

Think Tank

The art of aquariums

—by Jörg Scheller

Contemporary art can seem like a collecting tank. Ever since Marcel Duchamp's readymade and the ensuing fluidity in the understanding of what art is and can be, there is little that can't be stirred up if one pokes around for long enough. While the arbitrariness of many of the objects floating in the 'art pool' can't be denied, the appearance of certain others in it seems inevitable. Among them is that tank itself: the aquarium.

Aren't aquariums the kind of basement hobby for men grown bored of their model railroad sets? Aquariums don't exactly possess the subversive freshness of eco art or the emancipatory potential of socially engaged art. Nonetheless, a kinship exists between the aquarium and the *artificium* of art, whose depths (to stick with the metaphor) will be fathomed here.

At Galerie Esther Schipper in Berlin this March, one found large-scale tinted panes of glass (e.g. *Magic Mirror (Blue)*, 2012) leaning against the walls of the exhibition space. Placed on two pedestals were two small aquariums filled with clear liquid (*Cocktail Sculpture*, 2008; *Untitled (orange)*, 2010). These objects are by Ann Veronica Janssens. In her installations, the British artist investigates visual perception and spatial experience and often makes use of the component parts of aquariums: differentiating the individual parts to reveal the elements of its construction, for instance, or incorporating liquids in different physical states (splatters, drops) as she did for the *Ausstellungshalle Zeitgenössische Kunst* Münster in 2011.



Antoine Catala *Distant Feel*, 2015, installation view, *Surround Audience*, New Museum Triennial, New York, 2015 (courtesy: the artist & 47 Canal, New York)

At the same time as Janssens's exhibition, the installation *assemble | standard | minimal* by the London-based artist duo Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen was on view at the Schering Stiftung in the same city. Also featuring aquariums, this show included living creatures. Flitting around inside the tanks were albino goldfishes without reproductive organs that were designed for the artist by a Japanese scientist.

While Janssens pacifies these artificial underwater worlds and transposes them into a distanced, minimalist aesthetic, Cohen and Van Balen utilize the present-day spirit of 'doability' – in this case, the pervasive experimentation in life and design that doesn't stop at living beings. At the very least, their work touches upon ethical and religious issues. In his book *Art and Fear* (2006), Paul Virilio described such artistic methods as the 'art of fear' and a 'chimerical explosion' counter to what is supposedly value-neutral modification and breeding.

It was between the axes framing the work of Janssens, Cohen, and Van Balen – aesthetic design, scientific research and ethics – that the modern aquarium was born in the 19th century. Philip Henry Gosse (1810–88), naturalist, illustrator and devout follower of the free church of the evangelical Christian group the Plymouth Brethren, is considered the founder of what quickly turned into an aquarium craze in Victorian Britain. Three elements were key for Gosse: the aestheticization of the natural world; a fascination with observing sea creatures and a reverence for the words in the first book of Moses, that man should have dominion over ‘the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the Earth.’ More than a hundred years later, in his film *Der starke Ferdinand* (1976), the director Alexander Kluge picked up on this aspect of dominion embodied by the aquarium. Ferdinand, the over-eager, chronically under-challenged security boss of a large factory installs an aquarium in his office that contains a miniature model of the company building. In the end, the symbolic control that he exerts in this form leads to serious paranoia.

Though Gosse coined the term in his book *The Aquarium: An Unveiling of the Wonders of the Deep Sea* (1854), and initiated a veritable aquarium craze when he displayed the world’s first public aquarium at London zoo in 1853, preliminary work had already been done by the French naturalist Jeanne Villepreux-Power (1794–1871) in the 1830s, when she studied living cephalopods in aquarium-like boxes. It speaks volumes that Gosse drew references to museums, exhibitions and collections in his writings. As Bernd Brunner writes in his cultural history of the aquarium, *The Ocean at Home* (2005), Gosse tried to ‘achieve the impossible, to put life into the “collecting cases” that had been designed centuries earlier for lifeless objects.’ A few years prior to Gosse’s aquarium London hosted the World’s Fair of 1851 inside the Crystal Palace, a gigantic terrarium made of glass and iron designed by a greenhouse architect. Seen in this light, the aquarium seems to exist in miniature within a tradition of world fair expositions, themselves the precursors to today’s art biennials. The latter can also be seen as collecting tanks for the proliferating images and objects of a globalized world, as mysterious and fascinating as Gosse’s *Wonders of the Deep Sea*.

The aquarium then fits neatly into the institutions of collecting, exhibition-making and museological display. Constituting its own presentation of enclosed, aestheticized and curated nature after nature, aquariums can be viewed as a precursor to television. Like TV today, for a 19th-century public the aquarium made visible things that were exotic and otherwise inaccessible; in a sense aquariums are both similarly virtual and real.

These and other connections were the subject of a pioneering exhibition titled *Under Water Above Water. From the Aquarium to the Video Image*, bringing together works by artists such as Pipilotti Rist and Peter Weibel at Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven in 2009. In her catalogue text, media scholar Natascha Adamowsky diagnoses the aquarium as ‘the “temporalization of the perceptual image”, bringing the aesthetics of aquariums in line with the experience of images as offered by the pre-cinematographic arts.’ Nam June Paik tapped into these genealogies in the 1970s when he attached aquariums to the fronts of TV sets on which a dancing Merce Cunningham could be seen with neon tetras gliding past him in an ostentatious lack of interest. Artists such as Simon Denny mark the most recent stage in this media-aesthetic continuum. Denny has referred to the aquarian world of imagery, for instance when he plays underwater scenes on interconnected monitors (*Deep Sea Vaudeo*, 2009), or integrates drawings of aquatic motifs by Nick Austin, which are actually based on stereotypical screen savers, into an installation at Ursula Blicke Stiftung in 2008.

As well as the aquarium enthusiasts in the art world – others worth mentioning are Pierre Huyghe who frequently uses aquariums (e.g. the tanks containing biotopes from Claude Monet’s pond in Giverny which were in his 2014 show at Hauser & Wirth in London) or Antoine Catala who showed one at this year’s New Museum Triennial in New York (*Distant Feel*, 2015) – there is also the practice of ‘aquascaping.’ Its adherents, for instance the British James Findley, design underwater landscapes in painstakingly perfect detail that are modelled after forests, ravines, bosnai groves, or deserts. In their series *Aquasophie* (2015), the Zürich-based photographers David and Tania Willen intensify and reflect the aesthetic character of such high-end aquariums by Swiss aquascapists. Concentrating on the flat glass front of the tanks, presenting them without spatial context, and subjecting them to an antiseptic digital imaging process, the aquariums in these images might be seen as something like keystones to Western modernism itself, the transforming of nature into culture and the world into its images. The hermetic character of these tanks evokes Nietzsche’s notion that ‘every victorious second nature will become a first.’