

Climates: Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary

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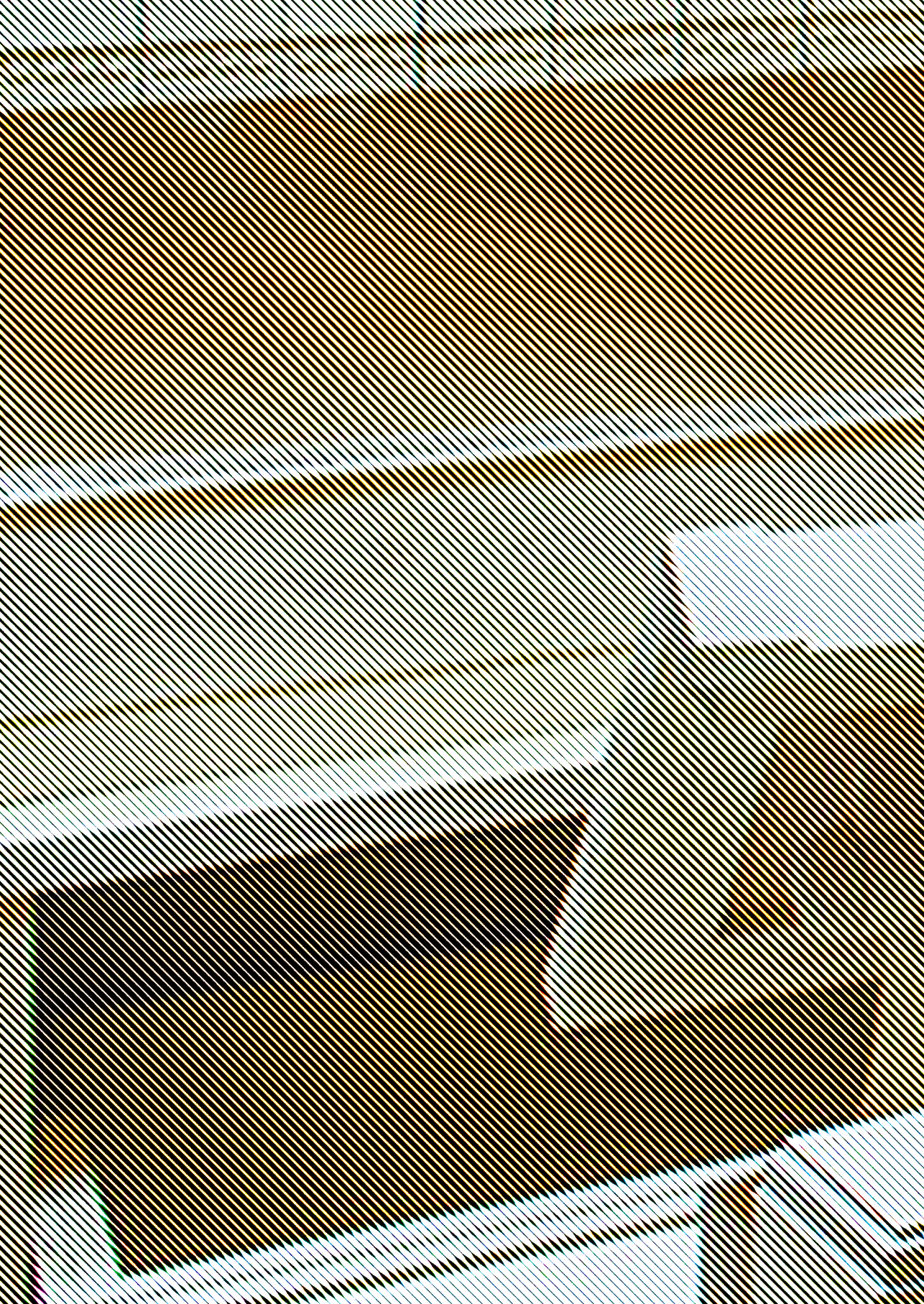
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Measure for the Anthropocene

NEYRAN TURAN

Climate implies environment.

—F. Kenneth Hare, *The Concept of Climate*¹

The city gives the illusion that the earth does not exist.

