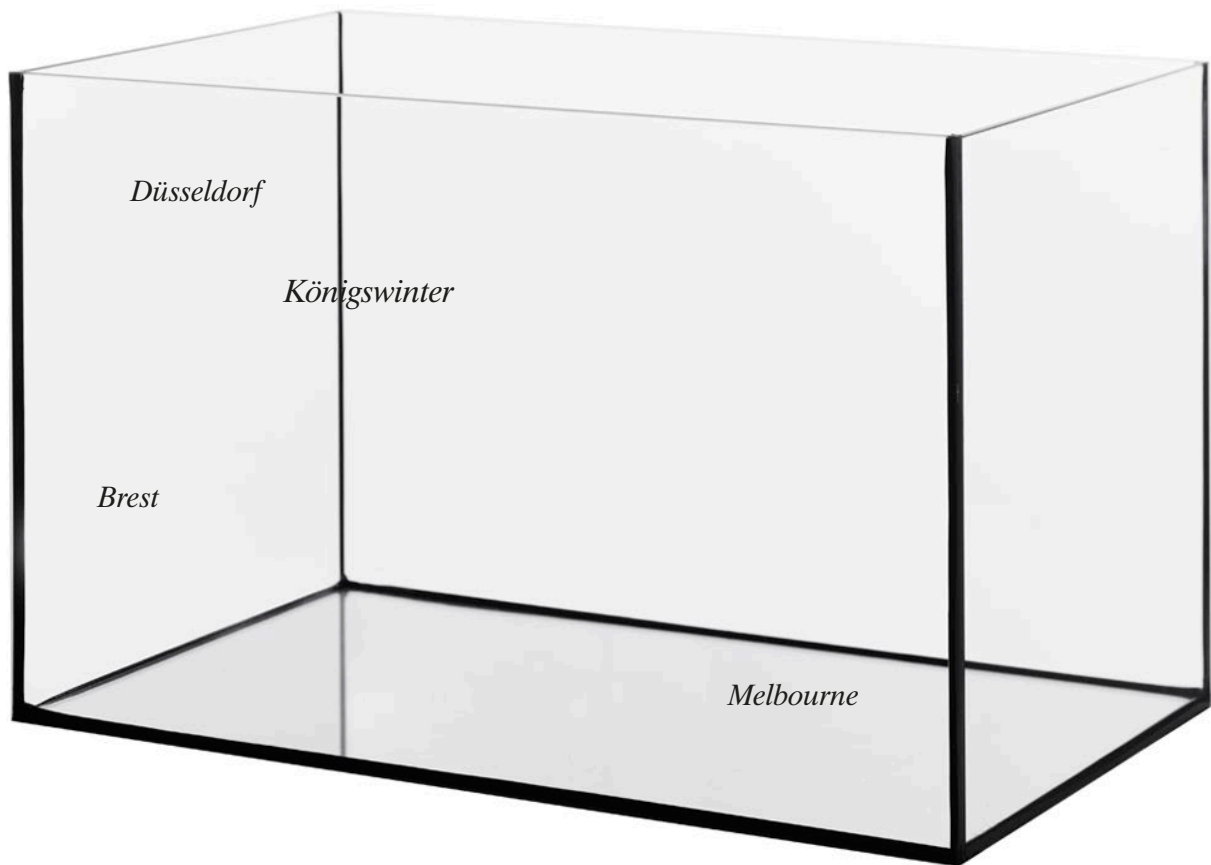


VISITING OCTOPUS



Hörner/Antlfinger

Visiting Octopus

Seeing Through a Glass Clearly

“Why look at Animals?” John Berger asked in his famous essay from 1977, in which he analysed the estrangement of humans and animals in the culture of capitalism. His criticism of the zoo as a place in which non-human animals are reduced to exhibition objects is still read and shared today. Interestingly, aquariums were, for a long time, exempt from this criticism. Even the early aquarists criticised zoos as prisons, but were at the same time convinced that the aquarium was something completely different – namely a part of the sea.

Glass and its illusionistic characteristics play a central role in the power of this narrative: “In that the glassy medium presents a sectional cut through the water space, in stead of a view from above, it created an an ‘eye-to-eye’ perspective, ‘where a human observer sees marine life from within – that is, as if he were underwater with the creatures depicted, and therefore watching them at their own level.’”¹

In our contribution to OktoLab we enter into contact with individual octopuses that live in environments designed and controlled by humans. In the sense of a multi-species ethnography we chronicle two interwoven narratives. Firstly, our own perception of the situation: the different actors, such as, for example, the glass mentioned before, the architecture, the behaviour of the visitors. Secondly we attempt a change of perspective, by seeing the world through the eyes of the octopus. For this we experiment with methods of obtaining insight that create a connectedness; in particular we work with mental techniques of empathy such as those used by shamans or animal communicators.

