

Beauty After Style. How Architecture Composes the Commons // Belleza Sin Estilo. Cómo la Arquitectura compone lo Común

When the communities of Xholobeni resisted the extraction of titanium from the dunes they inhabit along South Africa's Wild Coast, they were not defending nature. They were defending the possibility of a common world. (Ayers, 2023)

This distinction matters.

Nature can be protected.

A common world can only be continuously enacted.

The struggle at Xholobeni was never environmental, nor simply political. It was simultaneously geological and constitutional, ancestral and computational, atmospheric and financial.

Titanium-bearing sands, grazing practices, microbial metabolisms, multinational corporations, customary law, logistics infrastructures, community assemblies, atmospheric circulation and global speculation did not merely interact. They continuously *transscalarized* one another. (Jaque, 2020)

Together they produced the conditions through which that territory could be inhabited.

This was the proposition explored through our project *Xholobeni Yards*. (Jaque and Office for Political Innovation, 2023a, 2023b) Rather than documenting an environmental conflict, the project reconstructed an architectural composition dispersed across radically incompatible scales. Titanium extracted from Xholobeni enters industrial supply chains before becoming the photocatalytic coating applied to self-cleaning architectural glass, including the façades of developments such as Hudson Yards in New York. The immaculate transparency celebrated there cannot be separated from the dust suspended over Xholobeni. They are not distant realities connected by commerce. They are reciprocal materializations of the same architectural event.



XHOLOBENI YARDS. Titanium and the Planetary Making of SHININESS / DUSTINESS

A work by:
Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation

With Nohnle Mbthuma Forslund, Siyabonga Ndovela, Margie Pretorius, Sinagugu Zukulu, ACC (Amadiba Crisis Committee) and SWC (Sustaining the Wild Coast), Steve Hoffe

Architecture no longer exists where it appears.

Buildings are no longer objects occupying sites.

They are condensations of transscalar negotiations through which minerals become finance, finance becomes logistics, logistics becomes architecture, architecture becomes atmosphere, and atmosphere returns as politics. (Jaque, 2025)

This forces a different question. What becomes of beauty once architecture itself has ceased to coincide with its appearance?



'XHOLOBENI YARDS. Titanium and the Planetary Making of SHININESS / DUSTINESS' is a research-based installation presented at the Arsenale of the 18th Venice Architecture Biennale curated by Lesley Lokko. It is a collective effort by a network of activist and community representatives from Xholobeni (South Africa), experts in seismographs and transduction from Poland, researchers, sound editors, prop makers and the New York and Madrid teams of the Office for Political Innovation led by Andrés Jaque; to intervene the very problematic addiction to SHININESS in architecture now. This transnational distributed alliance has been needed to respond to a reality that gains its extractive capacity from its geographical and scalar distribution.

The SHININESS of the Hudson Yards in Manhattan is the result of TITANIUM-made coatings, being applied on self-cleaning glass and facades to enact the immutability of corporate global hegemonies, both aesthetically and through societal, material and ecological extractivism. The SHININESS of the global north is at the expense of Xholobeni, a small area on the East Coast of South Africa, where titanium can be found. By removing the titanium from the sand in locations like Xholobeni, the sand becomes light and volatile, making dusty the sites of extraction. DUSTINESS affects humans' and more-than-humans' health, makes farming impossible and, ultimately, forces communities and ecosystems to migrate and die. But the Xholobeni people resist extraction by singing together songs where they celebrate their entanglement with lands and ecosystems. This installation mobilizes architecture's capacity to allow human bodies to feel the violence other bodies sense through human extractivism and to provide material and societal settings for mutual care and resistance to extractivism. The dissident temporary, ecological and spatial constructs these songs are part of, are the architectures where the future, a desirable future, resides.

For centuries beauty was attached to objects. Harmony, proportion, formal coherence, expressive intensity, style; all assumed that beauty belonged to what appeared. More recently, architectural discourse displaced beauty from objects toward experience. Beauty became the vitality of public squares, the conviviality of markets, the atmosphere of interiors, the density of social life. The object disappeared, but the human observer remained.

Beauty simply migrated from form to experience.

Neither formulation survives Xholobeni.

Architecture no longer exists where it is seen.

Politics no longer unfolds where it is debated. (Jaque, 2017)

Both emerge through distributed processes extending across extractive landscapes, atmospheric chemistry, financial infrastructures, microbial ecologies, computational systems, legal apparatuses and planetary logistics.

Beauty therefore cannot remain attached either to form or to experience.

