objects as art, Schneider’s endorsement for studies of agency of art through interdisciplinary approaches, Becker’s mapping of social embeddedness of artistic production and Bourriaud’s definition of art as a discursively formed set of objects and techniques for production of relations. From other works I take note of suggestions to art’s social functions pointing, inter alia, towards identity marking, cross-generational knowledge transfer, social reproduction, stabilization of collectives, expressions of power and authority, innovations etc.

Let’s try to condense my selection above further still: unrecognized technical system (of no less than artworld-magnitude) aestheticizing encounters into artistic states enabling social distinctions, reproductions and innovations. I believe we can start to discern a contour of art as yet unrecognized infrastructure.

Brian Larkin provides a number of wordings to describe infrastructure, one of them being “material forms that allow for the possibility of exchange over space” (2013:327). In this minimalistic definition my understanding of art fits in just perfectly – art’s “aesthetic forms” (especially in an antonymic relation to noetic forms) and infrastructure’s “material forms” are nearly interchangeable, art’s relational nature is all about exchange, and space – while not necessarily accentuated in relation to art – is nevertheless always there, as art always “takes place” somewhere and exchange is hardly conceivable without some kind of space being negotiated. In other definitions Larkin exemplifies more specifically what is being moved by
infrastructures – “goods, ideas, waste, power, people, and finance” (ibid.). If we borrow for a moment Becker’s notion of “artworld”, it certainly moves all of that.

Now, clearly, Larkin tries to draw his readership’s attention to the analytically unduly neglected infrastructure in form of roads, pipes and cables as opposed to more metaphorical use of the concept in anything “from Marxist analyses of base/superstructure relations to Saussure’s *langue/parole* distinction, to any system that appears to underlie and give rise to the phenomenal world (culture, episteme, social structure)” (ibid., p. 328, italics in original).

My suggestion of art as infrastructure lies somewhere in-between, but still much closer to its literal than metaphorical meaning. It might seem metaphorical since the “social cohesion” I claim it to be facilitating is an abstract idea; but so is “traveling” enabled by roads, rails and airlines. It might seem metaphorical in that galleries, poetry books, concert halls, embroideries, operas and monuments are not continuously physically connected as e.g. electric cables or water pipes. But then again, there is no continuous physical connectivity in air travel infrastructure either, while electricity or water infrastructures include not only uninterruptible assemblage of cables and pipes but also detachable equipment and people managing and operating them. Interestingly, Larkin also notes that “infrastructures also exist as forms separate from their purely technical functioning, and they need to be analyzed as concrete semiotic and aesthetic vehicles” (ibid., p. 329), reminding a number of art definitions.

Larkin also points out “two major insights” from infrastructural studies that may inform future inquiries: firstly, “placing the system at the center of analysis decenters a focus on technology and offers a more synthetic perspective, bringing into our conception of machines all sorts of nontechnological elements”, which can easily translate to our artistic realm if we couple references to technology (art is also full of “techniques” so we don’t have to remove them) with references to aesthetics and replace “machines” with “artworks”. This view echoes also Gell’s anti-aestheticist stance earlier discussed. Yet, as opposed to Gell who went on to study “art nexus” in proximity of particular artifacts, Larkin’s infrastructural focus is on a “system”, which may remind of Becker’s “artworld”; but while Becker is mostly focusing on what happens within it, I understand Larkin’s call to focus on what this “system” does in a wider world, which is exactly the focus of my research design. “Infrastructure” in this context

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3 In case you find “waste” to be an odd fit I would refer to Svašek (2007:7-8) and her discussion of artworks Cloaca and Merde d’Artista. As to the “power”, in physical form of e.g. electricity it is certainly present in a number of artworks, but perhaps even more importantly, Foucauldian type of power or agency can also be exercised or mediated through art.
is for me the perfect conceptual replacement for the “artworld” – keeping artworld’s attention to its internal structure, but not disengaging it from the rest of the world, but to the contrary – placing it as its backbone. Secondly, Larkin highlights focus on “system building”:

A technical system originates in one place, growing in response to particular ecological, legal, political, and industrial techniques native to that area. But as it grows into a networked infrastructure, it must move to other places with differing conditions, technological standards, and legal regulations, elaborating techniques of adaptation and translation. (Larkin 2013:330)

In my view, this perspective can also be productive to study penetration of western concept of “art” into other collectivities. Anthropology of art is addressing those issues through cross-cultural comparisons and concepts of “traffic in culture” (Marcus & Myers 1995), “world system”, “artworlds” in plural or “global artworld” in singular (Bydlér 2004) etc. Holding onto systematic view of art as infrastructure may help us to avoid being trapped exclusively in the studies of aesthetic forms themselves and rather see what global proliferation of the western concept of art and its articulations with other traditions of aesthetic production or other kinds of social infrastructures is doing for the collectivities involved – what functions it assumes, what other functions it influences. Conceptualization of art as infrastructure may also open new productive comparison opportunities – instead of only seeking to define art in order to enable identification of its heteronymous equivalents in every “culture”, comparable equivalents could be searched on the level of infrastructure moving comparable meanings or enabling comparable social functions. Such could be science, religion, but maybe even Internet, cellular telephony or political systems.
Methodological considerations and data

In this section I briefly discuss my theoretical approach as well as methodological choices and considerations in relation to my research question.

Inventory of my methodological toolbox

Firstly, my conceptualization of art as infrastructure brings with it also methodological implications. As Larkin (2013:330) notes, system-view of infrastructure has led “scholars … [to] drew heavily on actor-network theory and its emphasis on tracing associations between heterogeneous networks and on the necessity of accounting for how translation occurs”. I find ANT (see Latour 2005) useful for the same reasons, but also for its particular conception of agency that can be acknowledged to human as well as non-human “actants” simply based on their ability to affect someone else’s behavior, thus leaving me a comfortable leeway in dealing with the agency of art – whether on the level of particular artwork, on the level of art as a category or in tracing effects of art as they may be traversing various collectivities through humans and non-humans.

Another methodological move of Larkin is somewhat less anticipated – he invokes Jakobson’s (1985) study of poetics that in case of infrastructure allows him to “loosen its form from its technical function”, and study how “state proffers these representations to its citizens and asks them to take those representations as social facts” (Larkin 2013:335). This maneuver (without taking any a priori stance on state activities) is of central importance to my study as well, as effects of representation of certain objects and activities as “art” is what it’s all about. Interestingly, one of the central questions that Jakobson is dealing with is “What makes a verbal message a work of art?” (1985:148), which gives additional input for understanding of the process that Svašek (2007) calls “aestheticisation”. To ground this even further I could refer to speech act theory, considering performativity of illocutionary (declarative) speech-acts proclaiming something as art (Austin 1962, Searle 1976).

Overall I operationalize my research design along the lines of grounded theory that “gives priority to the data and the field under study over theoretical assumptions” (Flick 2009:90-1). This way “theories should not be applied to the subject being studied but are ‘discovered’ and formulated in working with the field and the empirical data to be found in it” (ibid.). However, in this context it is worthwhile to remember Law (2004:70) suggesting that “method is
productive of realities rather than merely reflecting them”. For him, the “method is not, and could never be, innocent or purely technical … [it] unavoidably produces not only truths and non-truths, realities and non-realities, presences and absences, but also arrangements with political implications” (ibid., p.143). Thus I cannot pretend that my choice of questions to ask and methods to employ only affects which slice of pre-existing reality that I am going to reveal, as it is rather a matter of what kind of reality that I am going to craft. This causes me to consider not only what question I would like to find an answer to and what would be the most efficient way to go about it, but also why do I find that question worth asking, what do I want to achieve by answering it, what aspects of reality would be amplified or silenced by my methodological choices, what consequences could publication of such an answer-artifact lead to and am I ready to accept them?

Essentially I wanted to grasp the purpose, function and efficacy of “art” as a fairly ambiguous phenomenon, concept and category. Why do people find it worthwhile to “make art”, why does “society” find it worthwhile to support its production (including budgetary financing) and why its definitions, perceptions and valuations remain so diverse and contested? Finally, why does this ambiguous term covering a virtually endless variety of phenomena remains in our vocabulary when there are many other words denoting its more particular modalities? What does “art” discern in all its vagueness and apparent limitlessness that makes it still useful as a category? In other words, I was trying to find a perspective from which this paradoxically ambiguously particular notion of art would appear logical and socially efficient rather than paradoxical. And I wanted to achieve this logical coherence without reducing the actually existing discursive diversity surrounding the term, drawing my only limits around “western” and “contemporary”, assuming that in other times and places “art” may have had different meanings, functions and connotations that are likely to be inaccessible to me from my chosen positioning in the field.

To address these issues I have made the following methodological choices: (1) I have assumed that the very fact of art being widely produced, supported and used is witnessing of its social efficacy (as opposed to being random erratic activity or rudimentary survival maintained by irrational inertia); (2) I was looking for a method that would allow me to credibly construe art as such.
These choices have certainly guided my attention in the research process. Whenever I encountered indications of art as possibly useless, wasteful or random, I was trying to find an explanation supporting or at least not negating my first assumption and openly accounted for that reasoning. Consequently, my results should be very different compared to hypothetical alternative studies aiming to examine art as a reckless waste of public resources, or arguing that “art” is merely an array of homonyms rendering inquiry into art as a single phenomenon completely nonsensical.

Scientific value of my study derives not from any aspiration to positivistic truthfulness, but rather from the extent to which any reader may find it plausible and/or “good to think with”, or even “good to think against”. Does it reduce science to pure fiction? Not really. Wagner puts it quite nicely: “we might actually say that an anthropologist ‘invents’ the culture he believes himself to be studying … if we understand the invention to take place objectively, along the lines of observing and learning, and not as a kind of free fantasy” (Wagner 1981:4).

Finally, if my “invention” would happen to enhance social appreciation of art and liberate somebody from the knee-jerk reaction to justify art in purely economical terms, I would happily accept a share of responsibility in that. Would I pose that as my explicit goal? No, not really. I am much more driven by my curiosity than my will to change.

Empirical material and its collection methods

My empirical data comes primarily from a five weeks fieldwork in Alaska in May 2015 and April 2016, but is occasionally complemented by other primary and secondary data.

Most of my material has been obtained through a mix of interviews, phenomenology and visual anthropology. While choice of Alaska was triggered by practical reasons (opportunity to participate in a fieldtrip organized by Vienna University), it was adequate, as containment of the project within the area diverse enough to provide access to a variety of artistic practices, yet coherent enough to have reasonably comparable conditions for artistic production, allowed for a consistent gathering and contextualization of the material.

In Alaska I have made over 30 interviews based on convenience sampling and snowballing (Flick 2009:122). 18 of my collocutors identified as male and 12 as female, age-wise ranging
from early twenties towards seventies, 10 of them identifying as Alaskan Natives of varied tribal allegiance. Their artistic practices covered painting, sculpture, carving, jewelry, design, photography, installations, theater, poetry, electronic music, video, multi-media, public interventions and more. This number and diversity has provided a variety of perspectives and possibilities to identify certain patterns, but does not make my data representative in any statistical sense.

