TOWARD TRANSFEMINIST INFRASTRUCTURES AND AESTHETICS

To conceptualize the role of infrastructure in the critical transgender politics of contemporary art, I turn to theorist Angela Mitropoulos's definition of infrastructure as a form of social relation. For Mitropoulos, infrastructure comprises not only forms of transportation, communication, and logistics, but also everyday forms and patterns of contact and access.[51] Infrastructures are, in her words, "how worlds are made, how forms of life are sustained and made viable."[52] Mitropoulos's turn toward infrastructure offers a different model of relation from liberal-democratic regimes (that prioritize "identity, demands, promises, rights and contracts"); instead, infrastructure points to how "knots of attachment, adherence, care or fondness" are tied, but never incontestably, by kinship, race, money, sexuality, nationality, and other assemblages.[53] Infrastructures are pliable and not static; they scaffold how we attach or adhere to, or care or

experience fondness for, one another. We flex, reinterpret, and scale these infrastructures to the needs of those we encounter and, in so doing, change the very weave of infrastructures themselves. As Mitropolous puts it, "Infrastructure is the undercommons—neither the skilled virtuosity of the artisan, nor regal damask, nor the Jacquard loom that replaced, reproduced and democratised them, but the weave."[54]

The intimacies of our experiences and the capaciousness of our desires expand upon and rework infrastructure itself, rescript it away from intimate self-management under capitalism. However, Mitropolous points out how even intimate infrastructures may issue from possessive individualism, based on liberal notions of equality and hierarchy that constitute "*oikonomia*, the law of the household."[55] An effect of this is the scripting of agreements between peoples as "properties-in-self" (contracts, for instance, are exemplary of the management of relational uncertainty and allocation of risk). Instead of a politics based on relationships of contract, or a politics based on modern divisions of the household—such as separations between *oikos* and politics, male and female, slave and free, man and animal—Mitropoulos proposes a politics of infrastructure that would queer these relationships, render them promiscuous, a politics in which infrastructure is produced for and by subalterns within the tissue of their sociality.

I summon this notion of infrastructure in light of how cultural institutions and their infrastructures often are not scaled for prioritizing the lives, work, and memory of transgender individuals (to which projects by Vargas and others respond). The valences of trans social reproduction have been incisively articulated by Reina Gossett in her work as a community historian of pivotal drag queens and transgender individuals around the 1969 rebellion at the Stonewall Inn in New York City. This recovery is, by its nature, a difficult process: she emphasizes "the physical violence that stops some trans women from ever becoming elders. This historical violence elevates some lives, names them as important to know through their tragic deaths while erasing the lives & legacies of others."[56] Reina Gossett's research has made increasingly clear how both Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were fundamental to the founding of the Gay Liberation Front, before being forced out by conservative liberalizing impulses in the movement. Johnson and Rivera's foundational antipolicing, anti-prison, welfare and shelter organizing were replaced with more conservative LGB organizing that focused on legal rights rather than structural economic reforms. The artifacts that Reina Gossett draws on to reconstruct this history are often limited; she has critically observed how public and LGB-specific repositories rarely prioritize saving materials related to transgender artists. Rather, these materials are, in her words,

"accidentally archived"[57]—sometimes within the records of people who, in life, opposed the efforts of the trans people involved.

How, then, does one work with these scant traces of trans elders within the conditions of neglect and alienation that shaped their lives and the surviving artifacts of their cultural heritage? Reina Gossett's work points to a way forward, as a project that does not constitute a reparative impulse that would seek to insert, repair, and replace absences within a historical narrative that is structured by evictions. Instead, her polymath art embodies a *transformative* impulse: working across numerous platforms and genres, her efforts have included podcasts, lecture performances, and Tumblrs such as *40 Days* and *The Spirit Was*... that excavate trans and cultural histories, provide critical views on contemporary trans political issues, and distribute collectively sourced funds to trans people who are experiencing violence and need resources, support, and care. Her art is the work of a public intellectual that, in Stanley's words, forms an "insurgent trans study that refuses its own complicity in the brutality of exclusion."[58]

