Regeneration



AMERICAN ACADEMY in ROME

Regeneration

AMERICAN ACADEMY in ROME *Regeneration* is part of *Ethics*, a series of public programs in the arts and humanities organized by the American Academy in Rome in 2021-22 that questions the values we attribute to people, places, and cultural production from antiquity to today.

Curated by Lindsay Harris, Andrew Heiskell Arts Director (Interim) and Elizabeth Rodini, Director (Interim)

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

Fabio Barile

Chiara Camoni and the participants of the Performing Arts and Community Spaces (PACS) Master Workshop Sonya Clark Binh Danh William Dougherty Guillermo Kuitca Annalisa Metta and Luca Catalano Jorge Otero-Pailos Robert Pietrusko Georges Senga Julia Solis Yeesookyung

GALLERY HOURS

Friday to Sunday, 4pm – 7pm April 15 – June 12, 2022

American Academy in Rome Via Angelo Masina, 5 00153 www.aarome.org

Exhibition website regeneration.aarome.org

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The Residency of Jorge Otero-Pailos is made possible by the Roy Lichtenstein Artist in Residence Fund. The Residency of Guillermo Kuitca is made possible by the Mary Miss Resident in Visual Art Fund.

EXHIBITION EVENTS

Opening *Regeneration* April 13, 2022 7pm, AAR Gallery

Conversations/Conversazioni When Things Fall Apart with Sonya Clark (2017 Affiliated Fellow) and Guillermo Kuitca (2022 Resident) April 13, 2022 6pm, AAR Lecture Room

Conversations/Conversazioni Making the Past: Perspectives on Keeping and Letting Go with Webber Ndoro and Claire Lyons (2022 Resident) May 17, 2022 6pm, AAR Lecture Room

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Fragments and Layers

Mark Robbins President and CEO

Rome is a city of fragments and layers, evoking romantic visions of a distant past. Tourist souvenir books with acetate overleaves offer complete scenes, presenting images of the original states of buildings, structures, statuary, and open spaces fixed in time. Though a single composed view of the past is compelling, cities like Rome are more complex in experience and in our mind's eye. Its landscape of fragments offers evidence that invites the interpretation that continues to fuel the work of scholars and artists. It is an iterative process permitting new narratives to inform or supersede earlier ones.

This year's theme for the Academy is "Ethics," which suits an era in which ideas about truth and goodness seem to be relative commodities. Objects provide evidence of culture and are open to assessments of worth. As fragments are severed from their original context, the understanding of their initial uses or ritual associations can be lost and changed. Choices about what is preserved and displayed reflect a system of values that can [be used] to reinforce or upend ideas about the past.

The international group of artists in *Regeneration* variously plays with aspects of natural decay, decomposition, or violence. Their work suggests alternative readings of value and order, critically revealing hidden or suppressed histories while proposing a simultaneity of possible meanings.

I want to thank the curators of this exhibition, Lindsay Harris and Elizabeth Rodini, for their elegant and powerful thesis, the participating artists who were generous in their contributions, as well as the remarkable team who helped bring this show into being. I especially want to thank the Board of Trustees and the Academy's many supporters who sustain the overall work of the Academy.

Coming Apart

Rome is coming apart. All around us concrete crumbles and paint flakes, tree roots upend stone while car exhaust fouls buildings and toxic rain eats at their ornament. The monuments that have come to define Rome seem increasingly precarious, mocking the vision of eternity that allowed them to be built in the first place.

Although morphing and accelerating in the era of the Anthropocene, decay is an ever-present force and the "ruins" it produces are long-standing ciphers for western attitudes toward the passage of time. Paradoxically, the representation of ruins, whether stemming from nostalgia or anxiety, gives fixity to objects that are powerful precisely because they are undergoing change. Such representations assume the ruin to be a thing when it might better be understood as a process.

Regeneration draws inspiration from Caitlin de Silvey's description of cultural objects as "provisional gatherings of matter." This may seem a cold definition of art, but it is also a reminder of how art can help us make sense of transience in an epoch when change has taken on existential urgency. For the artists included in this exhibition, decadence, or the physical undoing of bodies, is the seed and substance of creative expression rather than its sentimental, regrettable endpoint.

