

Broken Nature, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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Broken Nature

In the Western world, art and nature have been at odds for a long time. During the seventeenth century, artworks focusing on plants, animals, and landscape were relegated to the lower ranks of creative production by Italian and French academicians. History, mythology, and religion were considered much more important because they reassessed our centrality as humans. Our anthropocentric obsession predates this historical moment, but its art historical theorization, which roughly coincided with similar affirmations in philosophy and literature, had a tremendous impact on our existential myopia. The mountains of flowers cascading from opulent vases in Baroque still life paintings are all about us, not flowers; they are symbolic mirrors in which we contemplated our virtues and our dreams, and came to terms with our fears of the passing of time and the fading of youth. Is it much of a surprise that we currently find ourselves on the brink of an irremediable climate crisis and interrelated mass extinction? Of course not. But while art is not the cause of the Anthropocene, painting and other media have been symptoms of an underlying condition that has plagued most of what we call Modernity. Art's complicity in the marginalization of nature in culture is undeniable.

That said, artists are not the only ones to blame. Institutions and art historians have for centuries promoted anthropocentrism while marginalizing artists whose work focused on environmental degradation, ecology, and biodiversity. But the situation is changing, and changing fast. The popularization of the word Anthropocene has certainly worked wonders in awakening the artworld's interest in the state of our planet. Innovative perspectives by contemporary thinkers like Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others, are beginning to inform the work of today's artists.

But the all-important question still stands: Can art save the planet? The answer is most likely "no." Not because it's too late, but because since the twentieth century most modern art has intentionally isolated itself from the real world. And in recent years contemporary art has too keenly embraced hyper-highbrow Conceptualism as its baseline, nurturing an unnecessarily conflicted relationship with beauty that has discouraged the neophyte and alienated the non-specialist museum visitor. In order to instigate real change, artists and institutions need to reach out to vast audiences in engaging and accessible ways.

An exhibition like *Broken Nature*, currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), might provide a blueprint for how museums can begin to make a real difference. Originally presented at the XXII Triennale di Milano in 2019, this iteration of the exhibition is organized by Paola Antonelli and Anna Berkhardt and features 45 works by an international cohort of practitioners straddling the realms of art and design. The blurring of boundaries between these historically fraught categories throughout the exhibition is certainly one of its most pronounced strengths. The focus on design keeps *Broken Nature* grounded and prevents the works from overlooking the problem of sustainability, which is at the core of the issues being addressed. The exhibition's more pronounced artistic components provide valuable opportunities to poetically consider urgent and often unnoticed dimensions in which human/non-human relations unfold. As Antonelli sees it: "From reviving the coral reefs that are bleaching at unprecedented speed due to increasingly warm waters, to contemplating scenarios for feeding an overpopulated planet, *Broken Nature* argues that design and architecture can and have been instrumental in jump-starting constructive change on different levels, for different contexts and circumstances, and across different spans of time."

Aki Inomata

Think Evolution #1: Kiku-ichi (Ammonite), 14,5 × 12 × 6 cm, 2016–2017.

Photo : courtesy of the artist and MAHO KUBOTA GALLERY

Alex Goad

MARS, 188 × 177,8 × 172,7 cm (variable), 2013, installation view, the XXII Triennale di Milano, 2019.

Photo : Gianluca di Iola, courtesy of Triennale di Milano

Kelly Jazvac

Plastiglomerates, 2013.

Photo : Jeff Elstone

Julia Lohmann

Ok! Naganode, 2013.

Photo : Robert Gerhardt, © 2020 The Museum of Modern Art



Antonelli's curation leverages the notion of "restorative design" as an opportunity to correct the course of events and reconfigure not only the way we think about nature, but how we can begin to live as part of it. Overall, *Broken Nature* makes good use of contemporary strategies of the sublime that must be deployed with care to engage viewers without sensationalizing the subject. This ecologically-focused exhibition faces the arduous task of providing information while instilling curiosity for the natural world.

The near-invisible and the exceedingly fragile are addressed in Mandy Barker's *Beyond Drifting: Imperfectly Known Animals* (2015–16), which features photographs of microscopic plastics found in seawater, and Aki Inomata's *Think Evolution #1: Kiku-ishi (Ammonite)* (2016–17), a 3D-printed shell for an octopus that elegantly traces millennia of evolutionary design in biodiversity. Alex Goad's *MARS—Modular Artificial Reef Structure* (2013) demonstrates how 3D modelling and printing are also central to the possibility of farming corals to repopulate reefs, while Christien Meindertsma's *PIG 05049* (2007) complicates the discourses around animal rights and veganism by cataloging 85 everyday objects that contain raw materials gathered from one pig.

Given the exhibition's theme, it might not come as a surprise that the versatility and biodegradability of materials have been given in-depth consideration. In Kelly Jazvac's *Plastiglomerates* (2013), a body of work produced in collaboration with geologist Patricia Corcoran and oceanographer Charles Moore, the rock-like objects formed by the fusion of beach sediment and plastic debris burnt in campfires on Kamilo Beach in Hawaii, stand as a reminder of our ability to deeply interfere with the planet's geological order. Simultaneously fascinating and horrifying, these artificial rocks work as a cunning visual metaphor of

the Anthropocene. Julia Lohmann's *Oki Naganode* (2013) sculptural installation, which employs dried naga-kombu seaweed, points more positively at currently untapped and more sustainable opportunities to radically rethink materiality beyond the ubiquitousness of plastic.

While MoMA's iteration of this exhibition is half the size of the first staging at the XXII Triennale di Milano, *Broken Nature* still presents numerous opportunities to engage with non-anthropocentric thinking and develop a more nuanced understanding of our current relationship with the natural world. The exhibition is one of the most interesting, informative, and thought-provoking to be staged at a time that will be remembered as the beginning of the ecological turn in the arts.

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