

EXHIBITING ENVIRONMENTS IN ARCHITECTURE

DISPLAY

Exhibiting Environments in Architecture

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Nature, Climate, and Weather: An Exploration Through Architecture Exhibitions

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Giulia Setti

Showcasing and describing the environment, and telling its story, is a challenge for contemporary architectural design. What it actually means is giving form and matter to an apparently immaterial and often ephemeral concept. It is a very broad subject, often describing phenomena that are not tangible or whose effects are felt over a long, protracted period of time, and it encompasses various forms of design. This essay attempts to trace and reconstruct a narrative in architecture exhibitions that have told the story of the environment and, in particular, that have defined the relationship – current and controversial – between humans, nature and architecture, in various ways. With this in mind, two emblematic exhibitions have been selected, both of which have sought to represent and showcase the relationship between humans and nature. The essay observes and analyses, in particular, the Italian context as the main focus of the study, with reference to the stated objectives of the PRIN Display¹ research to which this call refers. The two exhibitions, and a number of subsequent ones that have grown out of them, touch on historical moments that are close in time but very different.

The first exhibition, which forms the core of this text, critically examines and observes the close and precarious relationship between humans and nature in architecture and design, entitled *Broken Nature: Design Takes on Human Survival*, held at the Triennale di Milano on the occasion of the XXII International Exhibition, from 1 March to 1 September 2019, just before the outbreak of the pandemic in February 2020. The exhibition explored the links between humans and the natural environment, attempting to study nature in its broadest and most complete form; links that have been profoundly compromised, if not destroyed, in recent decades, and which are on the verge of an epochal crisis, with no way out and no possibility of returning to how things were before. The exhibition, curated

1. See the PRIN – Research Project of National Relevance – proposal entitled “*Display. The presence of the future. An archive/laboratory of the immaterial heritage of architectural exhibitions*” presented in 2022. Further information is available at: <https://www.display-thepresenceofthefuture-polimi.com>.

by Paola Antonelli and Ala Tannir, defines possible trajectories within a complex geography where environmental events are often in constant and rapid flux.

The second, more recent, exhibition event was held from 20 May to 23 November 2023 at the Fondazione Prada in Venice, with the emblematic title *Everybody Talks About the Weather*, seeking to highlight the urgency of climate change and the need to treat the weather as a central element of our lives, a precarious, diminishing resource, deeply affected by the current environmental crisis. The selected exhibitions present a number of possible scenarios through displays divided into different sections that attempt to touch on the salient themes of the relationship between nature, humans and the



Christina Agapakis, Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg, Sissel Tolaas, with IFF inc. and Ginkgo Bioworks Inc., *Resurrecting the Sublime*, 2019. Photo by Gianluca Di Ioia. © Triennale Milano.

environment. They also deal critically and problematically with issues related to the environment and the ongoing processes of change, as well as the imprint that humans and their activities leave on the Earth. Taking two exhibitions as a starting point, therefore, this essay critically re-examines the way in which the environment is represented in contemporary architecture and in the Italian panorama, trying to find new interpretations and to understand the design issues that these exhibitions sought to raise.

Architecture and Nature: Observe and Design the Changing Environment

The first exhibition covered in this paper is *Broken Nature: Design Takes on Human Survival* which sought to collect and catalogue different projects related to the relationship between humans and nature.

The exhibition catalogue is divided into six sections, each of which provides a partial but accurate view of certain key issues in the relationship between humans, nature and design. The six sections (*Il clima è cambiato; Ambienti complessi; Fatto e disfatto; O tempora, o mores; Ponti*, and finally the section entitled *Partecipazioni Internazionali*) deal with phenomena or events that are sometimes not so obvious. These are inexorable changes, manifesting themselves on a planetary scale, that evidently describe a latent, ongoing conflict between our species and the world in which we live. Each section presents case studies and examples that can be used as an excuse and a stimulus to engage more deeply with certain themes and to find (possible) new design synergies. The exhibition is aimed at a broad, generalist audience, but also at a much more specialised public, in an attempt to provide architects and designers with operational tools to rediscover and heal the broken relationship with nature.