This particular view of art is necessarily global. It imagines a continual making and remaking of the world that is beyond human measure, reaching back to the very formation of the marble that the Romans later quarried for their monuments. Similarly, it envelops oceans and landmasses, regardless of the peoples who have traversed and occupied them. In its concern with the literal force of matter, it also makes way for varied cultural interpretations of the elements we all share.

The resulting discourse is thus an ethical one. Beyond the equalizing factor of sheer materiality – that we and the world are dust – is the question of how to mark, make note of, intervene in, and perhaps forestall these natural processes. On the one hand lies the matter of resources: who has the means to decide which buildings will collapse while others are rebuilt, which landscapes merit intervention and which should be left "to nature"? On the other hand are more nuanced questions concerning cultural attitudes toward permanence, value, and beauty.

Roman monuments were by definition intended to outlive all else. But other traditions find potential elsewhere, including in the fragment and in materials that are taken back into the earth. The artists included in *Regeneration* explore these aspects of materiality, alongside the power of absence, silence, the shadow, and the trace. They refuse to place art on a timeline of judgment that sees the whole as the apex of achievement and degradation as decline, preferring to situate creative expression along a continuum of ongoing, elemental reinvention.

What Art Makes Possible

Ruins have long fascinated artists as a symbol of the passage of time. With the onset of Humanism in the fifteenth century, characterized by a curiosity about the lives and creative output of the early Greeks and Romans, artists began to turn their attention to the remains of ancient civilizations with newfound fervor. Rome emerged as the epicenter of this impulse, in no small measure due to ongoing discoveries of ancient buildings, sculptures, and wall paintings by contemporary archaeologists. The opportunity to see firsthand the accomplishments of earlier societies, and the power of time to ravage their integrity, triggered an association between ruins and nostalgia for a bygone age.

In contrast, the dozen artists featured in *Regeneration* perceive decay as brimming with possibilities. For some, photography offers a way to focus attention on the perpetual evolution of the landscape. Matrices of branches, vines, and leaves testify to nature's inclination to recycle debris into new life. In other views, objects discarded in the course of daily activities – plastic bottles, a hair clip, an old shoe – make plain how humans catalyze landscapes' transformations. Whether representing natural spaces or sites that people inhabit, these photographs compel us to reflect upon the ethics of environmental degradation. Which landscapes do we preserve from human intervention? Which, instead, do we sacrifice to human consumption, finding in their neglect patterns, lines, and forms that strike us with unexpected beauty?

The values we attribute to the built environment also take center stage in the exhibition. The industrial ruin emerges in *Regeneration* as a monument to the waning persuasiveness of modernity. The ambition associated with the age of the skyscraper, the automobile, and, slightly later, the movie theater fades in images that show the deterioration of these twentieth-century icons. The grandeur of monuments from earlier eras likewise comes into question in hand-crafted images that disintegrate historical representations of these sites. These works call attention to the very nature of preservation, in which we select certain elements of our built surroundings to preserve, and others to let go.

Finally, this exhibition foregrounds the capacity of art to help generate resilience in the face of destruction due to violence. The traumas of war, racism, and their consequences leave traces that can be seen and that remain invisible. Several of the artists in *Regeneration* have developed creative processes that use the elements of time, meditation, and metamorphosis inherent in artmaking to acknowledge these scars and try to heal them in however small a way. In their work, symbols of hatred and intolerance decompose into new forms that hold within them the promise of a fresh start, a changed perspective, or, at the very least, a moment of reprieve to reflect upon the possibilities that lie ahead. Lindsay Harris Andrew Heiskell Arts Director (Interim)

Fabio Barile

The evolution of the natural world marks the starting point for Italian photographer Fabio Barile. He took up the medium around 2004 to photograph the landscape, a subject that has held pride of place in Italian photography since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century. Early photographers trained their lenses on Italy's monuments; at the turn of the twentieth century, Pictorialists reproduced the peninsula's ruin-studded hillsides in compositions inherited from paintings; mid-century modernists strived to shakeup traditional views of Italy's storied surroundings. In 1984, Luigi Ghirri's *Viaggio in Italia* invited generations of photographers – Barile among them – to reflect upon the Italian *paesaggio* as a reality, a symbol, and a metaphor for existence.