The interviews ranged from a few spontaneous informal (like a talk at the gallery, in the shop or in the bar) to the majority being formal semi-structured, preferably conducted in the studio or office of the collocutor, enabling access to the artworks and environments that can be used for elicitation purposes. Typically I would start interviews by asking people about their reasons for doing art and their views about art’s role in/for the society and then follow up on emerging themes that peaked my attention. Normally I would also try to initiate a more in-depth discussion about a particular artwork as well as contemporary trends and conditions for art in Alaska. When I was interviewing someone in the capacity of institutional representative, I also tried to cover institutional goals and practices related to facilitation and/or acquisition of art. Roughly half of the interviews were recorded, many of them were followed up by notes and photographs.

My phenomenological approach has consisted of purposeful site visits where artworks were made, exhibited or sold, but also of random walking around searching out occurrences or traces of artistic activity, which rendered a number of leads for the interviews.

The main visual method (Collier & Collier 1986, Banks 2001) employed was elicitation using artworks – many interviews involved consideration of a particular artwork discussing various topics it triggered. While I have closely examined about a hundred artworks, for this paper I have selected only five of them to be presented as in-depth case studies. This way I have tried to avoid too heavy fragmentation of my narrative, while providing an illustrative variety of works. The downside of this approach is that only a very small subset of the data that has informed my thinking and conclusions is presented explicitly, leaving some of the conclusions less substantiated than others.
De-familiarizing art

To gain new insights about the social efficacy of art it is important to avoid excessive dependency on existing pre-conceptions that may lead to mere reproduction of old truths. While it is not feasible to become a tabula rasa, a shift of perspective can be just that methodological twist that facilitates new productive understandings. In this section I attempt to de-familiarize art by examining it as infrastructure. This involves asking questions that at the first sight may seem more meaningful in relation to infrastructures than to art – and trying to answer them without drifting too much into artistic discourse.

I will address each question through a case study of a particular artwork selected on the basis of how well it facilitates respective discussion, but also striving to present a variety of artistic practices in order to avoid false cues for essentialization. Nearly any artwork could have been used for discussion of any of these questions and I keep revisiting them as discussion progresses. Such “breakup” of cases is also an intentional part of de-familiarization, seeking to fixate reader’s attention to the theoretical question discussed through a variety of artworks rather than to “enchant” them by particular works of art. It is a risky strategy, since many works soon to be presented are highly emotionally or politically charged and the introduction of them as empirical sources for infrastructural analysis rather than as artistic wholes could be seen as insensitive and disrespectful. Acknowledging that, I do hope to be able to strike a fair balance, but since fairness – just as art – may also reside in the eye of the beholder, I do apologize in advance if my attempts would fail.

What does art move?

As we have already noted above, infrastructure is often defined as “matter that moves other matter” (cf Larkin 2013:329). Thus, in order to understand art as infrastructure we need to discuss what art is moving.

Case One: “A Supple Plunder”

In spring 2016, a Tlingit/Unangax artist Nicholas Galanin had a solo exhibition “Kill the Indian, save the Man” at the Anchorage Museum. According to the artist statement, the works at the show “dissect, reconnect and map the real history of settler violence as experienced by First Nations peoples”. A centerpiece of the show (made in cooperation with his brother
Jerrod) was called “A Supple Plunder” and consisted of nine transparent ballistic torsos stacked on a row of pedestals. Behind them, a black-and-white video loop showed an up-close of the bullet penetrating the ballistic gel in slow motion. The torsos were shot through with one bullet that remained lodged in the last of them. The work honored twelve Unangax men who were bound together a few centuries ago by the Russian settlers and shot with one bullet, which lodged in the ninth man. According to Galanin, the Unangax were forcibly enslaved by the Russians and later even forced to fight the Tlingit on the Russians’ behalf.

Various people who were telling me about “A Supple Plunder” prior to my meeting with the artist, offered slightly different interpretations of the original act of brutality – some described it as the Russians’ pastime experiment to see how many bodies one bullet could penetrate, others made a point of the Russians not having considered the Unangax to be worth even a bullet each. Regardless of these variations, the anger, the pain, the outrage was unmistakable – and the conversations would often segue to discuss remaining expressions of colonial violence in the present. It was clear that this story is not only about the past, but also symbolic of the contemporary issues.

“These men are not mentioned in the history books, they are not in the school curriculum, they are not decorated or commemorated as heroes. But we still celebrate the Columbus Day – Columbus, who was not any less evil towards the local people. What a complete displacement!” says Nicholas Galanin while we are having dinner at his place. Even if Jerrod Galanin later suggests that there has been a historic record of the misdeed, the story of these men has primarily been passed on in generations through oral history. I probe further:

Q: Why did you choose to reenact this story through art?
NG: I was ashamed of my culture, my language… Do I want my children to grow up like that?… It’s important to know how we got to this point… why things are fucked-up. To understand that nothing is wrong with you – that it is hateful people who should be ashamed…
Q: But why art, why not political action, or education, or…?
NG: We have no political power… This is our voice… We have power in our community… [Through art] we provide dialogue and place and space… Art provides movement toward social and political

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4 My conversations with Nicholas Galanin are reconstructed from memory and sporadic notes, trying to stay as close to the actual words as possible. Responsibility for any remaining misrepresentation is entirely mine.
I can see the difficulty for contemporary judicial system to offer adequate means for resolution of centuries old crimes and injustices, even if there have been a few arguably successful attempts (see e.g. Worl 1998). It is also clear that the tragic fate of the twelve Unangax men is just a single episode in a long and violent colonial history, positioning it more as a political matter rather than a criminal one. So once the original armed resistance to the invaders was overpowered, it did not cease completely, but gradually moved into the courtrooms and political arenas, where at least some of the infringed Native people’s rights where restored and certain material compensation for old misdeeds has been offered. But apart from irreversible loss of lives and livelihoods and serious infringements of the land rights, Galanin’s work witnesses also about a whole other variety of colonial damages. Long cultural oppression when prohibition of Native languages and traditional practices was brutally enforced claiming civilizational superiority of the colonizers has long-lasting effects on how others are viewing the Native people, just as on the Native people’s self-image. Nicholas recalls a recent incident in another state, where he and his friend were the only ones among the restaurant guests who were demanded an upfront payment and they could see no other plausible explanation than racial discrimination. What court ruling or legislation could erase the attitudes so deeply ingrained? I find it interesting that art can be employed where judicial and political systems are found insufficient. But how could that be theorized?

We will return to the latter point a little bit later. In the meanwhile let us start with the basics and consider what “A Supple Plunder” moves. Firstly, I have to admit that it moved me (and several other people I have talked to) quite literally – it stirred emotions affecting my body. My eyes were watering and my heartbeat stepped up as I was taking in what was being presented to me way before I attempted to verbalize my experience in my head. Prior to that it also caused my body (and many others – like those of the artists’, visitors’, journalists’ and guards’) to be physically moved to the premises of the museum. A number of things were moved as well – the torsos (from the seller to the artist, to the location where they were shot through, to the museum), the gun and the bullet, the video recorder and later – projector, the pedestals. Nicholas also showed me an invitation letter from the Contemporary Jewish Museum – “A Supple Plunder” is going to San Francisco, keeping things in motion. Certainly, and most importantly, it also moves ideas (whether those intended by the artist or not) – in
people’s heads, in private conversations, in media, even in this paper. Many of these movements are also reflected in microflows of money – purchase of the materials, transportation costs, admission fees et cetera – although I have not made any attempt to examine them any closer than to consult the pricelist of the works in the show that was made available at the museum gift shop. I could barely afford a thing.

So to answer the question what art moves we may take note of ideas, emotions, bodies, objects and money. However, my main point is not in this rather trivial inventory, but in the emphasis on the dynamic processual nature of art. Art’s efficacy lies in its ability to move.

A theoretical intermezzo: actor-networks acting in concert

Once we have established what art infrastructure moves, let’s examine how it does that. A lot of groundwork has been already done by Becker (1984) describing the “artworlds” – the artists, their works as well as “art world institutions” are given parts of art infrastructure. While I remain disturbed by that forced world-dividing line that Becker’s conceptualization provokes in my imagination, it fits my understanding of art infrastructure pretty well, since “infrastructure” better than “the world” describes a thematic or functional assemblage of things that are of the world, in the world, enmeshed with the rest of the world through myriads of connections – rather than being somehow outside or aside of the “non-art world”. However, in comparison with Becker, I would be somewhat less inclusive of all the suppliers (just as a factory of bolts or paper would not necessarily be seen as an integral part of transport infrastructure even if their products are being used to make trains or print the timetables), and more inclusive of non-institutionalized art.

In my view, all those “movers” are material enough to pass as “matter”, since even conceptual art – if we test for extremes – is only conceivable as art once it is materialized, be it as an object, as a written or spoken text or as a movement of matter as in e.g. dancing. They are certainly not as homogenous as pipelines, but even pipelines consist of distinct and different elements, not to mention all the humans, tools and machinery required for their functioning as infrastructure. However, in order not to be disturbed by all this variety of infrastructural constituents that may complicate our imagination of infrastructure as a meaningfully coherent whole, I would like to climb to the abstraction level where these differences are no longer visible. So what would we see looking down from the bird’s perspective onto a generic
infrastructure moving some stuff around? From this height we should notice that by being moved things get re-arranged in space. However, spatial configuration does not exclusively refer to geography, it can also describe connectivity and relative positions of various connected entities. Let’s stop here to sharpen some of our ANT-tools.

Law & Mol (2001:611-2) in their examination of “how do ships keep their shape” come to discern “two forms of spatiality: space as Euclidian; and space as a network”. Following this distinction, ships are able to cross the ocean as they move in Euclidian space while keeping their internal configuration as a network (consisting of i.a. hulls, spars, sails, sailors, navigators, sextants etc.) fairly stable. However, Law & Mol also acknowledge that the network metaphor has been diluted over time and fails to reflect fluidity of networks. One of their examples is invention of a bush pump in Zimbabwe that has become a huge success exactly “because it changes shape” (ibid., p. 613), its standard design getting variety of modifications in each location based on the particular usage practices and availability of make-shift spare parts. Nevertheless, all of its incarnations are identified as essentially the same bush pump. For Law & Mol this pump represents “a third version of space” that they call “fluid spatiality”. What makes this form of spatiality distinct is that connections that make a shape invariant change gradually and incrementally – “it is secured by displacement which holds enough constant for long enough, which resists rupture” (ibid., p. 614).

