

DISPLAY

Exhibiting Environments in Architecture

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Sea Sun Air: Setting Up the Environment According to Pino Pascali, Olafur Eliasson, and James Turrell

BY

Alessandro Rocca

In 1967, Pino Pascali hung *1 cubic meter of earth* on the wall, placed *9 m² of puddles* on the surface of chipboard panels, and, using nine iron tanks, set up the segmented diagram of a *River with a triple mouth*. But the work that perhaps most fully expresses this environmental line is *32 m² of sea approximately*, displayed in the *Gallery of Modern Art* in Rome in 1967, where thirty iron sheet tanks full of colored water represent an expanse precisely measured but also large, wide, capable of evoking the marine horizon and at the same time denying it, bringing it back to the dimension of a human artifact, of an artisan work carried out with the most elementary techniques. The ornament is water, the poorest material, which costs nothing, and at the same time, the richest and most necessary, the very symbol of the possibility of life.

In the exhibition curated by Mark Godfrey for the Prada Foundation,¹ the visit to Pascali's retrospective takes the form of an immersive experience continually disturbed, enriched by the artist's critical and ironic sense, always well respected and interpreted by the curator. The rooms set up in the Podium, the central hall of

1. In the spring of 2024 (28 March – 23 September, 2024), the Prada Foundation created, in the environments designed by OMA – Rem Koolhaas, a comprehensive retrospective of the works by Pino Pascali, an Italian artist born in 1935 who, in just four years, from 1965 to 1968, left an indelible mark on the panorama of contemporary art. When Pascali died from a motorcycle accident, his work was already well known, and he was presented in the best Italian art galleries and, with a solo room at the XXXIV Venice Biennale in 1968. The sudden and tragic disappearance of a volcanic personality and ingenious consecrated the myth; as the poet Menander wrote, “He whom the gods love dies young,” and Pascali undoubtedly received a lot from him. Equipped with a strong sense of humor, Pascali had the gift of clarity, power, and precision, three qualities which, put together, constituted an exceptional corpus in that very short four-year period, homogeneous but also articulated in broad and diversified experimentation. Pascali ranges from readymade, as in the *Bachi da Seta* (*Silkworms*, 1968) made using acrylic brushes, to the pure sculpture of works in canvas stretched on wooden structures, to traditional painting (*Colosseum*, 1964) to three-dimensional painting (*La gravida* or *Maternità*, 1964), up to the hyper-realistic series of bombs, cannons, missiles and machine guns reproduced with obsessive care. A particular section of Pascali's work concerns the proposition, in abstract terms, of environmental elements and natural landscapes.

Rem Koolhaas' project, offer themselves as unitary but at the same time non-secluded environments, admitting the double register of closed and open, walled and communicating. The passage from one room to another reinforces the unity of Pascali's work, which, as is known, always proceeded in relation to the spatial conditions in which the works would be exhibited. It was, in fact, typical of Pascali to conceive and create for a single exhibition occasion, in real-time, accumulating experiments and thematic experiences which, in the retrospective, are offered as chapters of precision, insights into a journey into reality experienced with eyes wide open and a mind wide open that unfortunately it ended too soon, tragically.

Often, Pascali conceived his works as installations or site-specific interventions, looking for an explicit agreement with the



Exhibition view of *Pino Pascali*, Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2024. Photo by Roberto Marossi. Courtesy of Fondazione Prada. *On the ground: 32 mq di mare circa*, 1967. *On the wall: Pino Pascali, 32 mq di mare circa*, 1967. Foligno, Palazzo Trinci. Photo by Claudio Abate.

environment where the work settles. In the installation of the Prada Foundation, the curator captured this aspect by reconstructing, in the central part of the exhibition, several rooms, open environments clearly defined by high walls and podiums in non-color, white, black, and grey, where to reassemble the solo exhibitions that Pascali performed in various galleries. Each room thus becomes representative of a unity of place and theme: the series of *Animals* at the Galleria L'Attico of Fabio Sargentini in Rome, the *Weapons* at the Galleria Sperone in Turin, the room set up for the 1968 Venice Biennale, and so on.

The Prada exhibition is a double retrospective, presenting Pascali's works and even how the works were shown for the first time, trying to render the feeling of the freshness and impact of those auroral moments. Prada's installation follows a path that is very respectful of the history of these works and the artist, recreating in vitro, with elegance, situations that were indeed livelier and more spontaneous, where the risk of the meeting between existing spaces and Pascali's irruption could have caused tensions which here inevitably appear as a distant and not entirely understandable echo. This tension is well grasped, in a palpable way, in the beautiful photographic exhibition that represents Pascali taken together with his works and forcefully restores the spirit of the era. The exhibition set up in the spaces of the Prada Foundation places these works in a frame, covering them with an artistic patina, which helps their understanding but probably reduces their formal and emotional impact.

