D’après nature (Paris, 8-9 Oct 26)

German Centre for Art History Paris (DFK Paris), Oct 8–09, 2026

Franziska Solte

“D’après nature”: Practice, Theory and the Limits of an Artistic Paradigm.

At the close of a two-year research programme devoted to the theme of “Nature” (2024–2026), under the direction of Peter Geimer and Pierre Wat, the fellows of the German Centre for Art History (DFK Paris) are organising an international conference devoted to examining the artistic principle of d’après nature (“from life,” “from nature” or “after nature”).

The history of Western art has continually measured its own practice against a formula whose apparent self-evidence conceals a profound instability. To examine the phrase d’après nature is to posit a model, a form of fidelity, and a distance; yet each of these terms eludes precise definition as soon as it is subjected to closer scrutiny. To take nature as a model raises a question that European art treatises have repeatedly reformulated since the thirteenth century: what can it mean to work sur le vif—ad vivum, nach dem Leben, or naer het leven—when the model itself resists any straightforward definition, whether it be a fertile landscape, a corpse, a taxidermied animal or a plant already withered at the moment the artist attempts to capture it? The living and its absence converge in a shared imperative to record and apprehend, while the preposition après (“after”) inscribes within the formula a temporality that is at once ambiguous and productive. The work comes after nature: it preserves its trace and becomes its remembrance. In the age of the Anthropocene, this seemingly simple temporal dimension takes on a new and more serious significance, that of the memory of a world in the process of disappearing.

The instability of the phrase is not merely semantic; it is also institutional and political. From the seventeenth century onward, academies structured the teaching of drawing first from prints, then from plaster casts, and finally from the living model, paradoxically placing the “natural” at the summit of an entirely artificial pedagogical edifice. This progression reveals that the claim to truth attached to the principle of working from life or “from nature” is never free from a degree of construction—or even of betrayal—of the reality it purports to capture. The same ambiguity runs through the scientific and colonial uses of the formula, in which drawing, casting, or photographing “from nature” formed part of knowledge-producing apparatuses serving broader structures of domination. The choice of colour applied to the elements represented likewise contributes to producing the appearance of self-evident hierarchies that are, in reality, constructed.

Without restriction as to period or geographical area, this conference seeks to investigate how the principle of d’après nature was constituted and institutionalised, and how it has subsequently evolved, until it has, in the present day, become an “after nature”—a formulation whose double chronological and epistemological meaning speaks to our contemporary condition.

PROGRAMME

Thursday 8 October 2026

14.00 Welcome
Peter Geimer (DFK Paris) and Pierre Wat (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne)

14.15 Introduction
Clara Lespessailles (École du Louvre – EPHE / DFK Paris), Clémence Fort (École normale supérieure – PSL / DFK Paris), Claire Sourdin (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne / DFK Paris)

SESSION 1: THE ORIGINS AND INSTITUTIONALISATION OF A PRINCIPLE
Chair: Clara Lespessailles

14.30 « Ad vivum », « Naer het leven », « D'après nature ». A Protean Promise and its Shifts between the 14th and 17th Centuries
Robert Felfe (University of Graz)

15.10 « Ad vivum vs. Allégorie? »
Sachiko Kusukawa (University of Cambridge)

15.50 – 16.20 Break

16.20 The White Rainbow. Imitation of Nature as a Search for Nature
Frank Fehrenbach (University of Hamburg)

17.00 Naturalism and Camouflage. Towards an ethology of image-making
Caroline van Eck (University of Cambridge)

17.40 – 18.30 Break

ARTIST TALK
18.30 Jérémie Lenoir en conversation avec Pierre Wat (en français)

Friday 9 October 2026

SESSION 2: SCIENTIFIC PRACTICES AND FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE
Chair: Clémence Fort

9.30 « Un dessin fidèle est éternel comme la nature ». The nature of the pathological image in Jean Cruveilhier's Anatomie pathologique
Mechthild Fend (Goethe University Frankfurt)

10.10 Rosa Luxemburg's Herbarium. On the Preservation of « Nature » as a Mode of Self-Care
Michael Klipphahn-Karge (Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig – HGB)

10.50 – 11.20 Break

11.20 Le moulage d’après nature : objectivité mécanique et régimes de visibilité des races humaines dans l’anthropologie physique du XIXe siècle (1830–1870)
Nancy Ba (Sorbonne Université, Centre André-Chastel)

12.00 – 14.00 Lunch break

SESSION 3: CRISES AND BEYOND
Chair: Claire Sourdin

14.00 Au-delà de l’imitation : l’appel de la matière
Sarah Ohana (Université Paris Cité)

14.40 Seeing at a distance? Claims to lifelikeness in early modern European travel accounts
Thomas Balfe (The Warburg Institute London)

15.20 – 15.50 Break

15.50 Histoires naturelles du cinéma
Alice Leroy (Université Gustave Eiffel)

16.30 Exhibitions After Nature: Observations of the Ecological Crisis on Display
Friederike Schäfer (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities)

17.10 End of the conference

Reference:
CONF: D’après nature (Paris, 8-9 Oct 26). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 13, 2026 (accessed Nov 24, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/54228>.