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*«The «state of emergency» in which we live is not the exception but the rule.»*

BURNING SIGN: THE ARBOREAL  
MONUMENT PINETA  
DUX AND THE DOUBLE OTHER  
OF ECO-FASCISM  
Reese Lewis



The arboretum «Pineta DUX» in the Apennine Mountains of central Italy is planted to form the Latin letters «DVX» in dedication to «Il Duce», the by-name of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini (1883 — 1945). A forest fire in 2017 nearly destroyed the signified landscape, producing what will be discussed here as equivalent to Walter Benjamin's conception of a «real» crisis. That which disrupts the living history of capitalist technical reason, the structure which, in turn keeps the unrealized history of a truly democratic and classless society dead and vanquished. (1) This analytical methodology allows for an understanding that the fire at «Pineta DUX» opens up the emancipatory potential of the politics of anxiety, which wakes the dead from «the eternal repetition of the same» (2). It is this disruption to the signifying device of the subject that architects and landscape architects find ground to lay a stake in the politics of (anxiety) conservation, that is, to make claims as to what to keep dead, or what to keep alive.

«Pineta DUX» is a living monument formed by 20,000 fir trees. While many other material dedications to the Partito Nazionale Fascista (National Fascist Party) such as Esposizione Universale Roma, Casa del Fascio, and Foro Mussolini (now Foro Italico) are static, «Pineta DUX» distinguishes itself from these works of architecture as a purely symbolic landscape intervention. While there exists a broad discourse on the destruction of monuments commemorating violent regimes, this signified landscape complicates this well-trodden territory due to its material composition — that of organic matter. This raises very different questions of maintenance as to what the ecological implications of removing 20,000 pine trees are, but also of destroying vegetation that grows outside of these precisely drawn letters. Moreover, it muddies the political implications of maintaining this organic text, as it becomes a defense ground for eco-fascism, which combines doctrines of racial, classist, and nationalistic with environmental conservation, or what will be discussed here as «the double other» of right-wing politics of interventions within the landscape.

This arboreal monument spelling out the Latin letters «DVX» was planted on the mountainside of Monte Giano in 1938 — 1939 by the military cadets of the newly formed fascist «Milizia Forestale» («Forestry Militia»). This paramilitary militiapart of the fascist state's voluntary «Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale», commonly called the «Blackshirts». The founders of these paramilitary groups were nationalist intellectuals, former disgruntled army officers and young landowners opposing rural labor movements. The site was claimed to have significant hydrogeological concerns that required the planting of a forest to protect the town of Antrodoto from landslides caused by the abundant winter rains. This arboretum was chosen to take a symbolic form at this site because the cadets of the «Milizia Forestale», which was created by Mussolini, were trained at the «Scuola allievi della Guardia Forestale di Cittaducale» located in the same valley. The mountain face also provided a billboard-like open field that could be seen from the local village Antrodoto, and on clear days can even be seen from Rome.

«Pineta DUX» is but a small instance within Mussolini's larger project of symbolically transforming the material composition of the Italian landscape,

where «In ten years, comrades, Italy will be unrecognisable! This is because we will have transformed it, we will have made a new one, from the mountains which we will have covered with a green coat [of trees], to the fields which will be completely reclaimed.» (3) None of the Italian landscape was to be spared from the symbolic and productive regime of the Fascist state. The creation of national parks, reforestation, reclamation of agricultural land, and new urban planning measures under the «bonifica integrale» (an integral reclamation) program were all part of the Fascist rhetoric of hyper-nationalism and social hierarchy. (4) Reclamation became a way of shaping the Fascist construction of the nation in a mythological narrative centered around the natural world and its means of representing the ideal national subject.