In the catalogue’s introductory essay, entitled *Broken Nature*,

2. A. Tanir, *Il clima è cambiato*, in P. Antonelli, A. Tanir (eds.), *Broken Nature. XXII Triennale di Milano*, La Triennale di Milano; Electa, Milano 2019, p. 43.



Anna Citelli, Raoul Bretzel, *Capsula Mundi*, 2003. Photo by Gianluca Di Ioia. © Triennale Milano.

Paola Antonelli³ looks back at some of the key moments in the emergence of awareness of the ongoing environmental and climate crisis, starting with a day that has been gradually pushed forward in recent decades: Earth Overshoot Day.⁴ This is the date that marks the moment when humanity's consumption has depleted all the natural resources that the Earth is capable of regenerating in twelve months. In other words, from that day on, humanity will be consuming and using up a portion of the Earth's resources that it will no longer be able to regenerate. The idea and aim of the exhibition are to highlight the importance of resources and their depletion, as well as the importance of creative practices – in terms of architecture and design – that try to imagine forms of repair and care for nature and relationships that are too often exploited and destroyed.

Design and planning are put at the service of nature to understand, through installations of various kinds, how the universe has been adapted and domesticated for the benefit of our species. Operations, often forced, marked the beginning of a new geological era, the current one, called the Anthropocene, which denotes the period in which human activity has succeeded in causing structural and climatic changes capable of influencing geological processes irreversibly.

In this context, the *Anthropocene* exhibition, on show at the MAST Foundation in Bologna from 16 May 2019 to 5 January 2020, explored the now indelible imprint that humans are leaving on the Earth, through the extraordinary images of Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier.⁵ The story told by the three artists, photographers, and filmmakers sought to highlight the power of the changes wrought on the planet by human activity and

3. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

4. The exhibition catalogue for *Broken Nature. XXII Triennale di Milano* refers to Earth Overshoot Day in 2018, which was on 1 August; in 2023 it was on 2 August, and in 2024 it is still set for 1 August.

5. S. Hackett, *Vicino e lontano: le nuove prospettive dell'Antropocene*, in S. Hackett, A. Kunard, U. Stahel (eds.), *Anthropocene. Burtynsky, Baichwal, de Pencier*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Ontario 2018, pp. 13-33. See also the website: <https://anthropocene.mast.org>.

the increasingly devastating effects on ongoing natural processes.

The idea of the three artists to expose the human impact on the Earth and to try to make the concept of the Anthropocene more understandable and accessible is the result of a series of works begun almost twenty years earlier, documented through aerial photographs and film footage that can bring viewers closer to the harsh and indelible impact of human actions in places that many of us may never see in our lifetimes. It opens the definition of a post-anthropocentric theory, which highlights the break from the traditional distinction between human and the rest, that has been introduced by Rosi Braidotti's work on the Post-Human⁶ and its effects on the planet.⁷ Indeed, certain images have marked key moments in the history of climate change awareness and environmental activism, such as the use of a composite colour satellite image of the planet Earth used by Stewart Brand as the cover of the first *Whole Earth Catalog* in 1968.⁸ A moment that many historians regard as a turning point in global awareness of the human impact on nature.

Or the historic photograph called *Earthrise*, taken on 24 December 1968 by Apollo 8 astronaut William Anders, the first colour photograph of the Earth taken by a human from another celestial body. An unprecedented image that for the first time changed people's perspective: the Earth is no longer the centre of the system, but is seen from the moon, showing its infinite smallness and fragility in the vast solar system.⁹ Images which, more than fifty years later, have begun to raise the need to reflect on the current state of the planet's health.

6. R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Polity, Cambridge 2013.

7. G. Setti, *In Search of Adaptation. Exploring Design Tools and Theories*, in F. Berlingieri, G. Setti (eds.), *Design Processes for Transition*, LetteraVentidue, Siracusa 2022, p. 109.

8. See the text by S. Brand, "Photography Changes Our Relationship to Our Planet," Smithsonian Photography Initiative, March 20, 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080530221651/http://click.si.edu/Story.aspx?story=31>. Accessed March 1, 2025.

