

Panel 2

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Oceanomania Managing the Unknown, from Wonder to Depletion

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Visualizing the Ocean

Oceanomania, Souvenirs from Mysterious Seas, is a two-part exhibition, to be held simultaneously at the Oceanographic Museum in Monaco and the National Museum (NMNM), in April 2011. The concept of *Oceanomania* derives from the craze for the ocean that developed in the late 1700s in Europe and reached its climax after the 1850s, as interest in the ocean, in its navigation, and in the new discoveries of its inhabitants, swept from primary contact with explorers, researchers, and the elite into the popular imagination.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the development of the aquarium and the emergence of the first public exhibitions and institutions portraying sea life. With the removal of the “glass tax” in Britain in 1845, the permeation of glass into all areas of interior design coincided with this new public curiosity in marine life to bring these exhibitions into the homes of the middle and upper classes, in the form of vivariums, glass jars, and cabinets. Dead, the specimens were mediated by the curiosity cabinet, or the glass interface of a jar, while the aquarium permitted the observation of live ocean specimens.

The surge in interest in the ocean was also fueled by literary fiction, exemplified by Jules Verne’s 1870 novel, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. The protagonist is a natural history museum curator, Nemo, a pluri-disciplinary, renegade, engineering genius, whose library and collections kept safely aboard the Calypso

become one of the primary lenses through which evaluate the story. The first underwater sea helmets with a glass “window” permitted the underwater breathing of the subject, while in the ocean’s depths. This technology existed prior to Verne’s novel, in addition to the accompanying ornamented decompression chamber. The umbilical cord tying the subject to the surface for air, and the heavy gears and machinery, turned a human subject into a being of an unrecognizable species, as if to inhabit the otherness of the ocean, a mediating transformation of the subject was necessary. The submarine Calypso, which the protagonists inhabit for much of the novel, had capacities unknown yet to engineers of its time.

From a visual perspective, as captured in Alphonse de Neuville’s engravings accompanying Verne’s original publication, and the monumental paintings Bernard Buffet created as a series towards the end of his life in the 1990s, the Calypso becomes a huge viewing apparatus engulfing the subjects and their books, and all available knowledge. The apparatus is moving, capturing vistas of an incommensurable, underwater landscape. We observe the subjects watching an early form of cinematic spectacle as they are pulled into the unknown.

These forms of visibility of ocean life permeate the exhibition *Oceanomania*, and with them come the many paradigms and contradictions involved in our capacity to comprehend the complexity of the Ocean as meta-system. Artist Mark Dion captures these contradictions, by focusing on the coexistence of wonder created at the sight of the ocean, and the melancholia that arises upon observing its depletion. Dion’s point of departure for the exhibition is the Deep Water Horizon Spill oilrig explosion, which has long-term repercussions on the environment of an entire region of the world and whose consequences still have yet to be fully ascertained.

Risk is an evaluation, which is now often left in the hands of venture capitalists. The outsourcing of the problem has not of course mitigated the scale of the impact of ecological disasters on our environment, human and animal life. Our lack of knowledge, of vision, of having any personal stake in the subject or outcome has become dramatically exposed during these worst-case scenario events. We do not seem to know how to begin to fix the problem or make amends. Artist Allan Sekula approaches the notion of risk in his film *Lottery of the Sea* based on the writings of Adam Smith, who introduces the very subject of risk in the life at sea in the eighteenth century. In this film Sekula presents the complicated structures of participants in the modern capitalist relationship to the ocean through the interaction of national and private interests on the one hand, and the seeming absence of accountability among financial, environmental and labor policies, on the other.

Between labor and daydream

Writer Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act* (1981) [p. 201] speaks of a literary blindspot to the economic approach to the Ocean:

“The non Place of the sea is also the space of the degraded language of romance and daydream, of narrative commodity and the sheer distraction of ‘light literature’. This is however only half the story, one pole of ability to whose objective tension we must now do justice. For the sea is the empty space between the concrete places of work and life, but it is also, just as surely itself a place of work and the very element by which an imperial capitalism draws its scattered beachheads and outposts together, through which it slowly realizes its sometimes violent, sometimes silent and corrosive penetration of the outlying pre capitalist zones of the globe.”

To Allan Sekula in his remarkable publication *Fish Story* [2002], underlines an absence noted by Verne: “For all his genius as a naval engineer, Verne’s narrator remarks that on the Nautilus’s extensive library: not one single work on political economy; that subject appeared to be strictly proscribed. Nemo’s answer to the misery of the land lies in the imaginary pre-industrial plenitude of the sea”. Within Sekula’s publication lies an extensive analysis of images of representation of the ocean correlated to the evolution of its use in human enterprise.

One of Sekula’s notable examples is the way our backs were turned to the less romantic cargo transportation of ships that emerged decades after the advent of the steam engine, transforming the docks into sites of ungainly labor, de-estheticized and hence ignored by the very classes that profited from the exchanges on its surfaces. In his documentary films, Sekula emerges as a specialist of the industrial and financial complexities of the ocean, from the shift to container cargos that started in the 50s, and the political frameworks or lack of them in the circulation of goods.

“Thus the proliferation of air-courier companies and mail order catalogues serving the professional and leisure needs of the managerial and intellectual classes does nothing to bring consciousness down to the earth, or to turn it in the direction of the sea, the forgotten space.”

The Great Unknown

These artists in the exhibition are revealing aspects of the ocean in a moment when science and its technology, and technology linked to entrepreneurship, and culture at large are still grappling with a reality of the ocean as the great unknown, or as described in Jameson’s quote “the empty space”.

“The great unknown” is in fact a motor for discovery, one where we can be inspired by the idea of the sublime, the wondrous and the uncanny, seduced by George Bataille’s description of the great Formless, sea as parent of all things but also of the eroticized sea of the tides, or Michel Foucault analogy between the space of the ship and that of madness in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, or as a non-place, or a counter-space. We can find comfort, inspiration and use in the vision of sea as a space of resistance, one of unchartered territory, that of the exiled, outside of national legislature, and of informal relations.

But Allan Sekula also puts us in guard of going too far with a certain “neo romanticism” about the ocean. There are few if any other territories on earth, which people can pride themselves about knowing so little about, besides perhaps the territory of the human brain, and that of the unconscious, an analogy already made during Aristotelian times. Many of us would have liked to think that knowing so little about the ocean, keeping it in the sanctuary of the unknown, or of the wondrous, a sort of mock-virginity, could mean that the ocean could remain somewhat spared from the usual machinations of human enterprise—recent history has proven otherwise.

Replicating our rather comforting vision of the ocean as space of other, of the nourisher and of the unknown, has a true cost in terms of our human management of the ocean resources and the human labor that takes place on its surface. The BP disaster is significant in that respect—in that it took us 3 months to stop the “leak”—we did not have the knowledge or the technology on hand to master the situation. And the consequences are still not known. The threats of species disappearing have considerably accelerated—before our knowledge of this biodiversity has even been fully uncovered or allowed to develop. The very unknown we have romanticized of the ocean’s diversity and species that have yet to be discovered, the systems which have yet to be understood, may be obliterated through a terrifying process of depletion, the dialectal corollary of blind accumulation and exploitation.

The Ocean as unknown or forgotten space relates to a more general question of an antiquated and romanticized vision of nature still in force today. Contradictory notions of responsibility, of saving, preserving, and letting be, all suggest that as our technology advances, so must our understanding of a measured view of ocean management, all while hopefully maintaining potentialities for an unexploited sense of wonder.