In doing so, the collectivizing and activist aspects of Reina Gossett's work lie alongside other transfeminist projects that battle brutality to emphasize the critical need to care for other trans people in rich and variant ways. micha cárdenas importantly called for a "free safety movement"—adapting the "free software movement"—in the wake of many people's recognition that the "Internet era has not brought about more safety, but less."[59] cárdenas's call to "hack safety" encompasses collaborations between artists, designers, activists, and hackers to produce networked technological devices that enable people to summon their own personal networks for help and empower bystanders to step in to avert the onset of violence. Crucially, these safety devices would be affordable, maintain the privacy of both their users and the persons involved, and center the needs of those most targeted and most intensely affected by violence—namely, transgender women of color, sex workers, and people living with disabilities.[60] Or we might also consider the crowdsourcing platform organized by Grace Dunham, Blaine O'Neill, and Rye Skelton to raise money for incarcerated transgender people.[61]

These pragmatic, infrastructural interventions have aesthetic effects, working upon our sense of what lives might be desirable, possible, cherished, and loved. They are dually aesthetic in their visual dimensions, in their attention to color, fashion, and beauty, dimensions not opposed to infrastructure but fundamental to it. It is important to note that, since the nineteenth century, the aesthetic and the infrastructural have been entangled in the US in ways that perpetuate modern state violence. Earlier laws against cross-dressing justified the arrest and incarceration of people for wearing clothing not of their presumed and assigned gender identity. Some of these same techniques persist in

contemporary policing tactics that violently target trans people based on perceptions of sexualized flamboyance and gender nonconformity.[62]

These techniques of surveillance and criminalization depend on the perception of aesthetic effects. Therefore, it is important that artists such as Gossett do not refute the aesthetic in their pragmatism, but embrace it as a space of improvisation, feeling, and glamour, including it within—rather than evicting it from—forms of institutional and infrastructural critique.[63] I emphasize this in light of how sections of the art world dismiss glamour for its allure and putative deceptiveness: such judgments interpret certain kinds of performances (quoting forms of entertainment, utilizing pleasure, or engaging the body explicitly) as pornographic or superficial; denigrate the explorations of surface, style, and fascination as trivial, frivolous, or irrelevant; and disdain queer and transgender glamour as dissonant, deceitful, monstrous, or contradictory, particularly within more refined spaces of high art.

We might instead continue to learn from transfeminist art practices such as Gossett's that foreground the vastly different structural conditions for trans and queer aesthetic embodiment. Her work points to how the improvisation of aesthetic genres of glamour might be a site of historical quotation and experiment, audacious pleasure, pragmatic necessity, community recognition, and interpretation. Dwelling with glamour is often denigrated by forms of Marxist critique (which prioritizes defamiliarization, distance, and the anti-aesthetic), but such dismissals risk reproducing a dangerous and transphobic discourse of erotophobia as critique. Such forms of analysis exist even within feminism—in feminist suspicions of artifice and in transphobic metaphors of transvestism as a signifier of deception and falsity—when critics try to differentiate the truly critical position or person from imposters.[64]

This discourse of erotophobia is lived to violent effect within the gallery, at school, and on the street. It participates in the broader stigmatization of survival sex work, poverty, nonnormative gender presentation, access to wearable clothing, and the pursuit of complex forms of desire. Against such punitive forms of critique, I wish to consider the most bewitching of aesthetic genres—glamour—as a critical modality by way of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2018), a film by Reina Gossett in collaboration with Sasha Wortzel. The film narrates the hours prior to the famous 1969 rebellion at the Stonewall Inn, where drag queens and trans women fought back against the protracted forms of police brutality they endured, barricading the cops in the bar. Legend has it that the first shot glass was thrown by Marsha P. Johnson, a longtime activist who, with Sylvia Rivera, notably forged the resistance that surrounded this event. *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* imagines the hours before Sylvia and Marsha's appearance at the Stonewall Inn,

after a birthday party for Marsha that nobody attends. Disheartened, Marsha goes to the bar as the historic event unfolds.

Reina Gossett and Wortzel's film actively adopts the language of glamour circa 1969 through its use of cinematography, soft-focus and tinted camera filters, period typography and costuming, and score by artist Geo Wyeth. Gossett and Wortzel set out, from the very beginning, to make a luscious film as a form of aesthetic resistance to the ways in which trans bodies are so frequently featured on camera as mangled and murdered, their scenes often captured with lower production values, their characters presented as caricatures, tropes, or scenography. In opposition to such depictions, in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* the camera lingers on the faces of its characters; its slow pans focus lovingly on the grace of each gesture and capture the beloved objects and animals of a household.

