

Observatory Effects: Report from the Bay of Naples

Lecture by An Tairan, Princeton University School of Architecture

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Aula Mollino, Castello del Valentino, Politecnico di Torino

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Eugène Sevaistre, “Naples pris du chateau St. Elme,” albumen silver stereograph, in *Souvenirs stéréoscopiques d’Italie* (ca. 1859). Courtesy of Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

As the tale goes, a few limestone blocks from Vesuvian ejecta delivered the fatal blow to what was once hailed as Earth’s oldest creature. Unearthed in 1858 within the ancient limestones of eastern Canada, the so-called *Eozoön canadense*, or “dawn-animal of Canada,” ignited a storm of attention as the presumed “firstling of creation.” In 1893, Henry James Johnston-Lavis, a Naples-based English medical doctor and self-taught geologist, “incidentally” revealed its inorganic nature. He observed that the volcanic specimens from Monte Somma at Vesuvius’s ridge bore petrographic

features that matched—and even surpassed—the Canadian specimens’ “freshness,” conclusively proving that magmatic heat and pressure alone could form the “Eozoönal” structure. What had bolstered Ernst Haeckel’s *Urschleim* (or “primordial slime”) hypothesis was thus debunked as an unusual rock.

This intertwining of observation and knowledge production reveals a larger paradigm in which human observation—most often exercised through the field observatory—serves not merely to record but to create knowledge. In examining a set of burgeoning observational sciences at the Bay of Naples in the mid-19th century, volcanology and marine biology in particular, this talk posits that field observatories, poised at the intersection of natural phenomena and scientific interpretation, shape our understanding of life and matter alike, often producing truths as much as they reveal them. It is through these “observatory effects” that the boundary between facts and artifacts becomes porous: observation generates its own constructs, yielding insights that can illuminate or mislead. The observatory, then, is not a passive site but a crucible where nature is interpreted, transmuted, and sometimes misunderstood, underscoring the powerful, if ambivalent, role of observation in framing the origins and boundaries of knowledge itself.

The event is coordinated by Aurora Riviezzo (postdoctoral fellow in History of Architecture, Department of Architecture and Design, Politecnico di Torino).

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Bio

An Tairan is a Postgraduate Research Associate at Princeton University School of Architecture, where he received a PhD in History and Theory of Architecture in 2024. His dissertation targets a group of research institutions and field stations established for the scientific observation of nature in mid-to-late nineteenth-century Italy. For his dissertation research, he receives a Citation of Special Recognition of the 2023 Graham Foundation Carter Manny Writing Award.

Tairan holds a bachelor’s degree in Urban Planning from Peking University and an MDes in History and Philosophy of Design with distinction from Harvard GSD. His articles have appeared in publications including *Lapis*, *Log*, *e-flux Architecture*, *Pidgin*, *Time+Architecture*. His research has been supported by grants from the Graham Foundation, Canadian Centre for Architecture, the Lemmermann Foundation for Research in Rome, Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, the High Meadows Environmental Institute of Princeton University, and a Harvard University Frederick Sheldon Traveling Fellowship.

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