The Structure of a Forest #12, from Barile's ongoing series, Works For a Cosmic Feeling, begun in 2018, exemplifies how the artist finds inspiration in the landscape's constant flux. Shot with a large-format camera, the photograph records a wood in the Canale Monterano Nature Reserve northwest of Rome. "I usually head to the mountains or natural areas when I have a mental block and need to regain familiarity with the camera," Barile has said about his photographic process. The density of brambles in this image, blurred here and there by the wind, coalesces around a triangular center that frames a pathway inviting us into the scene. The landscape's growth from the bottom up, its density of details, and its constant evolution even in a single image illustrate Barile's philosophy about photography: that it can reveal to us the perpetual process of becoming that defines the universe. (LH)

Chiara Camoni

and the participants of the Performing Arts and Community Spaces (PACS) Master Workshop

On walks through the city and countryside, Chiara Camoni gathers armfuls of plants that she then presses into silk. What is left behind are the ghostly imprints of leaves and flowers, arranged to evoke a series of humanoid figures, like sprites emerging from a magical forest. The juices that stain the fabric are not only ink but the life-force of the plant itself, coursing into Camoni's forms and connecting them intimately with their source.

Among the plants Camoni collects are weeds, floral detritus considered unsightly and undesired. A weed-strewn landscape is perceived to be in decline, having fallen out of human control. The weeds are invaders and threats. Once they begin to overtake a structure, it is lost: they pop out of crevices, creep across surfaces, and eventually consume their architectural prey. But they are also full of life, insisting on presence even when we try to eradicate them

Building on a long tradition of artists working with botanicals, Camoni rehabilitates these weeds and gives them new value. In her case, the shapes of the plants are preserved, maintaining their integrity even as they become the artwork. We are witness to a process unfolding, as floral traces transmute into a parade of talismanic figures. Camoni's silks remind us of the continual, unending metamorphosis of things, and of the impossibility of ever pinning them down. (ER)



The Structure of a Forest #12, 2021 Archival pigment print 155x192 cm (artwork © Fabio Barile; photograph courtesy of the artist and Matèria gallery)

Una Tenda #03, 2020-2021 Brass, vegetal print on silk 205x200 cm, detail (artwork © Chiara Camoni; photograph by Ela Bialkowska / OKNOstudio, courtesy of SpazioA, Pistoia)

Sonya Clark

Binh Danh

For over twenty-five years, American artist Sonya Clark has created installations that recount new stories about Blackness through objects, such as hair, beads, combs, and sugar. In 2010, she introduced a new, textile-based object into her repertoire: flags. Two flags in particular recur in Clark's oeuvre, namely the Confederate Battle Flag, devised by the southern Confederate States of America during the Civil War (1861–65), and the fifty-star United States flag, adopted in 1959 at a time when the Civil Rights movement was gaining new momentum.

If Jasper Johns in the 1950s reproduced the American flag in encaustic to question the nature of symbols, Clark investigates what the stars and stripes connote about identity and equality in the United States. The work on view in this exhibition focuses as much on the flag as a representation of ideals as it does on its demise. To create these days. this country. this history (2019), Clark unraveled commercial, nylon Confederate and American flags by hand. The artist has associated this process of disintegration with undoing the histories of racism and violence woven into the flags' fibers. "Sometimes it is really hard to undo cloth, and sometimes it is a little easier," Clark has said about her experience disentangling these potent American symbols. "But no matter what, it is slow going," a pace that offers "a fitting metaphor for where we are," Clark has observed. At least thanks to efforts like hers, the process is underway. (LH)

Binh Danh's photographs derive from the cycle of decay and regrowth in nature, and the faculties of memory and forgetting in the mind. He produces them through a technique he invented – the chlorophyll printing process – that uses photosynthesis in plants to generate chemical-free photographs. To create an image, Danh places a transparency on a leaf, sandwiches them between a solid surface and a sheet of glass, and exposes them to sunlight. He then lets nature work its magic for anywhere from a few hours to a few days. The images that result challenge viewers to reconsider the very concept of photography, and the ideas of identity, family, and memory the medium connotes.