Depicting the social familiarities of transfeminine friendships, Gossett and Wortzel's film details an affective landscape of intimate transgender social life. Its glamour quotes and reworks the street queens' own grammar of flamboyant femininity, wordplay, and camp, which constituted their liberation aesthetics. These aesthetics have been consumed as pageantry and spectacle in films such as *Paris Is Burning* (1990), but, when lived on the street rather than on the screen, such aesthetics were violently rejected by conservative impulses within LGB movements in the 1990s and 2000s and, in the last few years, have been increasingly used as a justification for murder when embodied by trans people. As Gossett has pointed out, "Those of us on the receiving end know what glamour as a slur is meant to do, who accusations of glamour are used against."[65]

Happy Birthday, Marsha! is not glamour used against but for: glamour as an optics of loving looks between queer and trans women. Indeed, even as Gossett and Wortzel worked with costume specialists, the lead actresses playing the various roles had input into the stylization of their characters. The film offers glamour as an event and an opening into how aesthetic embodiment sutures acts of complex signification, while moving across domains of street space and psychic life, fiction and history. Here, glamour is a set of operations upon forms of life and living: its aesthetics of allure, mutability, gorgeousness, and fascination are notably invoked by the film's exploration of visual splendor. Yet the film also resonates with how glamour has been historically entwined with language, transmission, and knowledge (whether in bohemian cafés, underground clubs, or books of sorcery), endowed with the powerful capacity to, in the words of Judith Brown, "shape and reshape the objects before us."[66]

The glamour of this film is pedagogical, an affective mapping of what Ruth Gilmore has termed "an infrastructure of feeling," which describes the affects emerging from the prison industrial complex—such as expectations of safety and

protection—that also serve to hold its material domains in place.[67] The operative infrastructure of trans feeling in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* might offer a response to José Esteban Muñoz's crucial question—"How does the subaltern feel? How might subalterns feel each other?"—by considering what Muñoz describes as the different "frequencies on which certain subalterns speak and are heard or, more importantly, felt."[68] Most of the film consists of quiet, conversational scenes between trans women in groups or pairs, who are rarely shown in art and cinema within structures of kinship and familial affection (in this regard, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* provides a decisive contribution to the history of trans cinema). In a pivotal scene in which Marsha realizes that nobody showed up to her birthday party, the camera cuts back and forth between Johnson in her cozy living room and Rivera on the telephone in a gray stairwell. She soothes Marsha's wounded feelings, even as she herself seems exhausted and crabby from having endured a long day. The tone of the scene is amplified by the anchor setting of Johnson's living room, decorated with party accoutrements, trinkets, and cats—artifacts of cherished femininity and festivities that are lovingly beheld by the camera. We are drawn proximate to the nuances of the characters' weary, bitchy, affectionate conversation, as the camera's close-ups solicit the interiority of kinship striated by fatigue, forgetfulness, disappointment, forgiveness, and immense tenderness.

Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade have argued that "[i]n an age when thousands of people are murdered annually in the name of 'democracy,' millions of people are locked up to 'protect public safety,' and LGBT organizations march hand in hand with cops in Pride parades, being impossible may just be the best thing we've got going for ourselves: *Impossibility may very well be our only possibility.*"[69] *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*'s heightened moods of glamour make us feel the impossible as something present, tender, and viable, bringing abolitionist desires for alternatives to imprisonment and debt one step closer, by way of what Bassichis, Lee, and Spade have called "the nourishing possibilities dreamed of and practiced by our ancestors and friends."[70] The glamour of Sylvia and Marsha is here a kind of affective mapping of what it's like to hold on to life and stay with it: each promise kept, each phone call answered, each gesture of forgiveness and staying with is a moment of aesthetic transformation within the natal alienation that structurally underpins black and transgender lives under racial capitalism. In this infrastructure of feeling, chosen family is sutured, seam by seam, into a discourse of impossible love that is lived every day, up close and at a distance.