While classic aquarium displays provide information about the geographical origin of animals, the characteristics of the species and finally the animals themselves, the displays in our work represent our approach to the animal subjects. From planning the visit, to the description of our perception on-site, to the empathic immersion into the body and mind of the individual octopus.

Octopuses are highly intelligent beings. They play and are curious about unknown objects. Not only can they learn to distinguish abstract forms, they can also distinguish between different humans and remember how they were treated by them.² And it’s quite possible that they perceive visual events outside the tank and react to them on a cognitive or even emotional level. The environment in which they live has an influence on the development of their personality just as it does on ours.³

The octopuses we visited live in strange and often very limited environments. Their ability to escape from their prisons is legendary and a great deal of effort is put into making sure that they do not succeed, as in most cases they would die of suffocation within minutes.

Creating empathy for animal subjects – radically adopting their point of view – may help us to understand more clearly what we see through the glass. As the philosopher Susanne Karr puts it: “The realization of the other – be it human or non-human – as having reflective and resonant qualities, makes it available for communication. An object turns out to be a subject. And the anthropocentric frontier dissolves.”⁴

¹ Vennen, Mareike. *Das Aquarium, Praktiken, Techniken und Medien der Wissensproduktion (1840-1910)*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2018, S. 141.

² Anderson, R. C., Mather, J. A., Monette, M. Q., & Zimsen, S. R. (2010). Octopuses (*Enteroctopus dofleini*) recognize individual humans. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 13(3), 261-272.

³ Mather, J.A. and Anderson, Roland C. Personalities of Octopuses (*Octopus rubescens*), *Journal of Comparative Psychology*, 1993. Vol. 107. No. 1. 336-140

⁴ Karr, Susanne. *Mirror Reflections as Agents of Connectedness*, in: *Yearbook of the Irish Philosophical Society, Special Issue Humans and Other Animals*, Cork: Irish Philosophical Society, 2017/18, S. 132



Visiting Octopus Installation view | Plimsoll Gallery, Hobart, Tasmania



Aquazoo | light-boxes (32 x 22 cm, 44 x 32 cm, 39 x 49 cm, 72 x 102 cm), sound loop approx. 3 min

First Visit

Aquazoo – Löbbecke Museum

Düsseldorf

The woman at the ticket desk tells me where the octopus lives and adds: “if you manage to see him, he often hides behind the decoration”. And that’s just how it is.

I’ve found his very small aquarium (D7), yet he is invisible to me. People try to find him, they read his label – his bite is poisonous, they say. A moray lives in the aquarium to his left – she isn’t as reserved, she is lying right at the front, along the pane of glass. I assume he’s a small octopus. He doesn’t have a name, doesn’t appear to be a particular attraction here. Maybe that’s a good thing, maybe not.

People actually look for him! They kneel down in front of his aquarium, they bend to the right and to the left, turn their heads in the hope of seeing him. In the tank to his right is a lobster, apparently his favourite food.

I wonder if there is anyone he has a relationship with – perhaps someone who feeds him, who cleans his tank? And why is he alone in his tank? Does he really eat everyone else? This is my first visit to an octopus. The fact that he doesn’t show up makes him sympathetic to me.

Who actually decides which tank he is put in? Is there a minimum size? What could an octopus demand if he could speak? On his label it says that he is loyal to one location and hides behind walls of stones he piles up himself. I’m pretty sure he didn’t build this one here. There are actually two morays in the tank next to him. Are they more social animals? They eat octopus, and I wonder if he might be able to smell them.

In the meantime I have seen almost all of his neighbours. Even a strange cowering fish, that doesn’t even belong in his tank. Apparently not everything can be regulated. I walk through the rest of the so-called “exhibition”. A display case with Nephila spiders, also eight legs, they are

closer to one another than others. A crocodile – sleeping, mudskippers crouch in the sand. When I come back from my walk he is still (or again?) in his hiding place. If I hadn’t heard someone saying, he had seen one of his arms this morning, I’d doubt that he even exists.



Aquazoo, Düsseldorf, Germany
February 7, 2019

Today I tried to make contact with the small octopus who I *didn't* see yesterday and it was, as expected, difficult. In my imagination, all I saw for a long time was the pile of artificial stones in his aquarium and the seaweed that grows on it, the seaweed that's the same everywhere, and I imagine him hiding behind it.