Scrolling through the images of Pascali's works in their first setting, one discovers a surprising adaptability and a capability of bursting into space and determining a solid characterization of the environmental characters, that is, operating through sculpture a manipulative and alienating action of the internal space which is involved and transformed by the presence of the work. In the minimalist and conceptual era, from Donald Judd to Giulio Paolini, space is neutralized, reduced to a white cube or an inexpressive background; for Pascali, space is an active and reactive environment, a stage that he transforms with the tools of figuration, parody, measurement.

Arranged outdoors, as seen in the rich photographic repertoire of the volume edited by Anna D'Elia,² the animals built with canvas stretched over wooden structures, dolphins, dinosaurs, and giraffes, become models of landscapes, mountain ranges, valleys, and short plains. This reinvention of the environment is even more strengthened by the series of the so-called *Elements of nature* (1967-68), bizarre collections of fragments with descriptive and often ironic titles: puddles under construction, cultivated fields, irrigation channels, the color of seawater, and others.

In these works, Pascali expresses an environmental dimension in abstract terms, without a doubt, but also adhering to the material and formal conditions of the places represented. The *Approximately 32 m2 of sea*, one of his best-known works, contains in an exemplary way the tension between the incommensurability of the sea, its space, its shape, its light, and the perfectly controlled project, up to the measurement of the surface in square meters, the juxtaposition of the galvanized iron tubs measuring 113x113 cm, the exact quantity of aniline-colored water that fills them.

The same happens for the *Irrigation canals*, which develop their progression of lines rigidly broken into equal segments across the entrance hall of the Gallery of Modern Art in Rome. Pascali reformulates the space into an aphasic bi-dimensional environment that emerges from the ground by a few centimeters, establishing a similar and autonomous geography foreign to the measurements of man and the natural environment to which it refers. In this case, Pascali chooses a different strategy regarding the place, giving up on any possible relation to the torpid neoclassical interior. As Achille Bonito Oliva wrote:

The difference between nature and art lies in the fact that the former develops through organic forms while the latter through a proliferating repetitive development of an initial form... there is always a container that formalizes

2. A. D'Elia (ed.), *Pino Pascali*, Laterza, Roma; Bari 1983, pp. 78-231.

the organicity of nature and the structure within a recognizable and not at all random or hidden order.³

Pascali's natural environments are, therefore, places that live through their negation: a sea made of modules, channels of separate tanks, puddles dug out of nine lacquered chipboard panels, each with a surface area of one square meter, a cubic meter of earth supported by a perfectly geometric wooden structure. This precise, basic formalization derives from choosing elementary forms deliberately devoid of qualitative connotation. This formal neutrality, typical of Arte Povera, promotes a critical circularity rich in possible meanings and multiple references through the interaction of form, concept, figure, and place. In Pascali's works, the environment remains as the orthogonal projection of a profound memory but also as the radical stripping of every environmental character, its reduction to number, object, sequence, and presence. Stuck in the nine rectangular iron containers of the *Triple Mouth River* (1967), the water stagnates lifelessly, as a future memory of all the waters of all the rivers in the world.

Sunset High-tech

Critics place the works of Pino Pascali in the artistic movement called Arte Povera for the use of simple, expressive techniques attributable to craftsmanship applied to poor materials such as earth, wood, iron, rags, plastic, and industrial waste. *The weather project*, by Olafur Eliasson, instead produces a high-tech performance where the scenic apparatus for the spectator is revealed to the spectator gradually and only from some specific point of view, such as the end of the hall and the balcony on the last level. At the core of the Tate Modern, the *Bankside Power Station*, freshly converted by

3. Oliva A.B., *Pascali: la scena mediterranea*, in A. D'Elia (ed.), *Pino Pascali*, Laterza, Roma; Bari 1983, pp. 38-41.



Olafur Eliasson, *The weather project*, 2003. Monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, scaffolding, 26.7 x 22.3 x 155.44 m. Installation view: Tate Modern, London, 2003. Photo by Olafur Eliasson. Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles.

the architects Herzog & de Meuron, the *Project* produces a visual, substantially immaterial, or at least intangible, spectacle, which consists in the apparition at the end of the vast void of the *Turbine Hall*, of an artificial sun.

