

Columbia GSAPP Spring 2016  
Advanced Studio IV\_006  
Scales of Environment  
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## ***Not Not Nature***



“The range of attitudes, prescriptions, warnings, restrictions, summons, sermons, and threats that go with ecology seem to be strangely out of sync with the magnitude of the changes expected from all of us, the demands that appear to impinge on each and every detail of our material existence. It is as if the rather apocalyptic injunction ‘your entire way of life must be modified or else you will disappear as a civilization’ has overwhelmed the narrow set of passions and calculations that go under the name of ‘ecological consciousness’. The camel seems to stand no chance of going through the eye of this needle. When the first tremors of the Apocalypse are heard, it would seem that preparations for the end should require something more than simply using a different kind of lightbulb...”

- Bruno Latour, “Will Non-Humans Be Saved? An Argument in Ecotheology”<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

1. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the dark-colored Peppered Moth was rare. By 1848, in Manchester, England, the number of these dark-colored moths had increased dramatically, outpacing the number of original white mottled Peppered Moths. As a result of color evolution, these moths were adapting to the color of the soot from coal factories shrouding the town’s trees and buildings.

2. The earth now contains a thin layer of radioactive materials throughout its circumference that have been deposited there since 1945 as a result of nuclear weapons testing.<sup>2</sup>

3. The world’s largest urban bat colony of 1.5 million bats lives not in caves or parks, but in Austin, Texas underneath the concrete Congress Avenue Bridge. With a human population of 900,000, Austin often has more bats than people living in the city.

4. In 2013, the Geological Society of America added plastiglomerate, a fusion of natural and manufactured materials that forms a rock-plastic hybrid, to the official geologic record. Plastic will now be part of future fossils.<sup>3</sup>

This studio will confront a radical rethinking of our modern assumptions about Nature through a dissolution of the Nature/Human dialectic and reform of environmental approaches to climate change. We are, indeed, entering the Anthropocene<sup>4</sup>, a new geologic moment in the Earth’s history, in which humans are now the dominant biogeophysical force on Earth. The examples above illustrate just a few weird, strange, and sometimes accidental ways in which natural processes have been hybridized, interrupted, changed, or accelerated by human impact. They highlight how humans and Nature can no longer be considered separate entities, but rather how the Natural world and the human world are

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Cover: Plastiglomerate sample.

1. Bruno Latour, “Will Non-Humans Be Saved? An Argument in Ecotheology,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (September 2009): 459-475.
2. Paul Crutzen, “The Anthropocene,” *Global Change Newsletter* 41.1 (2000): 17-18.
3. Rachel Nuwer, “Future Fossils: Plastic Stone,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2014.
4. A term coined by atmospheric chemist and Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen in 2000.

collapsing into one another. In other words, Nature is you, and you are Nature. Within the context of the Advanced IV “Scales of Environment” sequence, the studio will speculate on proactive, rather than reactive, approaches to architecture, infrastructure, and aesthetics *After Nature*.

The experimental program of the studio project will be the design of an After Nature Institute, an inter-institutional, multidisciplinary project between Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design [RISD] in Providence, Rhode Island. It will perform as a public infrastructure or civic device to provide an institutional public resource to the city of Providence. The After Nature Institute is a large-scale update of RISD’s existing Nature Lab founded in the early 20th century as a cabinet of curiosities for the hands-on study and observation of natural specimens at multiple scales and for the fostering of connections between artistic and scientific study.<sup>5</sup> The Institute will provide spaces for study, reflection, and exhibition of the After Nature condition—the interweaving of natural and human impact on earth within a time of climate change—and the aesthetic and spatio-temporal dimensions of that impact. As part of the design project, students will carefully curate and represent a taxonomy of those objects, specimens, concepts, atmospheres, and ecologies that constitute the condition of After Nature which might range from the nano-scale to the infrastructural highway scale to the toxic waste scale. The project itself will operate on a hybrid scale between building and infrastructure. Students will be expected to articulate a clear thesis in relationship to the design project and the concept of After Nature.

Our testing ground will be in Providence’s Narragansett Bay at the nexus of the Seekonk and Providence Rivers. Located near the expansion of the two campus master plans of Brown University and RISD, as well as the Iway, a \$610 million dollar infrastructure project completed in 2013 which moved a spur of I-195 to update traffic flow and create space for a pedestrian bridge. The site provides an opportunity to navigate an area with potential institutional and public growth while also addressing compromised former industrial buildings and aging public infrastructure such as bridges and waste water treatment facilities.

\* A more detailed syllabus with schedule will be posted online.

“The great promise of something like ecological design rests not in its ability to fashion terminal and partial palliatives for sustaining our degenerate modes of civilized existence, but in its capacity ‘to create concepts that are always new;’ to foment a disposition towards existence that does not materially undermine itself; to stimulate a sincere and audacious competition among various conceptions of life...Isn’t this where the work now lies? In fashioning a way of seeing, an orienting schema, a platform for contemplation and disobedience, or at least a primitive compass for moving about purposively within these new frameworks? In finding and capturing within our language and thought another order of agency, another degree of freedom within a milieu that by design aims to organize, govern, administer, monitor, record, and securitize that freedom?”

- John May, “The Logic of the Managerial Surface”<sup>6</sup>

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5. <http://naturelab.risd.edu>

6. John May, “The Logic of the Managerial Surface,” *Praxis Journal of Writing and Building* 13 (2012): 116-124.

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