Modes of Compression (Florence/online, 12-13 May 26)

Online / I Tatti and KHI Florenz, Florence, Italy, May 12–13, 2026

Ruth Ezra

Modes of Compression: Aesthetics, Operations, Formats

Like the bellows of an accordion, many human-made objects are designed to compress: to respond to external conditions through a series of contractions and expansions. Though the term COMPRESSION is most often used today to theorize digital operations (e.g. formats, algorithms, codecs, bitrates), its historical, material, and aesthetic dimensions stretch far wider, encompassing cylinder seals, lithography stones, collection inventories, and elided narratives of architectural reliefs. This interdisciplinary conference aims to explore these and other precursors in dialogue with contemporary conceptions of summarization, abstracting, code, and storage. We consider compression both as a technical procedure and as a mode through which aesthetic meaning takes shape amid constraints — whether material, ecological or economic. Paper topics span temporalities, localities, and media, from medieval pyxides to film stock, nineteenth-century books to DNA bunnies, hand knitting to mass production. As we convene in the city of schiacciata, special attention will be paid to the squashed techniques of Florentine sculptors and to pietra paesina quarried from the Arno riverbed.

Organized by Ruth Ezra, Ella Klik, Anna-Maria Meister, and Anna Luise Schubert.

With support from I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies; Lise Meitner Group "Coded Objects," Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz - Max-Planck-Institut; Association for Art History; School of Art History, University of St Andrews; Henry Moore Foundation; and the STAIRS Nascent Partnership Fund.

DAY 1 - MAY 12 - VILLA I TATTI
Villa I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, Via di Vincigliata 26

10:30 Coffee

10:45 RUTH EZRA (I Tatti / University of St Andrews)
Introductory Remarks

SESSION 1: TWO-AND-A-HALF DIMENSIONS
Chair: Baptiste Tochon-Danguy (I Tatti)

11:00 NICOLE PULICHENE (Hood College)

Premodern Pyxides and the Dogged Pursuit of Ivory

11:30 CHRISTOPHER S. WOOD (NYU)
Epitome of a Journey

12:00 ALINA PAYNE (I Tatti / Harvard University)
Plane and Simple: Architecture and the Seduction of Relief

12:30 Discussion

13:00 Buffet Lunch

SESSION 2: SPOOLING
Chair: Steven Lauritano (I Tatti / Leiden University)

14:30 KIRSTY SINCLAIR DOOTSON (University College London)
The Film Print: Compression and Reversal

15:00 MICHAEL FACIEJEW (Dalhousie University)
Microfilm and Machine\Learning in the Postcolonized World

15:30 Discussion

INTERLUDE: EXPANSION
16:00 SAMIR BOUMEDIENE (CNRS)
Expansion: A Thermodynamic Counterpoint

16:30 Tea

SESSION 3: THREADS
Chair: Paul Galvez (I Tatti)

16:45 ANNA OLSZEWSKA (AGH University of Krakow)
Laced Memory: Data Compression as Textile

17:15 ELLA KLIK (Bar-Ilan University)
DNA Bunnies: Volume | Density | Plenitude

17:45 Discussion

18:15 Aperitivi

DAY 2 - MAY 13 - KHI FLORENZ
Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, Palazzo Grifoni Budini Gattai, Via dei Servi, 51

09:30 Coffee

09:45 ANNA-MARIA MEISTER (KHI Florenz / KIT Karlsruhe)
Introduction - Coded Objects as Compression

SESSION 4: FLUIDITY AND FORCE
Chair: Bianca de Divitiis (KHI Florenz / Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)

10:00 FRANK FEHRENBACH (Universität Hamburg)
Under Pressure: Bodies and Liquids, c. 1290-1650

10:30 MARIKA TAKANISHI KNOWLES (University of St Andrews)
Water Pressure: Intaglio Printmaking and Painting on pietra paesina in Florence c. 1600

11:00 Discussion

11:30 Coffee

SESSION 5: CRITICISM AND CANON
Chair: Anna-Maria Meister (KHI Florenz / KIT Karlsruhe)

11:45 JEREMY MELIUS (University of York)
Erosion and Compression in Ruskin's Santa Croce

12:15 MALIKA MASKARENIC (Universität Bern)
Canon as Compression

12:45 Discussion

13:15 Vegan Lunch at Casa Zuccari (Via Giuseppe Giusti, 49)

SESSION 6: MODELS
Chair: Anna Luise Schubert (KHI Florenz)

14:30 MARÍA MATILDE MORALES (I Tatti / Harvard University)
Boccaccio's Summaries: Narratological Compression, Comprehension, and Comparison

15:00 CARLOS SPOERHASE (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität)
Compressing "Capital," Volume 1: Modes of Abridging Marxism

15:30 Discussion

16:00 MAREK JANCOVIC (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)
Response | AV1 TOOK EVERYTHING FROM ME

16:15 Break

IT'S A MATCH!
Jens Schröter and Rosa Menkman on Compression Artifacts
Introduced by Lise Meitner Group "Coded Objects" (KHI Florenz)

17:00 JENS SCHRÖTER (Universität Bonn)
Compander: History and Aesthetics

17:30 ROSA MENKMAN (Independent / Amsterdam)

Resolving Compression

18:00 Discussion

Talks will be live-streamed; Zoom details to follow. For links, please bookmark:

Day 1: https://itatti.harvard.edu/event/symposium-modes-compression-aesthetics-operations-formats
Day 2: https://www.khi.fi.it/en/aktuelles/veranstaltungen/2026/05/modes-of-compression.php

Reference:
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