—Robert Smithson, *Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*²

Introducing his recently published 2009 book *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*, geographer Mike Hulme writes, “Climate change is not ‘a problem’ waiting for ‘a solution.’ It is an environmental, cultural, and political phenomenon that is reshaping the way we think about ourselves, about our societies, and about humanity’s place on Earth ... Rather than catalyzing disagreements about how, when, and where to tackle climate change, we must approach the idea of climate change as an imaginative resource around which our collective and personal identities and projects can and should take shape.”³

Moving the attention away from the widespread frameworks of the managerial techno-fix, apocalyptic scenarios, or nostalgia, Hulme’s work provides important clues for the role of imagination and representation in relation to climate change. Hulme argues that we have to reconsider our discourses about climate change by understanding the mythical stories that come with it:

First is the Edenic myth, which talks about climate change using the language of lament and nostalgia, revealing our desire to return to some simpler, more innocent era. In this myth, climate is cast as part of a fragile natural world that needs to be protected ... Next, the Apocalyptic myth talks about climate in the language of fear and disaster ... and reveals our endemic worry about the future ... Then there is the Promethean myth, named after the Greek deity who stole fire from Zeus and gave it to mortals ... which talks about climate as something we must control, revealing our desire for dominance and mastery over nature but also that we lack the wisdom and humility to exercise it. Finally, the Themisian myth, named after the Greek goddess of natural law and order, talks about climate change using the language of justice and equity. Climate change becomes an idea around which calls for environmental justice are announced, revealing the human urge to right wrongs.⁴

For Hulme, the more we can understand these myths as stories that reflect our own contradictions, the more we will come to terms with our limitations to deal with the climate change and will be in a better position to assess

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F. Kenneth Hare, “The Concept of Climate,” *Geography*, vol. 51, no. 2 (April 1966): 100.

2

Robert Smithson, “Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects” [1968], in *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 82.

3

Mike Hulme, “Why We Disagree About Climate Change,” *The Carbon Yearbook 2010: The Annual Review of Business and Climate Change* (September 2010), 41–42. Hulme is professor of climate and culture in the Department of Geography at King’s College London.

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Mike Hulme, “Climate Change: No Eden No Apocalypse” [2009], in *Exploring Climate Change Through Science and in Society: Understanding Controversy, Inaction, and Opportunity* (London: Routledge, 2013), 205.

its potentials. He writes, "There are different ways of portraying this re-imagination of climate change: as a cultural turn, as a crisis in representation or by suggesting that climate change has become a synecdoche ... a term which 'stands-in' for something else."⁵

Hulme's work is all the more noteworthy if one considers that almost all of these myths have infiltrated architectural and urban discourses recently. So how exactly are we to reimagine climate change beyond these myths? And more specifically, what can design possibly contribute toward these urgent concerns? Rather than limiting the role of climate change for design to an external reality to master or solve, might we see it as an opportunity to prompt a renewed understanding of *realism* for architecture? What follows is a brief elaboration on this question and the disciplinary and cultural potentials of such a provocation.

CLIMATE AS THE NEW *CONDITION*

Humankind cannot bear much reality.

—T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*⁶

In his 1974 article titled "Architecture and Modesty," published in *Casabella*, Andrea Branzi, one of the members of the Italian group Archizoom, wrote:

With the development of the electronic media and mass-culture, architecture has become something of a minor art ... Once considered the most complete and noble of the arts, architecture has lost its pre-eminence not only because of the external difficulties of a political and economic nature that it has always encountered, but because of a deep internal crisis now afflicting it as a result of modifications in the mechanisms of cultural production and of the urban function itself ... Today the city is no longer a cultural "place" but a "*condition*" ... The quality that we ask of the city today has nothing to do with form or composition, but only with the quality of social services and the market.⁷