I find this discussion useful to think how e.g. “A Supple Plunder” remains the same even if it moves from Anchorage to San Francisco and is being exhibited in a different space, possibly using different pedestals, projectors, positioning in the room etc. This comparison may seem rather trivial – and in fact it is, if we stop at the artifacts as constituents of the artwork and their transportation between the galleries. Things get much more interesting if we include the people. Just as the description of the ship above included sailors and navigators, so are the artworks hardly conceivable without the artists and their audience. Remember Bourriaud’s (2002:107) description of art as “activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects”. If we merge it with Law & Mol’s fluid spatiality, we start discerning an outline of my conceptualization of artworks that I intend to use throughout this paper – production of relations that evolve over time, yet stay constant enough long enough to resist rupture of their particular identity.
However, one crucial element is still missing – a more specific description of that entity through which relations with the world are being realized, while continuously reshaping its fluid spatiality. Here I find the concept of actor-network from ANT (Latour 2005) most useful. Simply put, an actor-network is a network whose constituents are “acting in concert”, making the whole network perceivable as an actor (cf. Murdoch 1998:361). Yet, ANT is careful not to attribute observable orchestration of those acting in concert to any autonomous intentionality of a conductor. In ANT view, “An actor is what is made to act by many others” – “An ‘actor’ in the hyphenated expression actor-network is not the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it” (Latour 2005:46). Any actor is thus potentially a network in itself just as it is also likely to be a part of another, larger, network or networks. A human can thus be seen as a network of various body parts, microorganisms and possible prosthetics “acting in concert”, just as he/she may be part of the network “group of friends” consisting of other humans only, or part of the network “ship crossing the ocean” where there are both humans and things and, possibly, a few rats.

Actor-networks are constituted through associations between their elements. Since associations can take very different shapes and are tricky to observe for a number of spatial, temporal and scalar reasons, ANT makes a pragmatic move focusing on the traces of associations observable as “transformations”, since “if a given ensemble simply lies there, then it is invisible and nothing can be said about it” (Latour 2005:31). There are unlimited possibilities for how transformations can manifest themselves – making of the exhibition poster transforms the paper it is being printed upon, art gallery going out of business transforms the social function of its former space, artwork transforms the state of mind of its beholder, or that same beholder transforms the artwork by misinterpreting its artistic intent – so there is no specific prescription as to what to look for and where. Transformations also tend to propagate through actor-networks, then described as “chains of translations” hinting at accompanying re-articulations of forms and meanings. Different research strategies might identify and prioritize different “stops” in such a chain, but overall ANT discerns two roles an actor may assume in associations – as mediator or intermediary. In Latour’s (2005:39) words, intermediary is “what transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs”, while mediators “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry”.

I intend thus to consider artworks as actor-networks assembled by associating various people, ideas and objects into entities that while not immutable remain consistent enough long enough to be seen as “acting in concert”. Artist’s agency is certainly important in this assembly work, but it is not an autonomous absolute power either. Artistic traditions, social realities or even audience’s demand are influencing artistic inspiration and choices, just as available materials and their materiality affect how artistic ideas or energy are transformed into an art object, while various members of the audience can act both as mediators and intermediaries of the initial artistic intent. This perspective is also scalable – we can deconstruct an artwork into its constituents analyzing how each of them informed the final outcome, we can choose to what extent to include various “artworld”-elements into a particular artwork, we can also aggregate several artworks to consider an oeuvre, a style or a biennale as an actor-network in itself.

*How does art infrastructure operate?*

Now we have all the tools we need for the next step in our inquiry – to trace how artistic practices bring into being new actor-networks shaped as artworks – and how these artworks-actor-networks are then “acting in concert”, moving stuff around through various chains of translations.

*Case Two: “Our Voices Will Be Heard”*

“Perseverance Theatre believes theatergoing creates shared experiences for our communities, which foster empathy, build relationships, and cultivate communication skills, and in the process better equip us all to solve problems together and create more vital and just communities”.

“The mission of Perseverance Theatre is to create professional theatre by and for Alaskans. Perseverance values community engagement, cross-cultural collaboration, professional rigor, and regional voice. Alaska is full of stories and characters that aren’t found anywhere else in the world. Perseverance is committed to creating theatre that represents all that is great about Alaska, and to bring great live theatre to our Alaskan audiences”. (Perseverance Theatre Playbill, p. 15)

In January 2016, Perseverance Theatre in Alaskan capital city of Juneau gave a World Premiere of “Our Voices Will Be Heard”, the first play by Tlingit/Dena’ina Athabascan playwright Vera Starbard. The story is about coping with domestic sexual abuse told from the victim’s mother’s perspective. The author, herself victimized by her uncle, addressed a topic
that is highly sensitive, very intimate, but also acutely relevant on a much larger scale. According to the crisis intervention agency STAR (Standing Together Against Rape)\(^5\), referring to the survey\(^6\) by the University of Alaska Anchorage, about 59% of adult women in Alaska have experienced intimate partner violence, sexual violence or both, in their lifetime; nearly 12% have experienced intimate partner violence, sexual violence or both, in the past year. Thus, “Our Voices Will Be Heard” was staged in a social context where media, noticing that Alaska is “clocking in at triple the national average” and, “even more shockingly, its child sexual assault rate is six times the national average” (Williams 2014), have been running pieces like “Alaska’s alarming rape epidemic\(^7\)” , “Rape Culture in the Alaskan Wilderness\(^8\)” or “The Rapist Next Door\(^9\)”.

Apart from its other distinctions, this performance was also significant as the first Native play within the Perseverance Theater’s subscription package, which in the words of the theater’s Executive and Artistic Director Art Rotch, “puts Vera on par with Shakespeare”. For the purposes of this paper it is important to note that Perseverance Theatre is not a “Native theatre”, but rather Alaskan theatre that strives to be attentively inclusive of all Alaskan communities. There are only two actors-in-residence (who are also engaged in other tasks – e.g. I observed that one of them was handling my ticket reservations), others being externally casted for every new production. The cast of “Our Voices Will Be Heard” consisted of eight actors, all Native, whereas two from out of state; four of them were Tlingit, one Yup’ik, one Aleut, one Cherokee and one Iroquois. While maintaining its focus on Alaska, Perseverance is open to exchange across the state borders, which is important for their ability to offer a diverse high quality repertoire to their audience and development opportunities for their staff.

By the look of it, Perseverance Theatre itself is pretty small. It takes perhaps 10 minutes by car from Juneau (ca 30,000 inhabitants) downtown to cross the bridge to Douglas island (ca 3,000 inhabitants) and drive through most of its populated area to reach this nondescript two-stories building. Apart from its weathered awning serving as a signboard, nothing distinguishes it from its suburban residential surroundings. It could just as well be a local pizzeria or a dive bar. On a play night, any entering visitor will pass by a counter covered by

\(^6\) [http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/avs/alaska.html](http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/avs/alaska.html) accessed on May 3, 2016.
pre-printed tickets, waiting to be picked-up by their seasonal subscribers or those who made
their bookings online. A few steps deeper in there is a coffee pot and some snacks on a side
table (help yourself and leave your payment in a jar). Behind a foldable table in the corner a
couple of volunteers are trying to attract visitors’ attention for the 32nd Annual Travel Raffle
benefitting the theater. Most likely, that’s where volunteers from SEARHC, a non-profit tribal
health consortium, have been standing when “Our Voices Will Be Heard” was still running10.
Perseverance engaged SEARHC to consult and counsel the actors, both as part of artistic
research, as psychological support when dealing with emotionally charged material, but also
for the purposes of coaching how to respond to possible feedback from the audience. E.g.
what to do if somebody would choose to share her own painful experience with an actor
convincingly playing a victim in a similar situation. Volunteers from SEARHC were also
present in the theater each night when the play was running, would anyone need someone to
talk to – and they were being kept pretty busy. When the play consequently was being given
in Anchorage, the aforementioned STAR was offering same kind of support.

Returning to our virtual tour of the theater, we pass the foyer with its ticket desk, coffee stand,
raffle table, a few chairs and walls covered with theatric memorabilia, and reach the door
leading to the mainstage, a square room that seems larger than could be expected from this
building. It is furnished as a kind of steep rectangular amphitheater with a stage in one of its
corners. At the most there are seven rows, all in all seating some 150 people. Those sitting at
the front row are more or less sitting on the stage; there is no visible divide. I had to move my
feet several times when an actor was approaching, so they would not trip over. The setting is
thus quite intimate, it is easy to be “drawn into” the story that is being played out. I keep
describing this intimacy and smallness for a reason. Firstly, I believe it is an important part in
how this particular theater affects people – it would not make sense to exclude the room or the
audience from this artistic actor-network, as exchange is mutual, in the course of the play we
are one, “acting in concert”. Or, as Dawson, another of my theatric collocutors, described it
when asked about his artistic agenda: “…search for the perfect moment… the moment when
you synthesize with the audience and become one human mass… become a part of something
larger…” Secondly, I am trying to prepare you for a contrast that comes next. How many
people would you expect to participate in a production like that? I have already mentioned

10 Upon my visit it was already succeeded by the comic performance of “In the Next Room, or the Vibrator
Play”. While I would have liked to see “Our Voices Will Be Heard”, not having seen it may also have
methodological advantages – as opposed to “A Supple Plunder”, here I can try to assess “what art does” without
being directly affected by the artwork itself.
eight actors, theater director and the playwright – that’s ten. Then, at my request, director starts listing all the others.

There was a Creative Team of nine people assembled for this particular production:

- Director (Lakota, LA)
- Set Designer (Japanese, Juneau)
- Light Designer (the theater director himself)
- 2 Costume Designers (NYC & Juneau)
- Sound Designer, who was also a Composer (Tlingit, Sitka/Seattle)
- Cultural Design Consultant (Tlingit/Athabascan, Juneau)
- Stage Manager (Seattle)
- Tlingit Language Consultant (Tlingit, Juneau)

Also, there was a Production Team of 13 people (five of them working at the theater fulltime):

- Production Manager
- Production Stage Manager
- Technical Director
- Assistant Technical Director
- Costume Shop Manager
- Production Intern
- Stage Manager Intern
- Assistant Stage Manager
- Scenic Painter
- Costume Shop Assistant
- Property Assistant
- Audio Engineer
- Master Electrician

An Administration Team of four (3.5 fulltime):

- Development Director
- Development Assistant
- Marketing Director
- Anchorage General Manager
As Perseverance Theater since 2014 is performing its full season in Anchorage as well (while “Our Voices Will Be Heard” was also performed in Hoonah), there is also a lot of moving of the sets and technical activities in the alternate locations, for which other companies are subcontracted. However, even without them and without the volunteers from SEARHC and STAR, we have already counted 35 people of highly varied professions, ethnic backgrounds and places of residence who had to come together to make this artistic experience happen, even if it was only eight of them that the audience could see on stage. And, surely, we should not forget the audience itself – according to the director, some 2,700-2,800 people came to see the play. And we are still not done counting. “Our Voices Will Be Heard” began as a short story that Vera Starbard wrote when she was 18 years old\textsuperscript{11}. Vera returned to it over a decade later, once she was accepted into the Alaska Native Playwright Project through the Alaska Native Heritage Center. During the project and its spin-off events the short story got reworked into a play that prior to being staged at Perseverance Theater was also read at Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage, at The Autry in Los Angeles, at the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego, at the Lark Play Development Center in New York and at the University of Alaska in Anchorage.