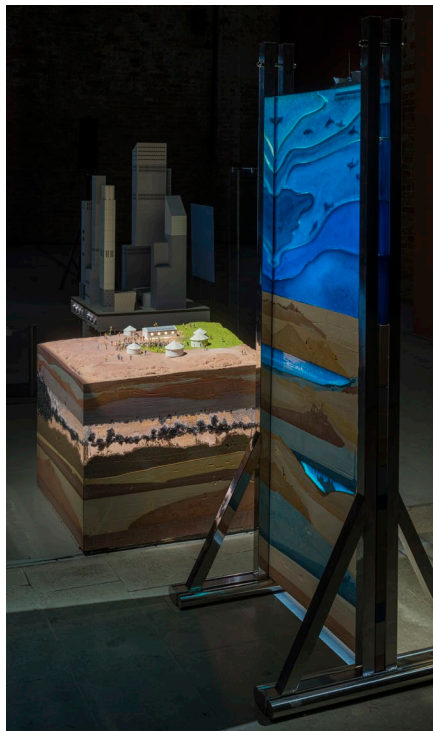
Beauty is not what architecture looks like.

Beauty is not even what architecture feels like.

Beauty is what allows architecture to become a common world.

Not because beauty represents that world.

Because beauty composes it.



José Luis Espejo, sound research and direction Farah Alkhoury, research and field recordings Roberto González, coordination and design Vivian Rotie y Pablo Sáiz del Río, fabrication Jorge Cañón, AV consultant Ignacio Farpón, lighting consultant Wojciech Gajek and Michal Malinowsky, seismic recordings Walter Ancarrow, text editing Joseph Hazan, studio recordings Imagen Subliminal (Miguel de Guzmán + Rocío Romero), photographs in Venice Farah Alkhoury, photographs in Xholobeni

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Beauty is neither an attribute nor an experience.

Beauty is an event.

The event through which heterogeneous realities become publicly co-present.

The event through which geology, law, finance, microbes, satellites, algorithms, buildings, memories and atmospheres cease to belong to separate domains and begin to constitute a common.

Beauty does not enlarge the commons.

Beauty composes the commons.

This requires rethinking what the commons have always been.

J. M. Neeson demonstrated that the English commons were not residual traditions but material institutions through which rural populations secured autonomy from market dependence. Rights to graze livestock, gather timber, cultivate marginal lands or collect fuel were not symbolic inheritances. They organized the conditions of life. (Neeson, 1993)

Yet Neeson's own history reveals something larger than it explicitly names. Commons were never constituted by human agreement alone. Pastures negotiated. Hydrological cycles negotiated. Soils negotiated. Livestock negotiated. Seasonality negotiated. Microbial transformations negotiated. Political institutions did not regulate ecological processes from outside. Ecology itself participated in political organization. The common was ecological before it became institutional.

Today even this proposition is insufficient.

Humans themselves are ecological events.

Microbial symbioses, atmospheric exchanges, mineral metabolisms, computational infrastructures and biological evolution continuously compose what humans become.

Politics therefore cannot be understood as negotiation among autonomous actors operating within ecological conditions.

Politics is ecology organizing itself.



Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation (OFFPOLINN) is an international architectural practice, based in New York and Madrid, working at the intersection of design, research, and critical body-environmental practices. They have been awarded with the Frederick Kiesler Prize for the Architecture and the Arts, the SILVER LION for Best Research Project at the 14th Venice Biennale, and the Dionisio Hernández Gil Award. OFFPOLINN's work is part of the collections of MoMA and the Art Institute of Chicago, among many others.

The office has a broad portfolio of **awarded projects**, that includes the Babyn Yar Museum of Memory and Oblivion in Kiev, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Ocean Space in Venice, Reggio School in El Encinar de los Reyes, the Clergy House at the historic center of Plasencia, COSMO MoMA PS1 in New York, Escaravox at Matadero Madrid, Transvector at Lafayette Anticipations in Paris, Rambla Climate-House in Molina de Segura, House in Never Never Land in Ibiza, Romola in Madrid, Hybrid Infrastructure: RUN RUN RUN, TUPPER HOMES, Rolling House for the Rolling Society, among others. All these projects are part of a critical practice that the office has developed as well through the revision of **architectural formats in performance projects** that include: Being Silica (Performa NY, 2021), IKEA Disobedients (MoMA, 2012), Superpowers of Ten (Lisbon Architecture Triennial 2013; Chicago Architecture Biennial 2015; Jumex Museum, Ciudad de México, 2016; ZKM Karlsruhe, 2016), 12 Actions to Make Peter Eisenman Transparent (Cidade da Cultura, Santiago de Compostela, 2004), 11 Oil Banquet (Madrid, 2007); and **research-based installation projects** including: Spirits Roaming the Earth (Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2018), Pornified Homes (Oslo Architecture Triennial, 2016), Intimate Strangers (London Design Museum, 2016), Sales Oddity. Milano 2 and the Politics of Direct-To-Home TV Urbanism (14 Venice Biennale, 2014), PHANTOM. Mies as Rendered Society (Arts Institute of Chicago, 2012), Fray Foam Home. When Decoration Becomes Political (12 Venice Biennale, 2010), among others.

Community assemblies, constitutional law, atmospheric chemistry, logistics, artificial intelligence, extraction and microbial ecologies do not intersect.

They world one another.

