Elemental Ecologies (Rome, 28-30 Oct 26)

Rome, Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, Oct 28–30, 2026
Deadline: Apr 15, 2026

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Elemental Ecologies: Art Histories of Situatedness and Drift from the Great Acceleration.

The diversity of the universe has often been rationalised by fragmenting it into discrete units – from the elements of the Pre-Socratics to Dmitri Mendeleev's periodic table of elements. In reality, of course, these fundamental constituents are never truly isolated; they are continuously reacting and combining across time and space. Since the mid-twentieth century, human activities have accelerated this process, triggering a profound reshaping of the composition of the Earth's surface at an unprecedented pace. Vast quantities of soil and minerals are extracted and transported globally to fuel agriculture and industry, while synthetic chemicals are engineered in laboratories, reprocessing molecules in new ways. As a result of these monumental transformations, the composition of the atmosphere has been dramatically altered, with cascading effects on natural cycles and regulatory systems. The environmental historians J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke have described this epoch as the 'Great Acceleration' – one in which local and planetary scales are inextricably entangled, and humanity has fundamentally shaped the Earth's geology.

We are concerned with how these elemental transformations are manifested in visual and material culture in the second half of the twentieth century, and how art histories might be reframed to address them. Under the aegis of the discipline's 'material turn', as well as in advancement of environmental agendas, scholars have probed the relationship between artworks and the global circulation of goods and resources. These enquiries have already proven to be productive in accounts of early modern, nineteenth century, and contemporary art, yet there is scope for further research into works made between 1945 and 2000 – a period which contributed significantly to the onset of the current environmental crisis. Given the extent to which so many artists from this era worked with novel materials, and embraced experimental techniques and media, we want to explore how their innovations fostered, reflected or challenged the destabilisation of planetary matter and epistemologies underpinning those transformations.

What models might art historians adopt for acknowledging both the locatedness of artistic practices and their deep entanglement with planetary systems? What are the possibilities and the limits for the discipline when thinking through humanity's impact on the Earth's elemental components? How do the material histories of drift, movement, and transformation coexist with histories of belonging and situatedness?

In addressing these questions, our seminar builds on recent research in cognate disciplines within the environmental humanities that have explored ways to narrate transformations of the Earth at

both local and planetary scales, as in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Jessifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena, and Feifei Zhou's Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene (2024), or Dimitri Papadopolus, Natasha Mayer, and Maria Puig de La Bellacasa's Reactivating Elements: Chemistry, Ecology, Practice (2021). Contemporary artists have also tracked the trajectories of elements across sites, ecosystems, and socio-political contexts, such as Katrin Hornek, who examines the circulation of artificial nitrogen in Plant Plant (2022), Forensic Architecture which explores toxic atmospheres in Cloud Studies (2022), or Anaïs Tonderau, who created a taxonomy of radioactive plants in The Chernobyl Herbarium (2016). Such projects contribute to the storying of matter, revealing the entanglements of politics and ecologies.

There are many viable models for narrating the ecologies of art's constituent elements during the early decades of the Great Acceleration. This seminar will interrogate them and serve as a foundation for a future publication concerning art-historical approaches to the elemental ecologies of art produced after 1945. To submit a proposal, please send an abstract (300 words maximum) and a bio (200 words) to Edward Christie (esc21@st-andrews.ac.uk), Elisabetta Rattalino (elisabetta.rattalino@biblhertz.it), and Alistair Rider (ajr1@st-andrews.ac.uk) by 15 April 2026. Selected contributors will be notified by May 15, 2026. Funding is available to support sustainable travel and accommodation expenses.

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