For those who are familiar with Branzi's work, this is not a surprising choice of words. One thinks of the No-Stop City project of Archizoom in 1969, which declares the demise of architecture and replaces it with total urbanization, i.e., the limitless horizontal carpet of the capitalist urban *condition*. Conceptualized both as a critique of capitalist development and mass consumerism and as an attack toward the progressive and utopian objectives of late modern and neo-avant-garde architectures of the 1960s, No-Stop City's endless repetition of the big-box structures (the interior climates of the supermarket and the factory) was a demystification of the contemporary metropolis's new logics of production and consumption through the representational technique of overload.⁸ Perhaps more importantly, by canceling the distinctions between the interior and the exterior—or work (factory) and consumption (supermarket), city and capitalism, architecture and urbanism—No-Stop City also suggested another kind of collapse, that between *reality* and *realism*. That is, by the relentless repetition of the capitalist city with extreme exacerbation, the realism of the project was nothing more than the excessive and nullifying depiction of external realities. For the No-Stop City, "the city no longer exists any longer outside the system itself: the whole

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Hulme, "Climate Change: No Eden No Apocalypse." For more on this point, see Mike Hulme, "Climate and Its Changes: A Cultural Appraisal," *Geo: Geography and Environment*, vol. 2, no. 1 (January–June 2015): 1–11, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/geo2.5/full>.

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T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (Mariner Books, 1968), 14.

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Andrea Branzi, "Radical Notes 20: Architecture and Modesty," *Casabella* 396 (December 1974): 8. Emphasis added.

8

For a thorough reading of the No-Stop City project in relation to the political climate of Italy, see Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy: Politics of Architecture Within and Against Capitalism* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012), and Pier Vittorio Aureli, "Manfredo Tafuri, Archizoom, Superstudio, and the Critique of Architectural Ideology," in *Architecture and Capitalism: 1845 to the Present*, ed. Peggy Deamer (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 132–147. See also Andrea Branzi, "City, Assembly Line of Social Issues: Ideology and Theory of the Metropolis," *Casabella* 350–351 (1970): 22–34.

visual relationship with reality loses importance as the distance between the subject and the phenomenon collapses. The city no longer ‘represents’ the system, but becomes the system itself.”⁹

Twenty years after Branzi’s announcement of architecture’s demise within the relentless market-driven “conditioning” of the city, another kind of “condition”—this time *field conditions*—would prompt a new call for realism. Reacting to the representational concerns of postmodern architecture and shifting focus to the material systems of the city, the attention to conditions in the nineties was promising for its identification of a new realism in architecture. An important difference between these two formulations is that while Branzi’s emphasis on conditions had declared the *demise* of architecture, the newer notion aimed to reclaim architecture’s agency. Here, the distinction between realism and reality was once again abolished, but this time with an almost opposite premise of instrumentality (instead of critique as it was with Branzi), a realism that aspires to intervene into the very material reality of the city:

Postmodernism in architecture is usually associated with a rediscovery of architecture’s past ... Postmodernism responded not only to a call to re-inscribe architecture into history, it also responded to a contemporary demand for *meaning* in architecture ... Nevertheless, an architecture that works exclusively in the semiotic register and defines its role as critique, commentary, or even “interrogation” ... has in some fundamental way given up on the possibility of ever intervening in that reality. Under the dominance of the representational model, architecture has surrendered its capacity to imagine, to propose, or to construct alternative realities ... Infrastructural urbanism marks a return to instrumentality and a move away from the representational imperative in architecture ... Material practices (ecology and engineering for example) ... do not work primarily with images or meaning, or even with objects, but with *performance*: energy inputs and outputs, the calibration of force and resistance. They are less concerned with what things look like and more concerned with what they can do.¹⁰

Standing as a precursor to contemporary conceptions of environmental performance in architecture and related design fields, the shift in emphasis toward material conditions has been exemplified for the last two decades by explorations of landscape and ecological urbanism, a renewed interest in the politics of territory and infrastructure, as well as the omnipresence of mapping as a methodological tool for “design research.” And, after almost twenty years, we are currently experiencing the evolution of a third stage, presenting climate change as the *new* “new condition.” Ranging from managerial metrics of environmental engineering and maintenance to data accumulation, climate change reveals architecture’s desire to engage with the realities of the world—but runs the risk of limiting its unique capacities to narrow negotiations between data and its management. Correspondingly, rather than reducing architecture’s agency to the managerial, can we instead project an alternative kind of geographic imagination that builds unfamiliar aesthetic couplings between the representational and the material?¹¹ Here, instead of negating the representational for the sake of an emphasis on the material, as it was in the nineties, this geographic imagination would aim at a new kind of materialism—one that couples deep engagement with environmental

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Archizoom Associati, “No-Stop City Residential Parkings: Climatic Universal System,” *Domus* 496 (March 1971): 53.