The installation consists of a semicircular screen, a mirrored ceiling, and artificial fog: the light produced by 200 lamps back-lights the semicircle and reflects on a ceiling cladding of mirroring panels. The effect is a gigantic indoor sunset perceived through a humid air filter. The images and the video, visible on the artist's website, attest to a strange and unnatural environmental situation,

a fixed scene where the public becomes the driving force of the performance. The unusual light and the mirrored ceiling induce people to sit and lie on the floor in a contemplative but also passive attitude; in fact, there is nothing to see, and nothing happens; you just have to accept the effect of the artificial sun which produces an unreal yet real climate situation and also, for the captive visitors of the Turbine Hall, unavoidable. Eliasson stages a motionless, technical sunset, whose most disturbing characteristic is the persistence of a sun that does not move, of a twilight light that resists, indifferent to the passing of time. As Eliasson says in dialogue with Kurt Forster:

something that is a brief moment, normally associated with a kind of urgency, even a certain anxiety - I mean, the sun goes down, and in a moment it will be gone. *The Weather Project* extends this moment until you switch off the light. So it is a very curious thing that a relatively rapid passage of time - a sunset is actually amazingly rapid when you look at it from that point of view - can be made to last... it is as if the urgency were taken out of the experience. I was at Tate Modern a number of times and I saw many people sprawling on the floor and simply abandoning themselves to the fact that the anxiety of this moment is suspended; it's gone away. The museum was open until ten o'clock at night, so you could go when the sunset was already over. You inhabit it with that kind of dreamlike duration.⁴

4. O. Eliasson, K.W. Forster, *In Conversation*, in "Perspecta," 181-182, no. 42, 2010, pp. 177-190.

Air Mass

By James Turrell, *Air Mass*⁵ (1993) is an almost cubic room with sides around eight meters long and a height of around seven meters; in the center of the ceiling, there is a void, a square cutout four meters on a side, which frames the sky. This simple device, an installation created in the Hayward Gallery in London, is a replica of a prototype that, in various dimensions, situations, and forms, returns periodically like a mantra in the Skyspaces series, which includes at least seventy permanent installations, like those made in England in the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (2006) and the Kielder Water and Forest Park (2000). However, in the *Hayward* exhibition, the Skyspace is not the centerpiece but rather a dutiful citation to Turrell's artistic career. More representative, especially from our point of view, is a series of interiors based on atmospheric, luminous, and optical reasoning.

In Turrell's intentions, these installations correspond directly to specific climatic conditions and represent the movements of that invisible matter, air, in its meteorological conditions. At the beginning of the catalog, Turrell reports in the epigraph a quote from the book *Weather* by Louis J. Battan, which says:

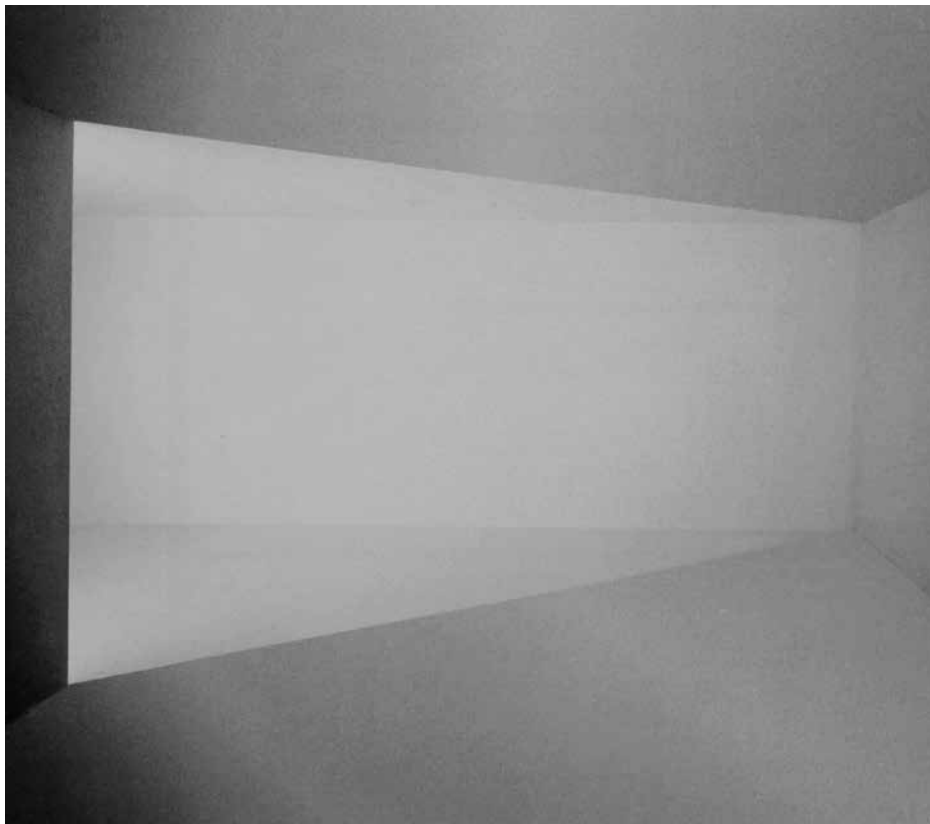
When two air masses of differing types encounter one another, they do not mix readily. Instead, the colder one slides under the warmer one and a transition zone develops between them.