9. J. Fox, *Il mondo dei colori. Una storia culturale in sette tonalità*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2023.

Returning to the *Broken Nature* exhibition, the project was built around a series of site-specific moments and installations created with the aim of investigating and exploring the ways in which architecture and design interact with nature. This essay describes a few examples, selected for the conceptual strength of the ideas presented and the care taken in the construction of the exhibition. The first in this series is the *Ore Streams* project, created by Formafantasma, included in the *Fatto e disfatto* section, dedicated to the issue of waste and the environmental disaster being caused by its increased production in various forms. The aim is to understand how to observe, study and reuse waste and residues, transforming them into



Abel Rodríguez, *El árbol de la vida y la abundancia; La vega II; Mata de achote; Vañoobo tabaco origen*, 2018. Photo by Gianluca Di Ioia.
© Triennale Milano.



Sigil, *Birdsong*, 2019. Photo by Gianluca Di Ioia. © Triennale Milano.

an alternative resource. In other words, promoting new forms of circular economy capable of rethinking the way we consume and produce waste. It was in this context that *Ore Streams* was born: an ambitious research project on e-waste recycling, developed over three years, commissioned by the NGV Triennial in Melbourne and finally exhibited and presented at the XXII Triennale di Milano. In particular, *Ore Streams* explores strategies for repairing things that are broken – in our case, nature, but not only – and finds ways and means of trying to repair what is already broken (or depleted), rather than breaking or changing what is already working. As mentioned above, it focuses on e-waste and the relationship between product obsolescence, recycling and repair, with the audacious aim of healing or trying to repair a broken relationship.¹⁰

The *Ore Streams* video installation takes an in-depth look at the relationship between forms, objects and materials, and in particular seeks to identify products that lend themselves to more efficient recovery and recycling. The project consists of a series of interviews and videos collecting examples of different types of planned obsolescence of electrical and electronic equipment – an issue that has already been the subject of significant reflection by Kevin Lynch.¹¹ Another video describes and explains the systems and technologies used to separate waste for recycling.

The idea and the project developed by Formafantasma invite us to explore the issue of surface material extraction and the role played by architecture and design in transforming raw natural resources into desirable commercial products. The research revolves around a place – the office – where the search for efficiency and ideal standards is concentrated. The office also brings together a series of iconic furnishing elements such as the filing cabinet and the

10. Formafantasma, description of the *Ore Streams* project, for the XXII Triennale, see the video available at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZTrFzqpKzI>.

11. K. Lynch, M. Southworth, V. Andriello (eds.), *Deperire: rifiuti e spreco nella vita di uomini e città*, (ed. or. *Wasting Away*, 1990), Cuen, Napoli 1992.

modular cubicle, which are put on display. The second installation to be explored in this paper is entitled *Birdsong*, included in the *Ponti* section, and created by Sigil, a studio operating between Lebanon and the United States, consisting of Khaled Malas, Salim Al Kadi, Alfred Taranzi and Jana Traboulsi, in collaboration with Aamer Ibrahim and Emad Madah, is an experiment that reflects on the role of architecture and design in the production of places, specifically through the creation of an object – in this case a scarecrow – that represents an agricultural monument of great tradition in Syria. In fact, *Birdsong* tells the story of a Syrian community that inhabited the fertile Jawlan plateau, where agriculture has been integrated into village architecture for thousands of years. Following the occupation of these lands by the Israeli army in 1967, the population was forcibly relocated and displaced, and remains stateless to this day. In recent years, the people of Jawlan have chosen to show their resilience and attachment to the homeland by growing apples. The



Neri Oxman and The Mediated Matter Group, *Silk Pavilion*, 2019. Photo by Gianluca Di Ioia. © Triennale Milano.

installation proposed for the XXI Triennale is a scarecrow imagined in a Jawlan apple orchard. Used throughout history to scare birds away from seeds, shoots and fruit, the scarecrow is still very popular among Syrians. More generally, the idea of reproducing a scarecrow is linked to certain primordial design objects: a hearth, a tomb, a totem pole.¹² The creators of the installation emphasise how the idea of building – and imitating – a scarecrow illustrates the relationship and constant confrontation between humanity and nature, where the two are constantly being torn apart. It is therefore an association that, through design and architecture, once again recalls the relationship that humans had with nature, a relationship that has in part been broken. In this particular case, the link with the traditions of the Syrian people is very strong, and the scarecrow, dressed in clothes that represent birdsong, becomes a witness and symbol of the difficulties faced by the Syrians at this historical moment.