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Stan Allen, “Infrastructural Urbanism,” in *Points + Lines: Diagrams and Projects for the City* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 49–53. Emphasis in original. See also Sanford Kwinter and Michael Feher’s introduction to *Zone 1/2: The Contemporary City* (New York: Zone Books, 1986), 10–12.

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For more on this point, see Neyran Turan, “How Do Geographic Objects Perform?” in *ARPA 03: Performance* (2015), <http://www.arpajournal.net/how-do-geographic-objects-perform>.

contingencies with its seemingly opposing counterpart, representation. In an era when humans are described as “geological agents,” architecture is a background and a measure against which the world might be read. Like architecture, then, could a new realism represent the world back to itself and instigate potentials beyond?

MORE THAN REALITY, MORE THAN MATERIALITY

Enjoy Nature! I am glad to say that I have entirely lost that faculty. People tell us that Art makes us love Nature more than we loved her before ... My own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition ... It is fortunate for us, however, that Nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have no art at all ... As for the infinite variety of Nature, that is a pure myth. It is not to be found in Nature herself. It resides in the imagination, or fancy, or cultivated blindness of the man who looks at her.

—Oscar Wilde, *Decay of Lying*¹²

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Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying* (London: Penguin Group, 2010), 3.

To be able to talk about an alternative relationship between the material and the representational, one point of departure would be the subtle yet crucial distinction between realism and reality. Instead of fixed and fastened, what if the reality promised to us by the new condition of climate change is nothing more than an evolving agglomeration of representations in themselves, in the form of statistics, measurements, and simulations? First, consider the thin line that exists between observation and agency when it comes to sensing, surveillance, and subjectivity.¹³ Second, thinking of the incomprehensibility of representations of scientific data and the inhumanly large scale of climate change (both in temporal and spatial terms), grasping climate change comes with challenges in terms of making visible its invisibilities. Anthropologist Peter Rudiak-Gould proposes the idea of “constructive visibilism” as a way to go beyond the limitations of “invisibilism” promoted by the physical scientists—who point to the huge gap between the visible reality and climate change as they claim sole authority for judgment—as well as the “visibilism” of activism, which aims to give nonscientists the right to speak about climate change. He writes, “Climate change is neither inherently invisible or inherently visible; it is, like all other objects, *made* visible.”¹⁴ Similarly, Birgit Schneider and Thomas Nocke make us aware of the key role that “climate pictures” play not only “in making the future imaginable and making the unimaginable visible” and point to their political dimension:

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See Paul N. Edwards, *A Vast Machine: Computer Models, Climate Data, and the Politics of Global Warming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010). Also see Ryan Bishop, “Smart Dust and Remote Sensing: The Political Subject in Autonomous Systems,” *Cultural Politics*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2015): 100–110.

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Peter Rudiak-Gould, “We Have Seen It with Our Own Eyes’: Why We Disagree about Climate Change Visibility,” *Weather Climate & Society* 5 (2013): 128. Emphasis in original.

Climate pictures are often produced for normative purposes; they are produced to change what they show: possible futures are blueprinted in order to prevent the futures shown with the help of the curves from coming true ... Because of their normative character, what is special about images depicting climate change is that they have implicitly also become *political images*. This is likewise true for scientific images of climate change. Climate science is facing considerable pressure from all sides: when scientific graphics produced by climatologists started to gain currency in the field of policy, as climate change became a key

issue within risk society, they encountered different values and expectations. Climate change is not only a science subject, it is also at the core of socio-political interests.¹⁵