What I am trying to accomplish by painstakingly identifying participants of the process that resulted in the play being staged and experienced by the audience, is to show how the production of this artwork can be seen as a process assembling an actor-network. By only focusing on people we have arrived at a rather high level of complexity, but that is already a major simplification. The whole actor-network of “Our Voices Will Be Heard” consists also of that little intimate theatre venue (and alternate venues), of all the elements of the set, the costumes, the lighting, the sound equipment and the soundtrack, the script, the playbill, the tickets, the intermission coffee and many other things. All these bits and pieces “acting in concert” create this particular artistic experience. Just like the “fluid spatiality” it keeps changing its shape (e.g. one collocutor told me that upon their visit the lead actor was sick and since the theater did not have an understudy, a theater student was called in at the last minute to read the lines from the script), but still remains identifiably the same (even in the case with the missing lead actor the audience was in tears).

\textsuperscript{11} \url{http://www.ourvoiceswillbeheard.org/about-1/} accessed on May 3, 2016.
So we can conclude that art as infrastructure operates by assembling particular actor-networks and moving stuff within and between them. One might ask if this conceptualization would only make sense for performing arts, but no. Even in the case with “A Supple Plunder” whose immediate production as far as I know involved much fewer people – two artists and their friend who consulted them on ballistics – there certainly were others acting more or less “behind the scenes” – museum guards whom I have seen, but most likely also some technical staff who may have been involved in preparing the gallery spaces, connecting equipment, making the posters etc. And while in “Our Voices Will Be Heard” it was the script that held it “constant enough long enough” while audiences, venues and actors were changing; in “A Supple Plunder” it was those nine torsos, the bullet and the video files.

Artistic emissions and their socio-environmental footprint

We are still in de-familiarization mode. Infrastructures move stuff not for the sake of the movement itself and they do not necessarily move stuff back were it came from (as in a special case of a daily commuter); they have also intended and unintended side effects. Extracted oil is transported to other places where it is irreversibly refined, processed and often burnt – and along the way may cause other long-lasting effects like redistribution of wealth, environmental damages, reconfigurations of industrial production and human migration (see e.g. Wheeler & Thornton 2005; Clifford 2013:261). Siberian railways have reconfigured settlement patterns, industrial production, livelihoods of the Native people and forms of state control in Russia (see e.g. Anderson 1990; Collier 2011). So if art is a stuff-moving infrastructure, what are the long-lasting outcomes and effects of all those moves?

Where the previous sub-section discussed how artistic actor-networks are made, this one will focus on what they do once they are “finished”. Some mundane answers to this question could be arrived at without any deeper research – upon completion artworks are often being exhibited, commented upon, listed in the catalogues, bought and sold. However, such view risks reducing artworks to merely props of social interaction. While nothing would be inherently wrong with that – it would all depend on how the “props” are being dealt with analytically and what questions are being asked – I believe that premature analytical acceptance of the “completion” of the artwork and its separation from the human interaction as an instrumental, yet lifeless entity, risks derailing productive analysis just when interesting
things are about to happen. In my encounters with artists there were many instances when
discussion came to contrast artistic process to its product. Artists’ opinions varied widely:

**Adam:** “It’s not about the process or the making, it is all about exhibition, it is all about its impact on the
audience… I want to make a contribution to art discussion.”

**Keren:** “It’s all about being in the process. I’m not sure about the residual - it is not very interesting
afterwards, although it gives something to talk about, stimulates intellectual discussions.”

**Jerrod:** “…normally [I have] no idea ahead, it’s an explorative process, it’s part of me figuring out who I
am and where I want to go…”

**Enzina:** “When I have an image I just have to make it happen and I hope that other people can relate to
that… to get relief… a shared relief, loose that sense of isolation… so that someone else can also loose that
sense of isolation…”

Each of these quotes witnesses about an implicit residue, an anticipated continuation even
after the artist’s work is finished and there is an artwork “out there”. That continuation could
be a discussion, new insights or a sense of relief – all examples pointing towards social
interactions. One might try to make a distinction here between the “visual” and “performing”
arts as distinctly different in their residues, but we have just covered what makes “A Supple
Plunder” and “Our Voices Will Be Heard” constant enough long enough to be identifiable as
particular artworks even as they are negotiating the fluid space of daily life. In an attempt to
bypass any further assumptions regarding this difference I have chosen to continue this
investigation with a case study that resolutely dissolves this dichotomy, since in this particular
case a “visual” artwork is intentionally produced for performance leading to its destruction –
but its destruction is the means rather than ends. And what is the residue of that?

**Case Three: “The Dancing Mask”**

“Religions and most notably Christianity have played a significant role in shaping our current view of the
masks. We were taught that the ‘graven image’ is all about devil worship and is evil in all cases and
should be cast out and avoided in any and all forms. Naturally with this assimilated value there can be no
open discussion or dialogue among the Island people.”

(Eaton 2009:291)

In September 2011, 170 invited guests gathered at the Château Musée in Boulogne-sur-mer in
France. The formal occasion was the 100th anniversary of passing of Alphonse Pinart, French
linguist and ethnographer who visited the Kodiak Island in 1871-1872 seeking to prove “links between Native inhabitants and Asian origins” (Eaton 2009:290). As it happened, “Pinart was one of the very few foreign scholars to hear Sugpiaq songs, to watch masked dances, and to attend a winter festival and systematically document this entire experience” (Rostkowski 2012:32). According to Perry Eaton, Alutiiq/Sugpiaq mask carver, who introduced me to this story upon our second meeting in his Anchorage studio, when Pinart was asking Kodiak people about their mythology, people would tell him that they did not tell stories, they staged plays – but they could no longer do it, since they did not have the paraphernalia anymore. But when somebody mentioned the necessary masks being hidden away in the caves on the south end of the island, Pinart with the villagers’ help succeeded to retrieve them. Since people first refused to dance the old masks, Pinart commissioned replicas to be made, eventually getting to experience and record the stories properly told by the dancing masks. Upon his departure, Pinart took with him the original masks and their replicas to France, where he “exhibited his collection in Paris and then donated it to the Château Musée in Boulogne-sur-Mer, his home region” (Clifford 2013:283), forming, as it turned out “the richest collection, by far, of nineteenth-century Alutiiq masks anywhere“ (ibid., p. 281).

In an interview with Rostowski (2012:33), Sven Haakanson, Executive Director of the Alutiiq Museum of Kodiak, who had put in a major effort to bring the masks back for exhibitions in Alaska in 2007, says that it “still remains a mystery” how “a young outsider could gain access to so many powerful religious songs, stories, and artifacts”, but according to Clifford (2013:282-3) “all evidence suggests that the young scholar/adventurer respected and valued the individuals and cultures he encountered, and that he understood his salvage project to be authorized by the historical inevitability of loss”. After all, the masks were decaying in the cave. In 1990s the Pinart collection was “re-discovered” in the Château Musée (where it was “poorly understood”, yet “source of local pride” – Clifford 2013:283) by Professor Lydia Black and her doctoral student Dominique Desson. Desson’s (1995) dissertation “Mask Rituals of the Kodiak Archipelago” triggered a chain of events through which contacts between the Boulogne-sur-Mer and Kodiak Island museums were highly intensified. They involved also the Native (artistic) community, gradually revitalizing the nearly lost practice of Alutiiq/Sugpiaq mask carving, which in turn is closely related with traditional dancing, storytelling, knowledge transfer, spirituality and other facets of tribal social life. And indeed, in ceremonial context Alutiiq/Sugpiaq masks have very specific utilitarian functions and purposes – to the extent that Eaton finds it meaningful to distinguish between masks that are
“art” and “artifacts” – “you can display artifacts but you can’t dance ‘art’” (Eaton 2013:286).

Some ceremonies culminate in masks being burnt. Eaton explains:

We believe that when an individual leaves, the spirit stays in the community… the body is just a carcass, but the spirit stays in the community looking after the clan and the family… but at some point it really needs to start its journey into the next world, so we have this send off ceremony… it’s usually a year and a half to two years after the passing… the community comes together and they talk about the individual, and the kind of rule is that you can only say good things… because it’s that emotion that’s gonna travel with that ancestor into the future, so you don’t really wanna make them mad, you know… don’t bring up the bad stuff… and so you have this sort of gathering and it’s a feast and the family puts the food forward and then this evening progresses… and dancing… and then the mask is presented to… it’s there the whole time… absorbing… and then the mask is presented to a dancer, the dancer puts it on… there is a song that’s been created in honor of the individual… and it’s during the dance and the song that the spirit merges with the mask - and the mask has absorbed the goodness out of the community… so when they are both together you transform that through the fire - and the spirit starts its journey…

It was in this context of Native cultural revival and deepening ties between the French custodians of Alutiiq/Sugpiaq cultural treasures (that by now also have status of French national treasures) and their original Alaskan community that the gathering of 2011 was organized. To honor Pinart, who – whether knowingly or not – had rendered Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people an invaluable service, guests from Alaska intended to hold a traditional ceremony in the museum courtyard – with the speeches, feast, dancing and eventual transformation through the burning of the mask. Perry remembers:

We explained before how we are gonna do and why we are gonna do it… and they said:
– Well – well – wait a minute – you are gonna takes this mask and you are gonna burn it?..
– Yeah!
– Wow, no!! You have to…
And they offered to take it and put it away where nobody would see it, or whatever – you know… this concept of destruction of art was really difficult for them to get their [heads] around… But we stuck to our guns, and we took our dance group over, and it was a beautiful mask, and we had a full-blown evening with the speeches and the feast…

The food is enjoyed… people listen to the conversation and talk among themselves… and they are entertained… and then we move outside… and they gather around… there is a fire… and the dance goes on… and people watch the dance… and then the mayor and the deputy mayor and myself - we place a mask on the fire… and everybody just stood… absolutely silent… focused… quite emotional… and it
wasn’t as if they were glued down, because they didn’t want to appear, you know… they were really into it… and after the ceremony people started drifting off… just exactly the way it happens in the village… exact same reaction all the way down…

And afterwards they said:
–Oh… We understand…
But before they were just like this… cultural gap of destruction…

As this particular event was only one in the series of various exchanges where a number of prejudices had to be overcome (e.g. “are they here to steal our national treasures?”) and patterns of cooperation and reciprocation established among the people pursuing a variety of agendas, it may be difficult to provide a short and exhaustive answer as to its purpose and meaning. When I ask Perry Eaton, he says it is “to show there is continuity of culture” and further develops his thought in an e-mail:

With so many of our historical objects in Europe it is important that the holders understand the material they hold is relevant in lives today. All too often in Europe there is an assumption that the peoples of origin to their holding ceased to exist shortly after the materials were collected. Total assimilation is universally assumed and the materials become available only to scholars without consideration to the people living in the current culture, or now.