These are just two specific insights, of a different nature, into what is on display in *Broken Nature*. The exhibition is, in fact, an uninterrupted collection of objects, drawings, videos, images and stories that attempt to describe the broken relationship with nature. It is difficult to choose just one aspect, as the exhibits range from the Fairphone, a mobile phone whose modular parts can be easily replaced, to descriptions of the expansion and contraction of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers in India, to the safe storage of native plant seeds on a remote island in the Svalbard archipelago. Built on the island of Spitsbergen, the seed bank is an original and valuable artifact, storing more than 40,000 seeds to ensure and preserve the diversity of the world's crops and species in the event of disasters or extreme events. It is an underground vault about 120 metres below ground level, embedded in the slopes of a sandstone mountain. The extreme climatic conditions, characterised by ground that is usually frozen, allow the seeds to be preserved as if in a cold store. From the outside, the building looks like a wedge embedded in the

12. K. Malas, S. al-Kadi, A. Tarazi, J. Traboulsi, *Birdsong*, in P. Antonelli, A. Tanir (eds.), *Broken Nature. XXII Triennale di Milano*, La Triennale di Milano; Electa, Milano 2019, p. 236.

ground, representing a contemporary, automated form of archive. Built entirely of concrete to withstand any nuclear war or plane crash, it is designed to protect, catalogue and preserve species. A place designed to guard valuable materials for the future of the human being, capable of reconnecting the relationship between nature and humans in the continuation of the species.

In this way, *Broken Nature* portrays different episodes and moments of the realisation of the changes taking place in the environment, and shows their effects by building up a rich but dramatic repertoire of situations.

Climate, Weather and Nature: Raising Awareness of Climate Change

The second exhibition, *Everybody Talks About the Weather*, is a research display held in the rooms of the historic Ca' Corner della Regina Palace in Venice, conceived and curated by Dieter Roelstraete. The exhibition brings together works, particularly from the visual arts, that explore the meaning of weather. From this starting point, the aim is to identify tools for tackling the current climate emergency. Designed by New York-based studio 2x4, the installation attempts to construct a mosaic of positions, interweaving artistic aspects with a series of scientific findings,¹³ with the aim of highlighting the urgency of climate change, the necessity to adapt¹⁴ to this issue, and attempting to bring together the tools of art and science.¹⁵

The exhibition deals with an extremely delicate relationship: the climate and its effects in the present, and the need to reflect on

13. The exhibition has been organized with the support of the New Institute Centre For Environmental Humanities (NICHE) at Ca' Foscari University in Venice.

14. G. Setti, *Adaptation (in search of)*, in "Territorio," no. 91, 2019, pp. 29-31. <https://doi.org/10.3280/TR2019-091003>

15. See Miuccia Prada's statements during the exhibition opening, see also: <https://www.fondazioneprada.org/project/everybody-talks-about-the-weather>.

the impact of climate change on our lives. Dealing with this means approaching an urgent and decisive issue for the future of the Earth's inhabitants. The exhibition, open from 20 May to 26 November 2023, was set up on the two floors of the Ca' Corner della Regina venue, in an attempt to imagine an ideal dialogue between art and science. On the ground floor, a large LED screen looped weather forecasts taken from traditional media or broadcast online from around the world. Meanwhile, on the first floor, a selection of artworks from different eras were brought together to show the relationship with time, from allegorical painting to *en plein air* art to more recent multimedia art forms or the activism that has exploded in recent years. The collection shows the constant attention paid by artists of different periods to the weather and the observation of these phenomena, which were then reproduced in their works.