The creation of new life through loss that underpins Danh's technique also informs the meaning of his photographs. Danh is the child of war refugees displaced from Vietnam to California. Growing up in the 1980s, he developed an impression of his family's homeland primarily through movies, such as Apocalypse Now and Platoon, which feature impenetrable jungles as protagonists. Plants thus emerged as vehicles for Danh to address the trauma of the Vietnam War that transformed his family's lives. In his 2010 series, Military Foliage, which encompasses the works in this exhibition, Danh creates chlorophyll prints of camouflage, an abstract image developed by artists during World War I to help soldiers hide in the landscape. In the digital age, hand-painted camouflage has been replaced by computer renderings of environments from ice fields to deserts. By printing a camouflage pattern on a single leaf, Danh hints at the individual lives impacted by war, and the regeneration of life in nature regardless of human fallibility. (LH)



these days. this country. this history, 2019 Unwoven and rewoven commercially printed USA and Confederate flags 43x29.21x4.45 cm (artwork © Sonya Clark; photograph by Stephen Petegorsky)



Military Foliage #7, 2010 Chlorophyll print and resin 40x24 cm (artwork © Binh Danh; photograph courtesy of the artist and Haines Gallery)

William Dougherty

Guillermo Kuitca

Sound is evanescent. Even when recorded and replayed, it slips away. Contemporary technologies may give us the illusion of permanence, the hope that we can play and endlessly replay a favorite recording, but this is a false promise, as materials disintegrate and machines break down.

William Dougherty makes poignant use of this fact in his composition *Soft Brown Wax*, referring in his title to the substance used in the earliest musical recordings. This technology, perfected and marketed by Thomas Alva Edison in the late 1880s, involved engraving an audio recording into the surface of a wax cylinder, which was then played back on a phonograph. Each time the cylinder was played it degraded, often quite rapidly, layering the recording with what Dougherty calls "sonic artifacts."

Dougherty's composition is built around the disappearing sound of one of these cylinders, an 1888 recording of George Friederich Handel's "Moses and the Children of Israel" as sung by a chorus of 4,000 at the Ninth Triennial Handel Festival in London. Ghostly traces of the original performance emerge from the worn wax, weaving in and out with a small ensemble of acoustic and electronic instruments. Rather than focusing on absence, however, Dougherty calls our attention to the nature of the degraded wax – its subdued, sometimes jarring, often haunting qualities that are a moving trace of the music we can never fully hear again. (ER) In his ongoing *Encyclopédie* series, begun in the late 1990s, Argentinian artist Guillermo Kuitca investigates the graphic and conceptual means used to convey ideas about architecture. Through varied processes of disintegration – diluting ink, delaminating photographic paper – the artist transforms historic architectural engravings into meditations on time's ability to ravage even the most celebrated monuments, and the benefits, or pitfalls, of restoration. The floor plans and maps Kuitca reworks in this series were originally created to illustrate monuments in the mid-eighteenth-century publication, *Encyclopédie*. Edited by French Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot, the volume aspired to compile a record of all knowledge through texts and images like the architectural engravings at the base of Kuitca's work.

Encyclopédie III (2010) presents Kuitca's rendering of the marble floor that adorns the sanctuary and choir of Paris's Notre-Dâme cathedral. A matrix of architectural fragments, the acrylic and graphite drawing on canvas presages the destruction of the French monument on April 16, 2019 by a fire that reduced the church's wooden frame to ashes. Paradoxically, authorities' reluctance to equip the building with fire security for fear of "disfiguring the monument" only quickened its ruin (New York Times). At the same time, the swift decision to rebuild the damaged cathedral reaffirmed the building's magnitude in the French cultural imagination. As Viennese art historian Alois Riegl observed in his 1903 essay, "The Modern Cult of Monuments," "the fundamental requirement of deliberate monuments is restoration." (LH)



Containers for Wax Cylinders, early twentieth century Wax phonograph cylinders Collection of the artist

(artwork © William Dougherty; photograph courtesy of the artist)



Encyclopédie III, 2010 Acrylic and graphite on canvas 196xI51 cm (artwork © Guillermo Kuitca; photograph courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo credit: Alex Delfanne)

Annalisa Metta and Luca Catalano

Every Nine Days is a site-specific landscape set up on the front lawn of the American Academy during the late winter and early spring of 2021-22. For Luca Catalano and Annalisa Metta,

"The lawn is a living palimpsest animated by a never-ending choreography: its surface collects many kinds of grasses, with many shades of green and textures varying during the year; it records the passage of the gardeners and their machinery; it hosts insects and is bitten by the birds. These "lawn events" are so tiny and nobody usually minds."