I also ask him what he thinks that people took with them from the event:

From an artistic endeavor they recognized that there was a different value system around an art object… that was a minimum take-away… there were those who really did enjoy the dance… the dance was very well choreographed, it was - quote - “traditional”… but they appreciated it as an art form… as an expression of art from their definition of art… people were impressed that a colonial base like France could be honored by a group of indigenous people of which they held their artifacts… […] but I think that caused them to think culturally [to compare without making a valuation – mine’s right, this one is wrong]… yeah, I know it did… I absolutely know it… you saw the mayor…

What can we take from this case for our discussion? Perry Eaton alternates between seeing masks as art and artifacts and himself as artist or mask carver. Sometimes it is about different objects and intents; sometimes it is about different perspectives towards the same. For our conceptualization of art as ambiguous and contested, yet a particular western category, Perry’s dual view is not a reason to disqualify all or any masks from our investigation. Yet,
we can take a note of a utilitarian aspect as one of the criteria that sometimes is being used to define something as non-art (“you can actually use it for something”) or art (“it has no practical use whatsoever”). Clifford, analyzing largely the same case, is touching upon the same question – “where does art stop and living tradition begin” (Clifford 2013:308), but leaves it open and nearly discards it. “‘Art,’ like ‘culture’ is a process of recruitment into given roles, and simultaneously an expansion and subversion of these roles”, he writes and continues “If we cannot decide whether the visibility of Sugpiaq artists today is a story of interpellation or articulation\textsuperscript{12}, co-optation or subversion, so be it” (ibid., p. 309). Clifford is pursuing another agenda and is more attentive to power relations, identity policy, markets et cetera than I am, so I cannot tell for sure if we are on the same page here or not. I am also willing to discard the choice between art and life, but even more explicitly and decisively. From the perspective I have chosen, art is not a separate universe of its own, but integral part of life; and I am interested to find out what art does for that life, rather than to decide which artifacts and practices should be boxed as “life” and which should go to the “art”-box.

My claim and proposition is that every artistic process – whether willingly or not – is assembling real-life actor-networks that are never completely isolated from everything else and therefore are always re-configuring the social, even if in infinitesimal way. In the case of the burned mask – does it mean that the mask was inconsequential just because it is no more? Absolutely not, in ANT terms it can be seen as a mediator in a chain of translations that keeps propagating through the network even after the mask as a physical object ceased to exist. Its transformation through fire drove home the message that was rebuked at first (“hey, you should not destruct art” \rightarrow “oh, we understand now”), deepened inter-cultural understanding, brought different people together in a shared emotional/spiritual experience and triggered a variety of further developments known and unknown, including the discussion in this paper.

The narrow view of art would limit the artwork to the mask itself (well, perhaps also include the process of its making or dancing) – and after it was burnt, there would be no artwork left. But this view would miss the whole point of why the mask was made in the first place and what it accomplished. And the same view I would apply to everything “art” – whether “traditional” or not, object- or performance-based, burnt, sold, exhibited, documented,

\textsuperscript{12} Here Clifford refers to Althusser’s parable of interpellation addressing how the roles people are assuming – whether willingly or not – are largely structured by power rather than their own designs; this view he chooses to contrast with “articulation” as a “historical process of connection and disconnection, making space for a performative politics” (Clifford 2013:303).
preserved or not. “A Supple Plunder” would be a rather wasteful use of ballistic torsos and gallery space if it stopped having any effect as soon as it left the field of vision of an occasional visitor; “Our Voices Will Be Heard” would hardly be written and staged if it was forgotten the second the house lights went on after the performance. To grasp social efficacy of art, artworks have to be seen as transformative events with social consequences.

When I was pushing Perry and some other of my collocutors as to why art was important in contemporaneity, at some point there was nothing more they could or wanted to add than:

- **Jerrod**: “Our culture has been wiped out… this is a form of a resistance.”
- **Perry**: “Art is the glue that keeps community together. You cannot have culture without art…”
- **Dawson**: “Culture is what endures - who remembers a name of a plumber from 100 years ago?”

But why is it important to keep reproducing a particular culture? Why keep digging for the roots? Why care if someone remembers you a hundred years from now? Why not just keep marching into the future creating new exciting stuff? For a while it felt as if I was hitting a wall, as if there was no other way to make sense of art than as a form of resistance or even revenge – against oppression, time, alienation. Art seemed only meaningful in relation to something evil or dangerous rather than by itself, as if in a “good” world art would become meaningless. Yet, reconsideration of the “Dancing Mask” case has eventually brought to the foreground things that have been far too “naturalized” in my thinking.

Through the chains of translation triggered by each instance of the dancing masks, people recognize a long and rich cultural tradition, the roots, the origins. As it happens – and that’s what I had naturalized to invisibility – in our contemporary reality it is very often very important to be from somewhere in particular. Different acknowledged origins in ethnic, national or even cv-terms may entitle or expose one to very different attitudes and treatments. They can take shape of legalized rights like citizenship, inheritance, or in a particular Alaskan Native case – entitlement to shares in Native corporations. They can also reflect de facto hierarchies of influence, wealth or even odd discursive qualities like “whiteness”. Thus cultural origins are often being used for foundation and acknowledgment of a personhood, carrying wide social consequences. One might suggest that when traditional personhood-foundations of Alaskan Native people were bound for a wipeout by invading culture, they were offered an alternative – as citizens of more powerful nation and members of its
dominant culture. But situations like the earlier mentioned restaurant incident indicate that this substitute foundation is not necessarily fully procured and/or acknowledged and, considering coercive nature of the trade, not necessarily an equitable one. In this context it seems to me that this cultural revival is not so much about the “culture” in a folkloristic sense as it is about the emergency rescue of the deeply damaged, nearly destroyed, personhoods. It is about restoring unquestionable origins and their respectful acknowledgement by others, since those things still do matter and significantly frame people’s opportunities in life\textsuperscript{13}.

In this context it is no longer strange that Pinart, who saved some original building blocks of the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq personhood, was honored through the ceremony that he helped to retain. If we agree that personhood is dependent on its validation by others, it is also no longer strange that an initiative has been launched to donate a collection of contemporary Alutiiq/Sugpiaq art to the Château Musée as a sign of cultural continuity. And if art can be so instrumental for personhood and community construction, then idea of art as infrastructure for social cohesion should no longer come across as far-fetched.

\textsuperscript{13} By this I am not suggesting that cultural revival does not have also other meanings for its participants – e.g. aesthetic, spiritual or political – but since these aspects fall outside of the scope of this inquiry, I have not been studying them deeply enough to be able to offer a fair account.
Re-discovering art among the infrastructures

The previous section was dedicated to de-familiarization of art seeking to bypass aesthetic focus and constitute art as a “technical system” that spatially rearranges and orchestrates various human and non-human actants, advancing social cohesion. In this section I will move on to examine how art infrastructure works among other infrastructures, testing for its possible limitations and trying to outline its particularity. I will start once again with tuning of my analytical tools.

A theoretical intermezzo: inertia in shattered actor-networks

ANT is pretty good for analysis of actor-networks when they are acting ”in concert”. For example, Murdoch (1998:362) suggests that “ANT is interested in the various means by which certain locales (centres) actively consolidate the positions of others; the theory shows how spaces come to be connected in ways which permit certain actors (or centres) to determine the shape of others, from a distance (see especially Latour, 1987)”. We could easily apply this view on the narrow perspective on art – Nicholas Galanin does not have to be personally present in the gallery for beholder of his show to start thinking about the colonial violence. Vera Starbard has pre-determined what words will be uttered whenever and wherever “Our Voices Will Be Heard” is being performed regardless of her physical presence – and emotional reaction of the audience has been repeating itself time after time. Alutiiq/Sugpiaq ancestors have determined how the masks are to be made, danced and consequently burnt – even if it happens centuries later in a courtyard of a French castle. This is important, but it is the easy part. The tricky part is to trace what happens afterwards.

While beholders of “A Supple Plunder” are outraged over the colonial violence, while audience of “Our Voices Will Be Heard” is crying, while the French are reacting to the burning mask exactly as the villagers on the Kodiak Island, it is easy to perceive them as integral part of respective artwork-actor-network. But does it still make sense to see them as such once the gallery doors close behind them, once the curtain falls, once there are only the ashes left of the mask? In some situations continued participation in an actor-network after the initial artistic experience is quite obvious. Some fans revisit their favorite artworks many times, keep spreading the word and even adjust their looks or behaviors accordingly, but perhaps such obviousness is more of an exception than a rule. And what about the audience that fails to engage with the artwork or interprets it in unintended ways?
I visited “Kill the Indian, Save the Man” twice, each time lingering around for a while, trying to read the audience. This is an excerpt from my field notes:

A mid-aged couple enters, unhurriedly strolls around the works - smiling, straight posture radiating self-confidence. She looks at the torsos, thinking aloud - "How did they make it?", looks around a bit and then shrugs - "No description? I’m not the kind of person who can guess at the meanings of such things”.

A family of three comes in. They inspect the torsos curiously, closely tracing the trajectory of the bullet with a joyful fascination of discovery. I cannot help to wonder if that’s how the original perpetrators were inspecting the outcome of their brutal deed.

Yet another family. A little boy tries to make sense of what has happened here – “oh look, this guy has shot all those people in front of him and then got a bullet himself!” The boy’s mother does not miss an opportunity to moralize: “It’s Karma!”

It was very surprising to realize that the message that appeared so obvious, hitting the nerve so precisely, could totally escape several of the visitors I observed. I did not talk to them, so my reading may have been incorrect – they may have picked up on the message but chosen not to air it loudly, finding it too complicated for the kids or unfitting the mood of one of the first sunny weekend afternoons in Anchorage. And yet – does it make sense to consider an audience to be members of this artistic actor-network if they react to it in different ways than desired by the artists?

Here I find it useful to return to Murdoch (1998:362), who conceives of spaces of prescription as standardized networks where “spaces will be strongly prescribed by a centre as norms circulate, imposing rigid and predictable forms of behavior” and contrasts them with spaces of negotiation, which are “networks where the links between actors and intermediaries are provisional and divergent, where norms are hard to establish and standards are frequently compromised”. Following Murdoch, we could then identify different spaces even within our artworks-actor-networks. More stable space of prescription could then be found at the core, consisting of physical objects, script of the play or prescribed sequence of the performance along with the artists, hard-core fans, curators and custodians. Spaces of negotiation could be identified where the objects, the script or the sequence are changed by agencies other than artists’, their meanings being interpreted in unexpected ways or appropriated for unanticipated
purposes. Then again, some artworks have no pre-determined meaning or shape at all, audience’s participation and interpretation being necessary “to finish” the work, amounting to a space of negotiation by design.

Qviström (2012:259), drawing on Murdoch (1998), is concerned with examination of what happens when the unity of an actor-network acting in concert breaks down, converting “the *space of prescription*, where objects and subjects move through space without being transformed, into *spaces of negotiation*, where every step is related to translations or transformations”. Following Qviström, these spaces are convertible into each other, which could be a productive way to conceptualize our earlier question of what happens “afterwards”, when immediate interaction with or experience of the artwork is ended or interrupted. A hard-core fan may stay in the space of prescription of the artwork even outside of the art venue, less enchanted individuals may start sliding into the space of negotiation as their impressions fade over time, while others may challenge the work immediately or ignore it altogether. Previously engaged members may also “disconnect” from the artwork-actor-network completely as it stops exercising any influence upon them.