Moving toward geography, a second point of departure for renewed understandings of the representational and the material is the geological dimension of climate change. As argued by media theorist Jussi Parikka, what if there is no media without geology? From the geological formation and resource extraction of material to its final destination as electronic waste, Parikka depicts media as a geological entity, in that its materiality is derived from the chemical elements that form the earth. He reminds us that “data mining might be a leading hype term for our digital age of the moment, but it is enabled only by the sort of mining that we associate with the ground and its ungrounding. Digital culture starts in the depths and deep times of the planet.”¹⁶ Parikka points to the shift of our society’s expanding material usage, especially over the last fifty years. Where human society used to use less than twelve basic materials such as wood, brick, iron, copper, gold, silver, and a few plastics, we are now at a point when even a single electronic chip is composed of more than sixty different material elements.¹⁷ Parikka writes:

Instead of networking, we need to remember the importance of copper or optical fiber for such forms of communication; instead of a blunt discussion of “the digital,” we need to pick it apart and remember that also mineral durations are essential ... Besides the materials of production, media history is a story of relations between the organic and nonorganic and the waste products emerging from the use and misuse of materials.¹⁸

If realism is more than reality and materiality is necessarily geological, what role does representation play in this dilemma, especially in the context of climate change? Consider artist and geographer Trevor Paglen’s 2009 photograph *DMSP 5B/F4 from Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation*, which depicts Pyramid Lake with the white orbiting lines of the now defunct but still orbiting 1973 military meteorological satellite. This photograph operates on several registers relative to these questions. First, it reveals the political dimension of imaging, and the thin line that exists between military, geological, and meteorological exploration. Second, by juxtaposing the iconic, pyramidal tufa rocks (which give the lake its name) with the planetary ruins of the dead satellite orbits circulating the earth, his photograph points to a subtle distinction between reality and realism (realism understood as more than depicting reality, in this case phenomena visible to the human eye). By expanding the material *reality* of the earth to include the invisible outer space along with its technological waste, Paglen’s images depict an unfamiliar coupling of material and representational, making evident our need for an expanded geologic realism.

Perhaps most striking, however, is Paglen’s reworking of Timothy H. O’Sullivan’s famous 1867 photograph titled *Tufa Domes, Pyramid Lake*, taken in his capacity as official photographer of the famous King Survey, a geological expedition of the 40th parallel north of California, Nevada, and Wyoming. While Sullivan’s photograph centers on the tufa domes and main tufa pyramid itself, in Paglen’s photograph, the view is centered both on the pyramid and the orbiting satellite tracks, pointing to the doubling of two

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Birgit Schneider and Thomas Nocke, eds., *Image Politics of Climate Change: Visualizations, Imaginations, Documentations* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript-Verlag, 2014), 15. Emphasis added.

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Jussi Parikka, *The Anthroscene* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2014), Kindle edition, 861.

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Parikka, *The Anthroscene*, 227–229. Requoted from T. E. Graedel, E. M. Harper, N. T. Nassar, and Barbara K. Reck, “On the Materials Basis of Modern Society,” *PNAS* (October 2013), early edition: 1. See also Jennifer Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

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Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 4, 26.



Trevor Paglen, *DMSP 5B/F4 from Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation* (Military Meteorological Satellite; 1973-054A), C-print, 2009. Courtesy the artist, Metro Pictures, Altman Siegel, and Galerie Thomas Zander; © the artist.

kinds of geological objects as ruins of the earth—one extending to the underground, the other one far above the atmosphere. Here, by referencing an important precedent from the history of photography in relation to geologic expedition, Paglen's photograph portrays a disciplinary specificity as well as a speculative rigor for investigations yet to come. If discussions around climate change and the Anthropocene are simply telling us that the earth no longer exists in the ways that it did before thanks to the indisputable effects of human activity, what would be the architectural equivalent of this disciplinary specificity and speculative rigor in the context of climate change?

SLIGHTLY (UN)FAMILIAR AS MEASURE

On the one hand, it is perfectly true that if what you want is changes in policy, you are not likely to get them from art. On the other hand, if what you want is a vision of the structures that produce both the policies we have got and the desire for alternatives, art is almost the only place you can find it.

—Walter Benn Michaels, 2011¹⁹

The idea of the (un)familiar is pertinent here precisely because of its specific legacy within the history of realism in architecture. From the “de-familiarization” project of modernism to the re-appropriation of the familiar during the 1960s and 1970s—through discussions on reality-as-found, typology, and the ordinary, as seen for instance in the work of Mathias Ungers, Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo Rossi, and Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi—various relationships between the familiar and the unfamiliar have defined architecture's framing of the world and its cultural significance.