It is in its combination of culture and nature — the symbolic and rhetorical use of living, organic matter — that «Pineta DUX» is what sixteenth century humanist Jacobo Bonfadio would consider «terza natura» (third nature). (5) Whereas infrastructural projects within the Fascist landscape such as the agricultural lands, dams, or roads can be understood as «second nature». Even the natural reserves, national parks and reforestation projects did not exist outside of the ideology of modernist progress which aimed to use and develop every natural resource for capitalist growth and self-sufficiency of the nation. During the Fascist era preservation was always considered alongside economic improvement of the landscape. There was to be no «first nature»; no pristine wilderness left untouched by human activity.

These three natures outlined here have underpinned landscape theory since sixteenth century Italian historians such as Bonfadio conceived of an evolutionary progression of human manipulation of the environment. This historicity traces the primitive wilderness of the hunter-gatherer period of human activity (first nature) to manipulating these organic resources towards functional landscapes that formed complex social and political relations associated with the Neolithic or Agricultural Revolution (second nature) to sites for aesthetic communication with God's work with the development of Italian Renaissance gardens (third nature). (6) This concept is further extended into the twentieth century through the Fascist regime's interest in preserving and restoring landscapes towards territorial expansion as a statecraft project able to represent the re-birth of the Roman Empire — that is, the mythological re-creation of a national nature, culture, and identity simultaneously. (7)

In 2017 the fascist forest went ablaze from what local newspapers deemed an «accident» (8). While the exact cause of the fire can only be speculated on, what is certain is that increasingly hotter seasons in Italy facilitated the first wildfire in Pineta DUX's 83-year lifetime. That same year, there were more than 70,000 hectares of forest destroyed by fires in central Italy alone. (9) Following the wildfire, local far-right militia CasaPound replanted the text, armed with what they claimed to be the task to «not let history be burnt» (10). As a political party within a growing movement dubbed «the black-wave», CasaPound is part of a tradition that has combined anti-immigration racist ideology and a naturalization of socio-economic inequality with environmental





(fig. a) «Pineta DUX» spelling out the letters «DVX» in pine trees, Antrecodo, 2004. Image: Cristina Nadotti



(fig. b) «Pineta DUX» seen on the slopes of Monte Giano when it was first planted, Antrecodo, 1938. Image: Fettoviatia



(fig. c) Forest fire, Antrecodo, 2017. Image: FQ, Il Fatto Quotidiano

conservation. (11) Following Mussolini's «Doctrine of Fascism», they continue the legacy that «affirms the irremediable, fruitful and beneficent inequality of men» (12). Given this premise, fascists conclude that the preservation of social hierarchy is in the interests of state and society, meaning that all classes should collaborate in its defense.

Tracing back to the writing and work of American eugenicist and conservationist Madison Grant (13), and even Mussolini's own environmental policies, the right-wing discourse around the environment acts in fear of a double other: the environment and the immigrant. This is part of a discourse that aims to reclaim and reconstitute social «coherence» and «organic» forms of territorial solidarity and sovereignty within an ideology of domination. (14) Casa Pound have been able to successfully recast forms of economic and cultural alienation by imposing what anthropologist Douglas Holmes calls «a radical delineation of society in which «cultural idioms» as opposed to abstract interests serve as instruments for expressing meaning and for deriving power» (15). This fringe ideology ultimately provides further fuel to the more mainstream burgeoning Italian right. Parties such as The League and Five Star Movement are actively producing austerity measures, anti-immigration, and protectionist economic policies in parliament.

Given that this monument is living organic matter, we can build on the primary thesis in Walter Benjamin's 1940 «Theses on the Philosophy of History» that maintains that history is not the naturalized continuum of technical and economic innovation, but the aggregation of tumultuous world events — composed of what «flashes up at a moment of danger» (16). Benjamin's allegorical formulation of Paul Klee's painting «Angelus Novus» looks at the Angel of History that has its gaze turned to the past, and whose task is to «awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed» (17). Here what is alive is the ideology of domination and inequality (fascism represented in the form of living trees), an increasingly powerful contemporary right that builds on this legacy to uphold social hierarchy, and what is dead is a classless democratic society, a communist utopia and the nearly extinct first nature of unmanipulated wilderness. Benjamin continues by observing that the wings of the Angel are caught by a great storm moving it away from the past, by the continuous gust of progress. (18) Modern progress is understood to take place when the endless cycles of crises become a historic norm: «The «state of emergency» in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism. One reason fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm.» (19)