Catalano and Metta chose, instead, to track and highlight them.

Over the course of sixteen weeks, at nine-day intervals, they laid down a series of iron plates, neatly spaced across on the lawn. Beneath the plates, the grass yellowed or died according to the amount of time it was covered, leaving behind a variegated surface. The plates also underwent change. Patterns of rust disfigured them in beautiful swirls of color that, in their gradations, reveal varying exposures to the life of the lawn.

Now indoors, the plates are protected. But by inviting visitors to walk on top of them, Catalano and Metta refuse their work any preciousness. The changes wrought by nature are just one stage in its ongoing evolution. *Every Nine Days* is thus a meditation on the creative force present in decay, and on what it means to leave imprints at this crucial juncture in our relationship with the planet. (ER)

Jorge Otero-Pailos

Jorge Otero-Pailos works in latex casts, a conservation method used to remove dust and debris from historic monuments. During his Residency at the American Academy in Rome, he made casts of the building's surfaces – including floors, architectural details, and the spolia-studded walls of the courtyard – which were then placed in a gigantic, back-lit frame. The casts preserve the topography of these surfaces along with the dust that had settled on them, re-presenting the longitudinal history of a building and its environment.

At the conceptual core of this work lies the matter of permanence. Monuments like those that define Rome were built to endure. But Otero-Pailos reveals the contingency of every surface, including those of monuments: they become dust just as they accrue it. "Buildings," he says, "lend recognizable form to a dust that was formless and chaotic." In the end, it is dust that remains – including the debris created by human activity and industry. Traces of ancient Roman silver mining still apparent in the ice packs of the Arctic, for example, suggest that pollution itself is the most lasting of human creations.

There are ethical implications to this vision, underscoring our responsibility to the environment in the short and long term. But the implications are also spiritual, beyond time and our ability to measure it. The dust that surrounds us also *is* us. It makes up buildings and falls away again into the atmosphere, reminding us of stardust and the materiality of creation itself. (ER)



Every Nine Days, 2021-2022 With the participation of Valentina Peluso 12 raw steel plates, natural oxidation Plates: 120x60 cm; total dimension: 1560x60 cm (artwork © Annalisa Metta and Luca Catalano; photograph by Daniele Molajoli)



Distributed Monuments, 2022 Latex and dust transferred from the American Academy in Rome 912x591 cm (artwork © Jorge Otero-Pailos; courtesy of the American Academy in Rome and Sapar Contemporary. Photograph by Daniele Molajoli)

Robert Pietrusko

Georges Senga

With broad, lingering strokes of the camera, Robert Pietrusko introduces us to the slow decay of San Vittorino, a church in the hills of the Sabina region northeast of Rome. Originally dedicated to an early Christian martyr and later reconsacrated to the Virgin Mary, the church was built on marshy land that eventually gave way, possibly due to an earthquake that struck the region in 1703. Today it is the quintessential ruin, a heavy structure sinking down into the river that courses through what was once its nave.

Along with panoramic views of the scene, Pietrusko offers us close-ups of the play between stone, water, and foliage. Sometimes it is hard to tell just what it is that we are looking at, as organic forms meld and merge, pushing back against our larger sense of time: should we focus on the momentary play of leaves on water; the stream that cuts away at the structure on the timescale of human history; or the long view that situates San Vittorino in a chronology of geologic scale? Stone is stone, after all, whether naturally lodged in the earth or piled up in a heap of hewn blocks. From this perspective, the erosion of the church is less a ruin than a basic, elemental fact of nature. Pietrusko began filming Cadence San Vittorino in the spring of 2021 while a Fellow at the American Academy. In keeping with the multiple timescales embodied in his work, he intends to return regularly to the site to trace its ongoing transformation. (ER)

The work of Congolese artist Georges Senga centers on traces of encounters. In the past decade, he has developed projects that incorporate archives documenting priests' missions in his hometown of Lubumbashi, and interviews recording conversations about Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the independent Democratic Republic of Congo in 1960. Whatever his subject, Senga chronicles signs of confrontations between Africa and Europe before and after the process of decolonization above all through photography.