The title of the exhibition and the project itself start from the banal idea of telling the story of the weather, the climate, a topic that is very present in all daily conversations, explains curator Dieter Roelstraete, but the exhibition goes a step further and tries to highlight the greatest threat facing the Earth: climate change. Emblematic works include Claude Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*, a manifesto of Impressionism, but also a reflection on air pollution, and therefore a way of observing and understanding the effects of pollution on everyday life, even at that time. Through these simple relationships, the exhibition tries to suggest that, in the face of the enormity and power of climate change, we can do something very banal but incisive that has been done since time immemorial: "talk about the weather."¹⁶

Everybody Talks about the Weather is first and foremost a collective exhibition in which the works are grouped according to the weather phenomena described: the wind room, the rain room, the snow room and the cloud room. Each room recreates the effect of the weather and constructs an imagery of suggestions evoked

16. See the video of the exhibition's curator, Dieter Roelstraete, who describes the exhibition's structure and curatorial design: <https://vimeo.com/845879838>.

by the artworks themselves. At the same time, the exhibition has a significant research component, with several “research stations” bringing together more than five hundred books, scientific publications and articles written on the subject, as well as a significant selection of video material and interviews collected on climate change issues. The idea is to create a kind of open library where visitors can consult and browse through the documents on display and broaden their knowledge of the topics covered in the exhibition.

It is clear that the choice of Venice as the venue for this exhibition is no accident or mere coincidence, since Venice itself is one of the cities most exposed to the effects of climate change and its obvious forms of destruction. It is perhaps the most famous potential victim of rising sea levels, and so the exhibition also seeks to send a powerful and radical signal of awareness of the problem and the need for action to stop the way in which we inhabit the Earth. This is why, right from its very title, the exhibition highlights a profound contradiction: on one hand, we constantly talk about the weather in our daily lives, but on the other, it is surprising to realise that the climate crisis is a subject that is very often absent from communication and, to some extent, from the art world in general.

The exhibition takes a radical stance and tries to make public opinion more sensitive to these issues. In particular, curator Roelstraete supports the argument of Indian writer and anthropologist Amitav Ghosh, who in his 2016 book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, describes the broader failure of contemporary culture to find tools capable of dealing with the threat of climate change. For Ghosh, the great blindness to the climate and its mutations can be traced back to the complexity of the current situation, which creates a kind of paralysis in the actions of many contemporary artists and writers.¹⁷

The cultural positions expressed by the two exhibitions that are the subject of this essay highlight the need for a new critical stance, both by defining design tools capable of intervening amidst the

climate crisis and in terms of the need to increase critical awareness of the seriousness of the phenomena at hand. While *Broken Nature* constructs a broader reflection on the relationship between architecture and nature, and debates on the reasons for the breakdown of this relationship with humanity, *Everybody Talks About the Weather* focuses instead on the role of art and science as tools capable of raising awareness of the issues of climate, its fragility and its impact on our lives. A critical analysis of these exhibitions allows us to understand the enormous scope that climatic and environmental phenomena have in the cultural debate, in the field of architecture and design. Exhibiting the environment therefore means identifying projects, works and installations that are capable of investigating the delicate and fragile relationship between architecture and nature, between architecture and climate, in relation to human needs.

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NATURE, CLIMATE, AND WEATHER: AN EXPLORATION THROUGH ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITIONS

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BIOGRAPHIES

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SUPERVOID is an architecture office based in Rome. It was founded in 2016 by Benjamin Gallegos Gabilondo (1988, Santiago de Chile) and Marco Provinciali (1988, Roma) after they graduated from IUAV. It has realized projects in Italy and the US at various scales. The office is currently working on the redevelopment of the Tenuta della Mistica in Rome and the winning design for the Punta Spadillo lighthouse renovation in Pantelleria. It has participated in the 2014 and 2016 Venice Biennale and designed the Archizines show in Venice. They published projects and essays on international magazines and books such as: SANROCCO, Domus, Elements of Venice, The Real Review among others.

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In the context of climate change, the architectural exhibition expands beyond the display of discrete objects to the staging of artificial environments. Bringing together diverse perspectives, this volume explores how temporary settings, pavilions, and installations engage with nature, climate, atmosphere, and weather, becoming sites of critique that address the entanglements between the natural and the manmade, as well as between design agency and indeterminacy.

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