Another of Qviström’s interesting insights is about the network inertia. He examines a discontinued railway operation and notes that in a complex infrastructure break-down, space conversion from “prescription” to “negotiation” is neither immediate nor absolute, “infrastructure with industrial buildings and companies does not simply crumble—it is actively dismantled and reinterpreted” (2012:259-60). Following physical, legal, social and natural deconstruction of a particular Swedish railway operation and its physical track over a number of decades, Qviström observes a remarkable inertia demonstrable even in the state of a “shattered actor-network”. He traces it through enduring identification of the former railway’s topography as a “corridor” (some parts of it were asphalted for further use as a road), surviving land rights in their peculiar outstretched shapes, take-over of certain stretches by industrial actors for continued railway operation etc.

I believe that the same logics can be productively applied to our discussion of artworks as well. When during my conversation with Perry Eaton I interrupted him to ask why the masks were in the cave, he offered the following explanation:
When a dominant society runs over a culture, the first thing that is attacked is the belief system. [...] in our case the belief system was a very easy transition – we went from shamanism to orthodoxy... when you think it through, you know, he is an orthodox priest – he uses fire, smoke... got magic words... he got magic stuff... icons... not a big quantum leap... [...] so the transition was relatively quick... and so [we] had two belief systems - one, the orthodoxy... and so [...] the old system... you'd throw all the stuff away?.. They basically just put it in storage in the cave... the caves were used by the whaling fraternities... and our culture was whaling culture... and of course, the Russians didn’t want us whaling, they wanted us hunting otters... so you had that transition going on... so you didn’t really need the ancestors to teach you how to catch whales... so a lot of paraphernalia around the whale fraternity is no longer needed... so you have a utility that’s no longer there... but at the same time, you know, it’s pretty powerful... and you don’t just destroy it all... because you never know when you need to fall back on that...

The infrastructure of the dancing masks did not just “crumble”, it was dismantled and reinterpreted by many different actors – the Russians banned them, pragmatic Natives hid them in the cave, Pinart serendipitously saved them, the French turned them into the “National treasures”, the staff of the Château Musée might not have understood their full importance, but nevertheless worked hard to protect them even through the wars that followed. So what used to be a “space of prescription” in the old Alutiiq/Sugpiaq culture got gradually converted into a “space of negotiation” where acting in concert is less likely. But while some particular specimens of masks and songs may have been lost forever and even generations of people have changed, there was nevertheless enough inertia in this shattered actor-network to enable its revival a hundred years later. The Native artists embodying continuation of the cultural practice can thus be seen as trying to convert the space of negotiation back into a space of prescription. In this context, burning of the mask does not dissolve the actor-network, but rather re-enacts, expands and strengthens it, including new participants who shared in this artistic/spiritual/emotional experience.

By now, my suggestion that art infrastructure penetrates all facets of society, should not come as a surprise. But how can that be theorized? The director of Perseverance Theater told me that Alaska’s First Lady quoted “Our Voices Will Be Heard” in her speech at the rally against sexual violence, indicating that its message was circulating also outside the original stage. This and similar cases of “leakage” between different contexts makes me to observe that any element of an actor-network also is a potential constituent of multiple other actor-networks. The interesting part here is how chains of translation may then propagate outside of the
original actor-network, “bleeding over” into others, not necessarily “arty” ones. The way I see it, actors’ parallel participation in multiple actor-networks in all kinds of domains – politics, economy, religion or family life – are the channels through which art “leaks” into those other domains, which also underpins its social efficacy.

*How does art relate to other infrastructures?*

One immediate and relevant criticism that can be raised against the view on art as infrastructure is that it looses particularity of art out of sight. And indeed, if we operate on the level of actor-networks bleeding into each other through overlaps and chains of translations in a fluid space, we generalize a lot. The same description could be used to operationalize railways and pipelines or science and religion. But that is also my point – to find a level of analysis where art is not a world apart, but one of many infrastructures holding the social reality together. However, it was not my intention to dissolve art amidst everything else. While one among many infrastructures, art remains distinctive. Let’s see if we can gain a better sense of that distinction through yet another case selected for its particular entanglement between art, industry, construction and policy.

**Case Four: “Fragmenta”**

"It was a top-notch team," he said. "Reid Middleton did our structural engineering and Weona (steel fabricators) did our on-site welding." The foundation, concrete and installation was handled by Neeser Construction, "who were superb in all stages of the project." (Dunham 2012)

We developed a rigid framework of 4-inch diameter stainless steel pipe running radially and longitudinally, almost spiderweb-like. Several anchors welded to steel pipe piles 15-feet deep were concealed by a large, attractive perimeter wall of white concrete, creating the appearance of a large pedestal. We used a 3-D finite element modeling program called SAP 2000 to determine the loads, stresses, and deflections on the frame. (Fierro 2012)

Following the completion of the digital model and "dry fit" using Rhinocerous software, the digital model was used to generate manufacturing information for the various elements of the project. These elements included rolled tubing designed to appear compound-curved, custom manufactured fasteners, and hundreds of pieces of precisely positioned dichroic glass. […] In addition to the work performed in the fabrication studio, Demiurge coordinated the design and installation of an in-situ concrete element by utilizing actual geo-spatial longitude and latitude coordinates to precisely integrate elements of the project being produced thousands of miles away from each other simultaneously. (Demiurge 2012)
We are proud to announce the completion of the Studio Osman Akan new sculpture, "Fragmenta". Located in Anchorage, Alaska the sculpture includes 300 panels of our DichroGlass™. The panels are 24” x 24” and are laminated with polished edges. We drilled a 1-1/2” diameter hole in center of each panel to accommodate mounting hardware. (Jockimo 2012)

3D modeling, complex piping, structural engineering, in-situ concrete casting and welding – this could describe just about any contemporary infrastructural construction project. Only the last quote discloses that we are looking at a contemporary art production process. There is also another aspect in this project that suggests parallels with “traditional” infrastructural projects – “Fragmenta” was commissioned by the Alaska State Council on the Arts under the “Percent for Art” program.

In 1975, the Alaska Legislature passed the Percent for Art in Public Places statute requiring the expenditure of one percent of the capital construction costs of public buildings for the acquisition and permanent installation of artwork. The program is not unique for Alaska; according to National Assembly of State Arts Agencies14, “Percent for Art” programs are active in 27 states and territories of the USA. To put it in other words, along with connections to water, electricity and sewage, there is also a formal legal requirement to “connect” newly constructed public buildings to “art infrastructure”, as already the very first objective of the program is “to provide access to works of art in public places15”. The program itself can also be viewed in infrastructural terms, as it is “moving” artistic processes by providing institutional structure, demand and financing for them16. Among its other objectives can be mentioned the “introduction of new visual ideas to the general public”, “supportive environment and opportunity for personal creative accomplishment” and “development and recognition of a professional artistic community” – which I read as much more social relation-oriented intent than just a quirky vagary to get more decorated buildings.

The actual selection for the program is made among the artists responding to the call, based on their résumé. Shortlisted artists are then invited to submit an idea that is assessed by a committee, typically consisting of the architect, project manager, and artist delegated by the

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16 Moreover, responsibility for “Percent for Art” Alaska State Council on the Arts shares with the Department of Transportation, the most “infrastructural” public body imaginable.
Art Council and the facility manager. According to Andrea Noble-Pelant, Visual Arts Program Director at Alaska State Council on Art, typical criteria would comprise originality, durability and professionalism. Council’s commissions tend to challenge artists in many different ways – out of state artists may underestimate the very strong UV light in Alaska and extreme temperatures that limit choices of durable materials, while local Native artists may struggle with production of big works, as they traditionally work on a smaller scale. Creation of the artworks for this program is thus a fairly complicated process involving many different people, skills and considerations.

“Fragmenta” was the first project that came to Andrea’s mind when I asked for examples of what “Percent for Art” has accomplished. New York-based Turkish artist Osman Akan was commissioned to produce a public artwork as part of the new construction of Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory in Anchorage. In his interview to Alaska Dispatch News, the artist is quoted saying:

"In many ways 'Fragmenta' was the result of a focus on the site, the function of forensics and the idea of solace," Akan said. "Frankly, it was a challenge to find a form that conveyed some of these concerns of mine while remaining neutral to the highly sensitive theme of the site."

"I wanted to use the reflected light of the environment but also filter it like the colored filters utilized in forensic research," Akan said. "I wanted to activate a larger area with scattered tiles that were gathered like bits of information but also refrain from making a perfect, seamlessly continuous surface. I wanted the perception of the viewer to change when they changed their relative position." (Dunham 2012).

According to Andrea, this gloomy place that in public consciousness used to be closely related with “the rape kit, murder investigations and identification of dead family members”, through artistic intervention turned into a popular meeting spot for e.g. bike tours. Andrea is also accentuating the personal relational aspect, “art makes people feel better; they become proud about the place, bring their friends and family to show off even if they don't visit it on their own.” Returning to our actor-network concept we can then see how the introduction of an artwork next to the crime lab has rearticulated the shape and social meaning of the place.

This example shows how art can be entangled in mutual dependencies with other infrastructures – same industries that are involved in construction of “traditional”
infrastructure can participate in realization of artworks and benefit from that. For Reid Middleton, who did structural engineering for “Fragmenta”, “transportation infrastructure is our business”\(^\text{17}\), but their staff member Michael Fierro (2012) also notes that “as a structural engineer, my favorite projects are those that have creative or unique aspects that are outside of the box”. I got this view independently echoed by other Alaskan artists working with public art – their industrial partners are often more than happy to participate in artistic projects as it “allows them to keep qualified staff that otherwise could find the uniform industrial production not challenging enough”. Skills so acquired can also be used to develop new commercial products. As I have demonstrated, several participating companies proudly use “Fragmenta” in their own publicity and marketing. Other collocutors have emphasized importance of vibrant art scene for remote small towns’ ability to attract doctors and other professionals, while presence of educated and affluent audience is necessary for many professional artists, which gives us yet another example of mutual dependency.

Finally, just like the regular infrastructures, art is also being used by the “center” – in this case by the policy makers and public executives – to achieve their goals at a distance. Despite the major differences in scale, intentions and contexts, a principle comparison can be made between Collier’s (2011) discussion of how railway infrastructure was the means through which the Soviet state was controlling its vast Siberian territory and population from the center in Moscow and how the State of Alaska through its Council on the Arts in the Mountain View neighborhood of Anchorage can influence people’s perception of and relations to various places in the vast Alaskan territory, just as we have witnessed in the case of the crime lab and “Fragmenta”. While hardly among the most powerful state agencies, the Council on the Arts nevertheless has several instruments that may be used to shape people’s relations to Alaskan places, Alaskan identity and artistic livelihoods. Its Contemporary Art Bank acquires local artworks to be lent out to public offices and through that shapes public artistic representation of Alaska (iconic Alaskan landscapes and “traditional” works are preferred over anything that could be controversial or not “typically” Alaskan). Silver Hand Program issues certificates identifying authentic Alaska Native art as a means to counteract external appropriation of popular Native designs. There are also various educational and grant programs.