Turrell's spatial experiments seek to transfigure these kinds of phenomena, which he explored through aerial flight intended as an artistic and existential experience, with an explicit reference to the night flights reported in the Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's novel *Terre des Hommes* (published in 1939 and translated into English under

5. *Air Mass* is even the title of a solo exhibition of the American artist James Turrell at the Hayward Gallery, South Bank Center, London, 8 April – 27 June 1993.



James Turrell, *Meeting*, 1980-86, P.S.1, Long Island City, New York.
In: James Turrell, *Air Mass*, South Bank Centre, London 1993.



James Turrell, *Wedgework III*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1980.
In: Turrell, James, *Air Mass*, London: South Bank Centre, 1993.

the title *Wind, Sand, and Stars*). Turrell describes at length gliding flight without an engine as an experience of profound perception of the movements of the air, as an epiphany of currents, waves, flows, and pauses that are invisible and which, in a glider, become an aerial topography to be deciphered meter by meter, movement by movement. Regarding exceptionally rugged topographies of the American Southwest, Turrell notes:

The space up from this terrain is inhabited by weather phenomena. Heat structures are created in the thunderstorms and incredible visual worlds exist above the earth. Most action is at the weather front, the pressure dip. Frontal passage means entry into another air mass.⁶

Turrell's avian approach excludes tangible matter and pushes him to think simultaneously about climatic and visual phenomena:

I came to the installation works wanting to bring the light of day into a landscape. I did not want to make a mark on the surface of earth. I wanted to employ sunlight, moonlight and starlight to empower a work of art.⁷

Therefore, Turrell dislocates the artifact in a non-objective and non-figurative condition, expressing with great clarity:

First, I am dealing with no object. Perception is the object. Secondly, I am dealing with no image, because I want to avoid associative, symbolic thoughts. Thirdly, I am dealing with no focus or particular place to look. With no object, no image and no focus, what are you looking at? You are looking at your looking.⁸

6. J. Turrell, *Air Mass*, The South Bank Centre, London 1993, p. 19.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

So, Turrell transforms the air masses, movements, and encounters into environmental constructions where visual data replaces the climatic data. It is a transfer from the atmospheric to the visual, which the expression *Air Mass* conveys precisely, defining a coefficient that indicates the length traveled by solar radiation through the atmosphere. This radical cancellation of the object produces a series of installations more or less directly linked to atmospheric phenomena. They are extreme, empty interiors, often with minimal light that allows the space and colors to be revealed exceptionally slowly, only at the end of a wait shrouded in perfect darkness.

Wedgework, dated 1974, was revived at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1980) and the Hayward Gallery (1993). According to Turrell, the installation corresponds to the weather directly ‘Wedging’ occurs with a cold front and ‘Shallow Wedging’ occurs with a warm front. As you approach a front there is a change in visibility, which happens very quickly if you fly towards it. When flying, this differentiation of vision happens through weather and water vapor. In *Wedgework*, similar qualities of opacity, translucency and transparency are created by light simply inhabiting space.⁹ The drawings and photographs of the installation cannot give a satisfactory description of the visitor’s experience because, as Turrell says, there is no image, form, or object but only perception and, therefore, direct personal experience. The drawings, simple diagrams that indicate the walls of the room and the position and color of the lights, explain well, in the absence of a formal will, what the objective of the installation is in its nature as an optical device, an introverted darkroom, an interval temporal space capable of revealing to the gaze the presence of an unknown self.¹⁰

9. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

10. H. Foster, *Post-Critical*, in “October,” 139, Winter 2012, pp. 3-8.

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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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