Political analysis becomes naïve whenever it mistakes these ongoing worldings for separate domains.

The challenge is therefore no longer political before it is aesthetic.

It is aesthetic because politics depends upon what can become collectively perceptible.

Baumgarten understood aesthetics as sensory knowledge before it became a philosophy of beauty. (Baumgarten, 1750)

Kant transformed this into communicability (Kant, 1790). Dewey into inquiry (Dewey, 1934). Rancière into the distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2004). Each transformed aesthetics. Each nevertheless assumed that sensing belonged to humans.

This assumption has become untenable.

Plants detect humidity, gravity and chemical gradients.

Microbial communities communicate molecularly.

Forests register climatic stress.

Satellites perceive atmospheric transformations.

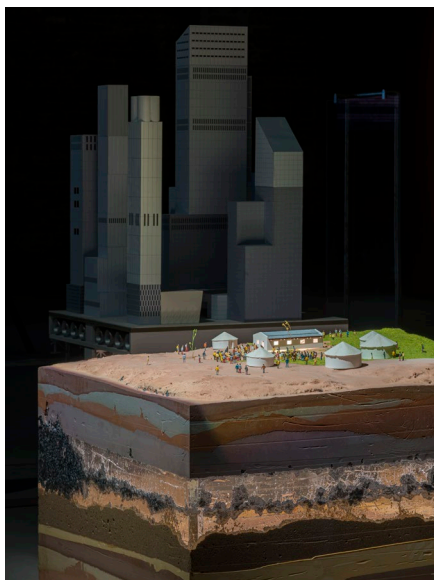
Algorithms detect correlations beyond direct cognition.

Artificial intelligence reorganizes what humans themselves become capable of perceiving.

Reality no longer emerges through human perception alone.

Reality emerges through heterogeneous ecologies of sensing.

The question therefore is no longer: Who senses?



OFFPOLINN's work has been the object of solo exhibitions at MoMA, MoMA PS1, MAK Vienna, Princeton University, RED CAT Cal Arts Contemporary Art Center in Los Angeles, the Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine de Paris, and Tabacalera in Madrid; and it also been exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago, Zentrum für Kunst und Medien ZKM (Karlsruhe), London Design Museum, Whitechapel Gallery (London), Z33 (Hasselt), the Schweizerisches Architektur Museum (Basel), Lisbon and Oslo architecture triennales, and the Venice, Chicago, Gwanju, São Paulo, Santiago de Chile, and Seoul architecture biennales.

The books of the office include: *Superpowers of Scale* (Columbia Press, 2020), *More-Than-Human* (with Marina Otero and Lucia Piastriusti; Idea Books, 2020), *Mies y la gata Niebla. Ensayos sobre arquitectura y cosmopolítica* (Puente Editores, 2019), *Transmaterial Politics* (MCD, 2017), *Transmaterial / Calculable* (ARQ, 2017), *PHANTOM. Mies as Rendered Society* (ACTAR, 2013) and *Different Kinds of Water Pouring into a Swimming Pool* (CalArts, 2013).

The question is: How do heterogeneous forms of sensing become a public? This is beauty.

Beauty is not sensing.

Beauty is the composition through which heterogeneous sensing becomes common.

Beauty is the event through which radically different perceptual agencies acquire the capacity to inhabit a shared reality without becoming identical.

This is the first commons of the twenty-first century.

Not forests.

Not fisheries.

Not land.

The commons of sensing.

The commons through which worlds become publicly available before they become politically negotiable.

Architecture consequently changes discipline.

Its task is not to produce beautiful objects.

Nor to reveal hidden relations.

Nor even to represent distributed realities.

Architecture becomes the practice through which heterogeneous ecologies of sensing acquire institutional form.

Its drawings, buildings, exhibitions, assemblies, legal documents, sensors, satellites, models, testimonies and material arrangements compose the perceptual conditions through which publics come into existence.

Architecture does not reveal reality.

Architecture reorganizes reality's capacity to become public.



OFFPOLINN was founded and is lead by **Andrés Jaque**. Andrés Jaque is an architect, writer and curator. He is the Dean and Professor of Architecture at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. He has also been Visiting Professor at Princeton University and The Cooper Union. He has been an Alfred Toepfer Stiftung's Tes-senow Stipendiat and Graham Foundation grantee. In 2018 he co-curated Manifesta 12 in Palermo, The Planetary Garden. Cultivating Co-Existence, and he is the Chief Curator of the 13th Shanghai Biennale, Bodies of Water.

Beauty therefore no longer belongs to architecture.

Architecture belongs to beauty.

Because beauty is the event through which architecture itself becomes capable of composing a common world.

The future of architecture will not be decided by style.

Nor by sustainability.

Nor by technological innovation.

It will be decided by its capacity to compose commons of sensing adequate to a planet where geology legislates, algorithms perceive, microbes negotiate, atmospheres remember, and politics has always been ecological because ecology has always already been political.

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