The fire at «Pineta DUX» is a sign of a «real» crisis, a true historical moment. It is a break in the tired debates between ruling right-wing or left-wing regional political parties as to what should be done with this signified arbo-retum. The forest fire is a breaking point in an ideology of dominance over the double other materialized in flames, accelerated by the altered climatic



conditions in the time of an environmental crisis. The fire indicates a further intensification of anxieties surrounding the growth of socio-economic inequality, the intensification of the climate crisis, and right-wing populist movements across the globe.

The Right-wing's political claims within the environmental movement will only grow as there are more climate refugees, resources become more scarce, and our reliance on fossil fuels further strain geopolitical alliances. The insidious ideology of domination has the capacity to manipulate the most festering anxieties of citizens, such that if the inability to address the climate crisis persists, the general population will only increasingly turn away from the political mainstream to more radical ideologies — towards the polar extremes of the environmental movement. So what opens up with this fire is a realization of a bigger crisis within this monument, calling for larger action than what has been taken to maintain this fascist arboretum for more than 80 years.

The fire breaks the signifier of this text, makes it illegible and confronts us with anxiety. As Lacan explains in his «Seminars on Anxiety», this modern condition of psychological neurosis emerges when the symbolic order in which the subject relies is made unstable. Lacan maintains that the symbolic order, «the big Other», is language and law (essentially the world we as humans must be in). (20) The fire at «Pineta DUX» demonstrates this moment of anxiety when the symbol can no longer be maintained and reveals that subjectivity is incomplete since it relies on inherently unstable symbols to exist. (21)

But as a general mode of operation, what the Right does is not embrace anxiety as it is being discussed here. Rather, they embrace a disavowal of anxiety, whose most clear symptom is fear. Freud explains this as «an inhibition, a restriction, which the ego imposes on itself in order not to arouse anxiety» (22). This is made evident when the mayor of nearby Antreccò Alberto Guerrieri, who is not shy about expressing his fascist sympathies, stated after the fire that «abbiamo perso una parte importante della nostra identità» («we have lost an important part of our identity») (23). This «real» crisis is a prompt that gets out of the state of fear and into another relationship with the «other». This is because anxiety is a path to think subjectivity against its forms of representation, or its semblances, its doubles — subjectivity against symbols. So our desire for domination over nature — our fear of what we do not understand — is all shattered and revealed to us when we look back at this subject-forming sign on fire. This anxiety reveals our desires, the «other» of our subjectivity.

This analysis provides a prompt for architects and landscape architects to understand these events as moments of history. Operating within a politics of anxiety means understanding that any intervention within the landscape should be considered a creation of history outside the symbolic order of subject formation, rather than the production of a new future — to make living the dead. These historical moments of «real» crisis provide a situation where architects and landscape architects possess a great deal of agency to intervene

in the political economy. This is because the built environment within a nationalistic context is understood as a subject-producing ideological apparatus. In this case, through the manipulation of the natural environment, the entire Italian landscape became an ideologically constructed environment. It is then the task of any material intervention to understand that within a landscape marked by an ideology of domination over the «double other» — which in many ways is the history of any nation-state — the history that is dead is a wild landscape; the first nature of an environment existing outside of the instrumental logic of capitalist production and nationalistic subject formation. This is not a call for a return to a primitive, pre-modern structure of land use or relationship with the built environment since there is no possibility of reviving an original organic state when an entire landscape and climate has been transformed by human intervention. Rather, this analysis calls for something completely new to the endless cycle of ideological debates: to let the signified landscape self-regulate. To neither replant nor cut down, but to let live by stepping out of the ideology of domination.