So while closely entangled with industrial, urban, political-administrative and other infrastructures, art is also distinguished by its creative challenges and solutions, by its recognition as facilitator of professional lifestyles, by its particular ability to reconstitute places, create comfort, channel emotions and communicate meanings.

_How does art infrastructure relate to less institutionalized art?_

I started this project seeking a uniquely inclusive macro-perspective on art. And yet, all the cases discussed so far were by established artists, presented in institutional settings. So what about the institutionally unrecognized “hobby art”, utilitarian decorative art or mass-produced “tourist art”? All that and more would easily fit into our vernacular concept of art, but how does it fit our view on art as infrastructure?

**Case Five: “Escape to Radio” and other stories**

On my desk I have a hand-sized wooden box, most of its front covered by a yellow metal sheet whose shape vaguely resembles an old lamp radio. Associations to the radio are enhanced by another, more elaborate metallic feature that looks industrially made and pretty old; it shapes a recess in the middle of the box, perfectly fitting an “Esc”-key from a standard PC keyboard. Two other grey keys with arrows pointing towards each other are placed below the recess as if they were two tuning knobs. The piece is called “Escape to Radio” and I bought it from Hilda, along with a necklace pendant made of an old VGA-cable connector, at a cramped little gallery in downtown Fairbanks. When Hilda, a petite and very sweet old lady, happens to come across odd discarded items, she often gets a vivid vision of what they could be instead – and she has made it into a habit to realize those ideas. So unwanted plumbing may turn into a gramophone-like sculpture and computer parts into eccentric jewelry. Just as the other members, two days a month she volunteers at the artist cooperative’s gallery selling their works, a lot of them being photographs of the Northern Lights, paintings of Alaskan landscapes and bears, more or less traditional jewelry, pottery and carvings. Her contribution stands out in that mix, but according to Hilda, it is rarely she gets sold anything of hers, so it is more about the sheer joy of making rather than business.
In a local daily I stumble upon a news piece reporting how “a group of inmates at the Juneau jail received an incredible opportunity last week — to learn the basics of Northwest Coast art and formline design from the nation’s most renowned Tsimshian artist”. The article also quotes Sealaska Heritage Institute President Rosita Worl: “we want our people to have an outlet that connects them to their culture and that could supplement their income when they return home.” I come immediately to think of Jack in a downtown art shop in Juneau, where he was carving a ceremonial paddle and generously shared with me the secrets of the traditional formline. He was very proud that art and Jesus had helped him to stay sober and out of jail, also inspiring his buddies.

Later, in a pub in Anchorage, I get engaged in a random conversation with a young Yup’ik man working as a fisherman and doing MMA fighting in his spare time. As it turns out, he is also doing traditional ivory carving and dancing – “it is important to pass on the knowledge, who we are”. Arlandra does not consider himself an artist, and he ignores my request to see his carvings.

Hilda, Jack and Arlandra’s qualifications, reasons and ways to engage with art are very different. I am not placing them into the same box, but in comparison to the previous cases of multiply awarded artists building national and international careers, they are all engaging with art on a more local scale that is more often than not below the radar of art institutions and art anthropologists. Do they matter then for my conceptualization of art as infrastructure? I am going to show that in fact, they are crucial for it.

Several random Alaskans whom I asked for their views on art immediately came to speak about the “beauty” and “nice things” that “make life happier”. And I believe that artistic practices of Hilda, Jack and Arlandra embody this understanding. While the same may apply to artistic practices of many artists from the previous sections, there are some caveats. “A Supple Plunder” has undeniable aesthetics – but it is not its visual beauty that is its main point, neither can one say that experiencing it makes one happy (well, perhaps by extension – seeing that somebody is skillfully addressing the difficult issues). Inherently, the piece is a political statement. So why this mix-up? Why do political statements end up in an art gallery and not in the legislature? We have already heard Galanin’s response about lacking political power.

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We have also considered the “bleeding” between actor-networks, when Alaskan First Lady participating in the audience of “Our Voices Will Be Heard” and then joining the rally against sexual abuse could transmit a message from one context to another. Is it then about the hope that the audience of “A Supple Plunder” will “leak” the message to other contexts where it may gain some political clout? Perhaps, but let’s dig a little bit deeper into the workings of art as infrastructure.

Galanin does not believe that he can successfully advance his cause in the political or legal arena. I can only hypothesize that depending on how such claims would be presented and to whom (to the Russian government – for the old brutality and initial invasion? or to US government – for remaining damages of colonial violence?), the response might differ, but if received at all, it would most likely contest the claims. In the worst case counter-claims could also be presented, seeking to discredit the opponent (which is not uncommon practice in politics) or even to press charges in case the original claims or their presentation could be deemed unlawful. Art, on other hand, allows this kind of public communication without the risk of sanctions (oh well, there may be limits to that as well – and they most likely would be different in Russia and in US) and even with a chance to actually mobilize support for the cause. In that sense I think that the contemporary western concept of art affords an odd equivalent to a “joking relationship” in regards to the institutions of the state power. Deviating views that lack political support can be aired in art, “releasing the steam”, but potentially also paving the way for the issue to the political arena.

Returning to our “uninstitutionalized” art, I think that this productive “joking relationship” would not be possible without art having a beautiful-happy side. If all of art would be strictly political-oppositional it would become indistinguishable from the regular politics. But boxed together with some innocent decorations, skilled representations and artistic experiments, political art becomes more ambiguous, leaving uncertainty whether any particular beholder would get its message and whether he or she would acknowledge it. This opens for a wider and less polarizing variety of responses to communication of sensitive issues. I believe that the same logics can explain the “shocking fact” (Bishop 2012:283) that Schlingensief’s provocative artwork “Please Love Austria”, consisting of a container with asylum seekers “caused more public agitation and distress than the presence of a real deportation centre a few miles outside Vienna” (ibid.). What art infrastructure does here is that it forges an actor-network copy of something that for various reasons cannot (yet) be successfully dealt with by
other infrastructures, initiating discussion in the more forgiving artistic space of negotiations (I believe, for many it must have felt easier and “safer” to direct their frustrations towards the artist than the government). This may not necessarily solve the problem, but by creating a fairly safe space to speak the unspeakable, the steam may be released, some good ideas generated and possibly bled into the contexts where they actually can make a difference. Artistic interventions can thus facilitate public debate in a way that is potentially less disruptive for social cohesion than some of its other modalities.

In this context it is interesting to note that some of the more formal Native claims have also been addressed through the means that westerners could view as artistic (although in Native tradition they may have completely different legal and spiritual efficacy and meaning – see Worl 1998). One of the exhibits in Sealaska Cultural Heritage Institute reads:

“In the Tlingit way of thinking, peace ceremonies are held to restore Wooch Yax, or Balance. At the turn of the 20th century, tensions and conflicts between the Tlingit people and the U.S. occupiers remained. In 1980, the Lukaax.ádi clan conducted a peace ceremony both as a cultural event and as an appeal for justice in the struggle of the Tlingit people against exploitation of their tribal land and resources. The Peace Dance was intentionally not completed.”

I believe that the same applies also on a smaller scale. One of my collocutors, asked if theater play is a good way to approach an issue of domestic sexual abuse, commented it this way: “Well, confronting an abusive uncle at the family dinner might not be the best conversation starter, to discuss a theater play is much easier”.
Tying up the loose ends of infrastructural theory of art

The discussion presented so far outlines a perspective that could be summed up as infrastructural theory of art. From anthropological point of view I see four main accomplishments of such a theory: (1) it can embrace entire, no matter how contradictory, actually existing variety of art without losing coherence; (2) it operates on the level of meaningful social relations, potentially permeating all facets of community; (3) it makes art comparable with other infrastructures without loosing its distinct particularity; (4) it offers novel ways to conceptualize intercultural exchange. I formulate these benefits in relation to anthropology of art that up to date – in my view – has been showing tendencies (a) either to fragment its study object or to dissolve it in even wider concepts like material culture; (b) to prioritize effects of social relations on art over effects of art on social relations; (c) to approach art as if it was a separate world of its own, only vaguely connected to the “real”, non-art world; and (d) to project western conception of art to other environments underestimating the differences in what designation of something as “art” may accomplish in different contexts. Surely, there are excellent exceptions from each of these tendencies, but they rarely come all together in the same study. So while I have no reason to question the relevance or validity of these other perspectives, I do believe that I am filling a rather obvious theoretical gap where new productive insights can still be gained.

To recap it briefly, I suggest that contemporary western art can be understood as infrastructure for social cohesion. This is not to imply that all art is intentionally produced for that purpose, but rather that production, designation and social treatment of art can be seen as having cohesive effects on communities. Artistic practices can be analyzed as processes assembling artworks in the form of actor-networks, i.e. collectives of humans and non-humans “acting in concert” (Murdoch 1998; Latour 2005), which also is the most direct example of how art facilitates social cohesion on a smaller scale. However, there is no reason to expect any compulsory teleological stabilization on that level. Individual actor-networks may remain stable over time, they can gradually evolve in the “fluid space” (Law & Mol 2001) maintaining their identity, but they can also disintegrate. Some of them will leave no trace, some will face radical transformations of their identities, while others may demonstrate long-term inertia also in a shattered state (Qviström 2012), occasionally even allowing a restoration centuries later. Stabilization and inertia versus change and disintegration can be theorized as features of mutually convertible spaces of prescription versus spaces of
negotiation (Murdoch 1998; Qviström 2012). Within the spaces of negotiation, chains of translations are likely to transform the original ideas and actors, while in the spaces of prescription they are more likely to keep performing – or reproducing – the status quo, as islands of stability. While some of those processes may appear “natural”, a closer analysis will likely reveal competing interests being involved, proactively pushing towards more prescription or more negotiation. As any actor involved in an artwork as actor-network is also likely to be a member of several other, amongst them also non-artistic actor-networks, ideas may “leak” through these overlaps, allowing meanings initially designated as art also to penetrate many other facets of the social life.

It is the totality of these artistic processes and their material “hardware” forging artworks as actor-networks that I refer to by “art as infrastructure”. For a process or an actor-network to be included in this infrastructure, somebody needs to point it out as art (in this polysemic and ambiguous, yet widely shared contemporary western meaning of it). Such pointing out can be seen as illocutionary speech act (Austin 1962; Searle 1976) invoking a particular status or regime for the process or object in question, akin to Svašek’s (2007) “aestheticization”. Perhaps it would not be possible to provide an exhaustive account of such status/region as context-based variations are most likely even within the “western” setting, but it would be hardly controversial to say that in everyday contemporary western understanding art is widely associated with aesthetics, matters of taste and a world apart from everyday reality. Roughly speaking, dubbing something as art implies a proposition that it should be judged on the basis of aesthetics where opinions can differ and those differences are rather inconsequential in the real world as they are about something that is out of this world. Contesting the designation as art would accordingly imply denial of such treatment, insisting that the real world rules and some kind of positivistic objectivity should apply, judging the process or object in question on the basis of e.g. legal, economical, moral or political norms. Since art as infrastructure is socially allowed to operate under its particular “regime of art” suspending certain rules of “the real world”, debates about the meanings and definitions of art are thus intrinsically about

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19 To avoid misunderstanding, I want to emphasize that in my view art is very much “in the world”, but I cannot escape noticing frequent discursive positioning of art as “a world apart” that is recurrent both in academic literature – like Becker’s (1984) “art worlds” or Bishop (2012:274) drawing on Guattari to discuss “transversality” of art “with respect to other Universes of value” – and in everyday discussions where art is often contrasted to the “real world” where one works, eats, sleeps and engages in other “serious” or “real” activities as opposed to “fictional” or “entertaining” world of art.
permissions or denials to move particular items through art infrastructure under its particular regime.