Senga's most widely-exhibited photographic series, Empreintes, illustrates discarded objects on the ground in Lubumbashi. The array of rusty gears, playing cards, and broken bottles in his square-format, black-and-white photographs records the presence of passersby, whether local or foreign, and their persistent dismissal of the landscape. Industrially produced and natural detritus recur with the same frequency, dissolving any distinction between human and natural degradation. A withered tree root and a pair of plastic bottles blend into the dusty ground with the same, chameleon-like ability to disappear into the surroundings as if they were integral to them. Senga's black-and-white representations focus our attention on the neglect that created the landscape in question, and on the unexpected beauty that can come of disregard. (LH)





Cadence San Vittorino, 2021 HD video, stereo sound (artwork © Robert Pietrusko; still video courtesy of the artist) *Empreinte_16*, 2009 Gelatin silver print 100x70 cm (artwork © Georges Senga; photograph courtesy of the artist)

Julia Solis

Michigan Theatre (2009), taken by German photographer Julia Solis in Detroit, exemplifies the symbiosis between ruin and regeneration. Designed in 1925, the Michigan Theatre was planned as the crown jewel of a new business district in the midwestern capital. "It is beyond the dreams of loveliness," wrote the Detroit Free Press in 1926 when the "magnificent" building opened to the public. By the 1970s, however, the theater had fallen into disrepair. "Vandalism and damage to the structure are so great that it is more feasible to demolish it than to attempt reconstruction," concluded one writer in 1976. When further study revealed that razing the Michigan would compromise the adjoining office building, the property owners devised an unorthodox solution befitting Motor City: they transformed the theater into a parking garage, complete with a ticket booth, fourstory lobby, and an Italianate painted ceiling.

Solis has remarked that growing up in Germany, in a landscape still scarred by World War II, seeded her fascination with the residues of the industrial age. She has photographed the relics of the automobile era in Detroit since 2005, and urban architecture that boasts some element of decay. The decomposition of swimming pools, subway tunnels, and rudimentary shelters barely built to last in the first place recur throughout her oeuvre. The appeal of her images confirms Andreas Huyssen's observation that "[w]e are nostalgic for the ruins of modernity": the monuments of industrial society that once held the promise of an alternative future, and now testify to the necessity of ruins to rebuild. (LH) Yeesookyung

In 2001, Yeesookyung watched a revered master of Korean ceramics destroy a vase that he considered imperfect. Gathering up the shards, the younger artist made a new vessel, held together with joins of gold. The resulting "Translated Vase" was a unique work, part of an ongoing series initiated in 2002.

Yeesookyung's joining technique is reminiscent of Japanese *kintsugi* repairs, where broken ceramics are sealed back together with fine lines of gold. Rather than recreating the original vessel, however, Yeesookyung distorts it, setting pieces together in forms that can be bulbous and ungainly. The broken vessel is not repaired but reinvented, the fragments assembled into something unexpected and new.

There is, in this work, a deep consideration of value and of the ethics of preservation. Yeesookyung questions canons of beauty – why one thing is discarded while another is preserved, for example – as well as what is meant by "restoration." Is it a particular form that is being restored? A function? Or might it be something more abstract, like beauty or strength? Her "translations" prioritize mutability over permanence, treating fragility as a virtue. Or as she put it in a 2020 interview: "My work can be seen as a glorification of the fateful weakness of being." (ER)





Translated Vase_2019 TVCW 3, 2019 Ceramic shards, epoxy, 24k gold leaf 63x41x46 cm Unique piece (artwork © Yeesookung; photograph by Yeesookyung Studio, courtesy of MASSIMODECARLO)

Michigan Theatre, 2021 Archival pigment print 60x45 cm (artwork © Julia Solis; photograph courtesy of the artist)

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<u>Cover</u>

Encyclopédie III, 2010 (artwork © Guillermo Kuitca; photograph courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo credit: Alex Delfanne)

Back cover Una Tenda #03, 2020-2021 (artwork detail Chiara Camoni; photograph by Ela Bialkowska / OKNOstudio, courtesy of SpazioA, Pistoia)