When I nonetheless managed, after some time, to enter into his body, I felt powerful and heavy. I couldn't connect with his three hearts, but when I attuned my breath to him, I had to cough, as if something had gone down the wrong way. Then I felt the cool fresh water in my throat and I pumped it pleasurably through my siphon.

And suddenly I had an intuition, an idea: I stretched one of my arms out, straight upwards, while turning it around itself like a corkscrew. This made the water around him also start to spin and swirl and I thought for a moment: how wonderful, I can mould the water with my arms. But that was only a very short moment.

In terms of people, I only really have one question: what are you doing here, or more precisely, why are you here? There's nothing to see! Certainly not me, I will always hide. Although I won't grow old, I have the feeling that my time in the aquarium is endless — a thousand years heavy.

My favourite place is up there, where the light comes from. I see an image of swimming upwards, like a plate, mouth opening upturned, and imagine that the small octopus is being fed.

You ask about my feelings? That's difficult, somehow unreadable. Perhaps they all exist simultaneously. Perhaps some parts of my body feel something different to other parts of my body.

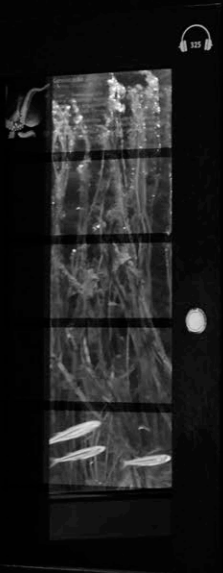
If I imagine my body, then I see myself all rolled up in a hug, I interlock my arms and stick them inside myself. I don't know exactly how I do it, how I squeeze myself into this cave in such a way that no one can see me. I can't eat too much either, otherwise I'd get bigger and at some point wouldn't fit into the cave any more.¹

I wait — I don't know what for. I will never meet other octopuses, but if there were any, then I would tussle with them and bite off one or two of their arms. That's just as a thought, if any were there, but that's not the plan, I'm here alone.

¹When I visit you once again 8 months later, you've grown enormously and now — whether deliberately or otherwise — you are very present in your tank.



D7





Sea Life | light-boxes (32 x 22 cm, 44 x 32 cm, 39 x 49 cm, 72 x 102 cm), sound loop approx. 3 min

Second Visit *Sea Life* Königswinter

“This octopus is very curious and active, which isn’t always the case”, says the woman at the ticket office. It has only been here for a couple of weeks. His tank is in the centre of the building, one floor down, underground. I walk down the stairs, past all the others – straight to him. I stand for a moment in front of a video about octopods, which explains how intelligent they are, and that unfortunately they can only be kept on their own, otherwise they’d kill each other.

When I reach the octopus, he is swimming around in his tank, his body glides along the curved pane of glass. He lives in a sunken world: piled up amphorae, broken columns, remains of murals and reliefs. Was it Atlantis, with the city of octopods? Or was it Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea ... I’ll have to read the stories again...

I now hear children’s voices in the distance – the octopus is going to be fed soon and they probably want to watch. I sit down on a small bench next to his aquarium to write. We can’t see each other at the moment, but I hope he knows that I’m still there. I think he has seen me, perhaps even looked at me.

I really didn’t know how beautiful they are. And this sentimental music that is pumped out of all the speakers, like from the moment in a fairy tale when everything has turned out good, really confuses me, it makes me emotional, I can barely resist. I wonder whether the octopus hears it too and if he can, how does it sound for him? This melody progresses relentlessly towards its climax and never gets there. But feeding time comes, perhaps that’s the climax for him.

It’s a small group, about 10 children and their guide. They first visit the lobsters. They can live for 30 to 40 years, the woman says, but only in an aquarium – in the sea they would have been caught and served up on a plate long before reaching such an age. Small pieces of fish are thrown into their

tank. Then the group comes to him. Octopuses are intelligent, she says, they need stimulation and activity. A hand in a black glove now lowers a red, perforated sphere into the tank, which attracts him. The shrimps in it look like they’ve been peeled, what a shame. He comes and takes the sphere into his arms. The guide says it would now be impossible to take it back off him, his suction cups are too strong.

The woman doesn’t know how old he is, only that he comes from the Mediterranean Sea and was caught in the wild. She says it’s extremely difficult to breed octopods, because they only reproduce once. And because I ask, she says that they can only be caught by licensed trappers, and that you can’t just ask colleagues to bring an octopus back with them from holidays. She doesn’t know his gender for sure, but she and her colleagues suspect it’s a female. It could be that she will lay eggs, but that would of course be pointless, because they aren’t fertilised.

In the meantime the octopus has withdrawn into an amphora, to eat in peace. I wait a moment and then walk back to the exit. The last few metres on the way up, back into the light, lead through a gift shop area, in which there is a potpourri of plastic sea creatures, including different versions of her. But – none of them really appeal to me.