To show how my theorization can be understood in real life situations, let’s return to our case studies. We can say that “Our Voices Will Be Heard” has staged a fictional (although reality-based) drama that enabled discussion of an actual problem under pretense of discussing a play. So while artistic actor-network consisting of the playwright, the script, the scenography, the actors, the audiences et cetera was real, it was also being employed as a “safe double” of another, more problematic, real situation for which the “regime of art” was invoked by positioning it as a theatrical artwork performed by artists in an art venue. This allowed a very sensitive issue to be discussed in this neutral zone as if it was exchange of taste-based opinions in aesthetic matters without any immediate real life consequences (no particular real-life perpetrator-uncle was being directly accused or challenged). However, since the members of this artistic actor-network (the actors, the audiences, etc.) are also members of the families where similar real life abuse can be taking place, messages and discussions moved by art infrastructure can “bleed over” to familial, civic, political and other contexts where they may gain actual social efficacy. It is worth noting that some people were calling the theater director, demanding cancellation of the play already before its premiere. From our theoretical perspective they were contesting the “regime of art” for this story, positioning it as a personal familial matter rather than art. We could also say that while the theater team was working to establish a “space of prescription” where the same story was to be enacted in the same manner over and over again, these callers were trying to convert it into a “space of negotiation”, to destabilize and dissolve the actor-network while it was still in the making.

In the case of “A Supple Plunder”, the Galanin brothers succeeded to publicly express another kind of “unspeakable” message by designating it as art and displaying it in art venues. Here the tension was not of familial, but rather of communal or political kind. I am not aware of any attempts from authorities or other organized bodies to interfere with exhibition of this work, indicating that art is socially and politically permitted more leeway in terms of what

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20 For the sake of simplicity I am using “regime of art” in singular, trying to identify its most generic features applicable to all arts. However, I believe that certain segments of art infrastructure – like institutionally recognized fine arts or folk art or children’s art etc. operate on special variations of the regime of art, adding to its generic features some particular add-ons that also limit access to those segments (just as air travel and subway may be sub-segments of the same overall transportation infrastructure, but a subway ticket will not allow you to board the plane and the passengers aboard the plane will be receiving a different modality of transportation services than those riding the subway).
can be said in the public arena – almost like having a “joking relationship” with the society and its powerful, like the jester at court who under pretense of fooling around could say otherwise unspeakable truths. Some resistance had come from private individuals, but the artists were not very keen to spend their time and energy talking about it, so I am not privy to any details. The audience that did not pick up on the message of the artworks showed another kind of resistance. There was a father of the family, who first motioned for his daughter to pose for a selfie “with her favorite”, a stuffed bear that was a part of another ethically-politically charged artwork in Galanin’s show, commented on its big teeth and finally pointed to the stuffed wolves accompanying the bear “I like that one and that one”. I do not know if he intentionally disregarded for me so obvious artistic protest against the reckless exploitation of nature and cultural landscape, but he behaved in accordance with everyday interpretation of art as a matter of aesthetics and taste. As I see it, this family father could show a peaceful and joyful reaction to a challenging political statement just because it was packaged as art. If we would hypothetically assume that he might have been offended by the message if it was stated more directly (e.g. positioning him as underserving aggressive consumer), it would indicate yet another way of how art facilitates social cohesion: those disagreeing can ignore the message and focus on its aesthetics. Instead of escalating a fierce confrontation, as the case could have been if the same message was articulated in the political arena, the controversy could be reduced to (potentially) less socially disruptive exchange of aesthetic opinions.

Now, since Durkheim (1915:49) has attributed function of social cohesion to religion, Firth (1992:17) thought of religion as art, and Gell (1992:42) of art as religion, someone might ask if my view on art as infrastructure for social cohesion also somehow equates art to religion. My answer would be a tentative yes, but only to the extent that art, just as religion – but also as political systems, science, economy, kinship structures, Internet, roads, sewage and many other systems – are moving stuff in a way that has impact on social cohesion. Yet it does it in a different way. To already mentioned features of the “safe double” and “joking relationship”, distinguishing modus operandi of art from other infrastructures, I would like to add a few more:

- **Inclusive open-endedness**: Artworks like “Fragmenta” afford a wider spectrum of individual interpretations than e.g. this paper or a religious doctrine, potentially making it a more inclusive and therefore more efficient agent of social cohesion;
- **Diverse penetration:** Fairly negotiable entrance thresholds (think “‘Escape to Radio’ and other stories”), technical variety and permanently challenged limits of art allow for a deep artistic penetration of the community through immense variety of connections that can hardly be matched by any other infrastructure;

- **Inert multisensory entanglement:** Just as roads or Internet, art offers social connectivity by bringing people together (like “The Dancing Masks”), but it also entangles them in inert artistic actor-networks where associations can be uniquely multisensory – emotional, physical and ideational – and long-lasting;

- **Pressure relief:** More cynically, art infrastructure could even be compared to a sewer transporting away “polluting matter” of dissenting meanings whose excessive accumulation might disrupt the peace of community, as artistic statements can be easier to disregard than formal claims;

- **Inoffensive connotations:** Connotations of beauty, special skill and excellence (“state of the art”) may enchant people triggering particular awe and respect for the things designated as “art”, also offering an alternative value ground to e.g. socially more controversial economical considerations and commercial exchange.

I claim that it is the combination of all these features (and I don’t think of this list as exhaustive) that characterizes the contemporary western “regime of art” that on the level of the infrastructure (rather than individual artworks) shapes art’s particular efficacy for social cohesion. Artistic assemblage of actor-networks makes connections and vehicles, building an infrastructure that can move values, visions, ideas and dissents under “regime of art”, while also continuously “bleeding over” into other spheres of social life. An artistic actor-network acting in concert can serve as a core for a stabilized “space of prescription” (e.g. “we are the Sugpiaq, we dance masks”), but it would be wrong to say that art has only a soothing and conserving function; many artists, scholars and activists positioning art as an agent of change and creator of difference would never agree with such description, either. And indeed, some artworks (like “A Supple Plunder” or even “Escape to Radio”) may intentionally create a space of negotiation where new ideas, values, visions or discussions can be proposed or provoked and also “leaked” into civic, political and other arenas, occasionally triggering changes far beyond the “art world”. However, I would not consider an art-triggered debate or evolutionary change as disruptive of social cohesion; to the contrary – a gradual transformation of society through a dialogue in the fluid space while continuing its identity is much more cohesive than any radical transformation, revolution, war or a violent oppression.
of one social group by another. My understanding of “social cohesion” implies thus not a status quo, but a dynamic, pluralistic, yet fairly peaceful co-habitation, allowing for gradual changes while maintaining a recognizable continuity of the group identity.

Now let me explain why I have been persistently reiterating that it is the “contemporary western” art that this theory is about. The original centuries-old ceremonies involving the dancing masks could have impossibly been considered “art” (in a sense discussed in the paper) in their contemporaneity. The very word “art” was hardly in circulation then (many tribal people in Alaska were telling me that their native languages had no word for “art”) and even if it were, it would not have had all the same connotations and social implications as it has today. When a corresponding ceremony is then being performed in a French museum courtyard for invited western guests in the 21st century, its status is not as clear. Perry Eaton assumed that invited guests most likely perceived it as artistic performance, while himself he would rather distinguish the masks that are being danced from the masks that are made as art (“you can’t dance art”). And still he was knowingly staging this performance in the context where he expected some participants to perceive it as art. In the light of my theory I would interpret this as Perry and his associates choosing to move their meanings and ideas under “regime of art”, since they would have been more problematic (or costly) to move through other infrastructures. Unless it was staged as art, the same performance could have been interpreted as e.g. vandalism (artworks are being destroyed) or occult practice (non-Christian spirits are being invoked). Yet those attendees, for whom this ceremony had a spiritual meaning or helped to mend the continuity of their communal identity and personhood, did not necessarily have to perceive it as art. Then again, as contemporary Alaskan Natives are westerners themselves, they certainly may have yet another ways to reconcile the western notion of art and the Native meaning of the ceremony, as they are native to both.

If we extrapolate this reasoning to cover also penetration of non-western environments by the western notion of art, I think that this process can be compared to construction of roads, bridges and pipelines. By connecting west with non-west it potentially enables movements in both directions. While western art infrastructure may reconfigure practices in non-western environments it penetrates (e.g. causing previously unseen production of artifacts for tourist markets, as discussed by Sieber (1962), or Aboriginal Acrylic paintings discussed by Myers (1995)), local and foreign actors active in these environments may also utilize this infrastructure for their own purposes, like selling obsolete utilitarian items as “exotic art” on
western markets or advancing national political goals on international arena by the means of “cultural diplomacy”\textsuperscript{21}. However, operation of art infrastructure outside of the western contexts falls outside of the scope of this study, so here I mention it primarily as an example of yet another research area where infrastructural theory of art may be productive.

Returning to my original quandary about the diversity and ambiguity of art, whose apparent paradoxality has also triggered this study, I believe that infrastructural theory of art dissolves that paradox. To put it very simply, it is the very diversity and ambiguity of art that is the key to understanding of its social efficacy as infrastructure for social cohesion. The actually existing diversity of meanings, values and preferences has better chances (although no guarantees) to be peacefully reconciled under “regime of art” that sanctions ambiguity of real/unreal, beauty/message et cetera than in many other infrastructures that tend to abhor ambiguity, enforcing more singular “truths” like dogmas in religion, verified theories in science, prices in economy, loyalties in kinship systems, laws in legal systems, ideologies in politics, waste in sewage, mobility in transportation etc.

Finally, drawing on Start’s (1999:382) famous maxim that infrastructure “becomes visible upon breakdown”, one may also wonder if art infrastructure has become so efficient, that “art services” for social cohesion are being taken for granted (just as cables, routers, servers and power stations “disappear” from our consciousness as long as computer is operational), especially when the time comes to pay the bill. Possibly, somewhere there could also be found a response to my earlier quoted collocutor, who has noted that art thrives in economic depression and is forgotten in the boom: maybe when other infrastructures are in havoc, art steps in to channel away the emotional and ideational debris and inject new ideas for recovery – and when immediate risks for the social cohesion have been mitigated, it recedes to the background again.

\textsuperscript{21} See e.g. Zaugg & Nishimura (2015:135) on Angolan and Kenyan participation in the 2013 Venice Biennale - “We are no longer dealing solely with the aesthetic, whatever its nature; this is political assertion”.

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Go Polar Bears!
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