With this background in mind, the relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar merits closer attention when one considers its renewed relevance within contemporary architecture and urbanism. On the one hand, one can speculate on the unfamiliar interpretations of what is considered to be familiar, ordinary, or banal architectural qualities of the city. Here, an endless horizon of suburban tract homes, shotgun houses, “typical plans,” cloudy curtain walls, office tower atriums, and big-box warehouses and other forms of commonplace or vernacular architectural production are not simply foregrounded but are understood with a renewed rigor. On the other hand, in an attempt to expand our disciplinary imaginary, one can also speculate on the use of familiar architectural strategies on what is considered to be unfamiliar within a disciplinary setting. Here, all that belongs to the environment yet remains invisible comes into focus, gaining a particular relevance—perhaps in the same manner that Schinkel found beauty in the English factories, Gropius in the American grain silos, and Le Corbusier in the ocean liner. Accordingly, the territorial geometries of agricultural and resource extraction fields, agricultural barns and grain silos, expanded infrastructures of resource and matter, and geological layers of the earth draw a particular attention. In both formulations of the (un)familiar, reality is filtered through a new realism and we are enabled to project renewed relationships between the material and the representational. Thought this way, rather than contextualizing the relevance of climate change for architecture as another external reality—or “condition”—to be accommodated, and quickly associating realism with reality, I propose that we contextualize the concept in the lineage of the (un)familiar.

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Walter Benn Michaels, “Interview with Walter Benn Michaels on Photography and Politics,” *NONSITE 2* (June 2011), <http://nonsite.org/editorial/interview-with-walter-benn-michaels-on-photography-and-politics>.



Lauren Marsolier, *Transition series, part 3*, 2012. © the artist.



Roxy Paine, *Carcass*, 2013; birch, maple, glass, and fluorescent lighting. Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery.

The true potential of such an investigation on the idea of the(un)familiar in relation to climate change would be in its capacity to offer unconventional relationships between the real and the abstract, and between the disciplinary and the cultural, rather than resorting to extreme dualities. In other words, while aiming to build a nuanced relationship between reality and realism, we would then be able to forgo the project of hyper-realism (think: righteous scenario planning or environmental engineering of data and performance), hyper-surrealism (think: architectural sci-fi), or hyper-abstraction (think: white noise), and instead project a *slightly (un)familiar* realism as a form of strategic abstraction, i.e., a subtle and unexpected separation from reality.

Rather than probing estrangement for its own sake or negating realism altogether, one can position this slightly unfamiliar realism as an alternative attitude that projects new relationships between the material and the

representational. Think of the near-plausibility suggested in photographer Lauren Marsolier's slightly distorted realisms of everyday life that appear in the carefully calibrated digital collages of her *Transition Series*, or of David Reed's paintings inserted anachronistically into the bedroom scene in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, or of Roxy Paine's meticulous rendering of the banal in his scaled diorama of a fast-food kitchen, produced entirely from birch and maple wood in his *Carcass*. What all of these works share is an abstraction that reinforces reality by pushing back.

Likewise, the potential of a slightly unfamiliar realism for architecture in the context of climate change would be in its carefully calibrated degree of separation from the real, in order to achieve a much deeper and nuanced engagement with reality through the limits and potentials of architectural specificity and its speculative rigor. Realism and abstraction need each other. It is time to consider materialism and representation together as well.

Neyran Turan is an assistant professor of architecture at the University of California, Berkeley and a partner at NEMESTUDIO, a design collaborative based in the San Francisco Bay Area which has recently received the 2016 Architecture League New York Prize for Young Architects. Turan's work draws on the relationship between geography and design to highlight their interaction for new aesthetic and political trajectories within architecture and urbanism. She is founding chief-editor of the Harvard GSD journal *New Geographies*. Her most recent projects include her solo installation titled *STRAIT*, which was on view at SALT (Istanbul) in May–August 2015, and her speculative design project Museum of Lost Volumes (2015), for which she received an Honorable Mention Award in *Blank Space: When Architecture Tells a Story Competition*.



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