*Sea Life, Königswinter, Germany
February 14, 2019*

At the beginning, as I immersed myself in the octopus, I had strong physical sensations, but it wasn't about this specific octopus, rather about "being octopus" in general. A wave, an impulse went through my whole body with each exhalation. I had the feeling the wave goes through my skin, through my surface and that it also changes my colour.

I felt a bit nauseous, something wasn't right with my stomach (but my human stomach is also not right, so it could also come from me). My body feels light, but something isn't quite right with me here. My sight is somehow unclear, it is like I am looking through a skin, everything is golden and streaked with veins.

I can't see properly as an octopus!

My favourite place isn't here in the aquarium but rather somewhere in the open sea. I saw an object that looked like a sphere, with a dark round opening pointing downwards and thought: perhaps it's an empty sea urchin? In any case I crawl inside this sea urchin, perhaps I'm still a very small octopus and my tentacles hang out of the bottom a bit.

And this sphere — it was a kind of zone of curiosity for me, a hiding place, I liked that. Naming feelings is very difficult, I've been through all the feelings, sad, happy, angry

and I don't know, these feelings don't really mean anything to me.

When thinking about my favourite place again, I go back into this sphere. I'm back in the sea and if I were allowed to ask for something, then I'd want live fish! I'm a good hunter, I'm really good at that! I've hunted, small fish, I've followed them and devoured them. I really miss that.

And when I'm back in my own body and look back at the octopus, the octopus woman, then she is suddenly very far away, optically much further away than she could possibly be in the aquarium, perhaps she's in the sea? In any case, I can't get that close to her anymore.





Océanopolis | light-boxes (32 x 22 cm, 44 x 32 cm, 39 x 49 cm, 72 x 102 cm), sound loop approx. 3 min

Third Visit

Océanopolis

Brest

The signposting system at the entrance to *Océanopolis* suggests huge crowds are expected. But as today is just a run-of-the-mill weekday, attendance is in fact rather modest. I ask the man at the cash desk about the octopus and he says: yes there's a "pulpo" in Pavillon Bretagne, right where the tour begins.

The use of media inside the building is overwhelming and hugely outweighs the live experience. There are screens and projections everywhere. There are glimpses into labs set behind glass along the educational trail, in which huge acrylic-glass cylinders with jellyfish in various stages of growth can be seen. Or the abyss box, a stainless steel chamber, like a washing-machine drum, which houses tiny deep-sea creatures at a pressure of 200 bars. It all has the look of an elaborate media art installation.

On the search for the octopus we happen upon a small tank that is embedded into the wall, alongside others, like a jewellery box. The wall itself is painted in a muted grey/blue tone and is adorned with graphics that depict the maritime food chain. I ask myself whether each display case represents a stage in the chain. The octopus is located in an aquarium, roughly 45 x 70 cm, in landscape format. At first there is nothing to be seen of him, just two brownish, translucent shrimps that swim nervously back and forth. In the space next door a diver in a neoprene wetsuit cleans the panes of a large aquarium from the inside and confuses me at first by making strange signs, but they are intended for another member of staff outside the tank.

Now the small octopus moves solemnly along the edges of the pane of glass until he disappears again behind the upper rim. My gaze is drawn to a rocky grotto in the middle of the tank, in which, it would seem, his larger predecessor liked to sit.

The shrimps are still there. A few metres on, the umpteenth loop of a virtual teacher in a sailor outfit begins on a flat screen. He wants to know, once and for all, in which language we would like to hear his lecture on the theme of plankton.

As neither I nor anyone else reacts, he becomes really impatient and tries to get our attention by rattling things and whistling. When he falls silent for a moment, one becomes all the more aware of the ambient soundscape that is being pumped out into every corner of the exhibition.



Océanopolis, Brest, France
September 24, 2019

I sat and imagined this small, graceful octopus intensively before actually encountering the animal. I gradually felt a kind of throbbing around my head, as if it were very soft. Then it became clear to me: it was the heart — its heart, but also the human heart and the energy that emanates from it. The entire head of the octopus was filled with this pumping, with this heart. The siphon was like a main artery from the heart. It felt energetic. And cool. It wasn't at all about its powerful arms, but instead everything seemed very light and garland-like, like a lace doily. A small, graceful octopus, floating. The feeling was "go with the flow"— going with something rather than going against it. To give in to the currents.

And suddenly I felt that the connection is the thing! The tentacles are like a hand that are attached to this heart. Very directly. Not with five fingers, but eight. And these eight fingers are much more sensitive than those of a human hand. I can sense everything with them.

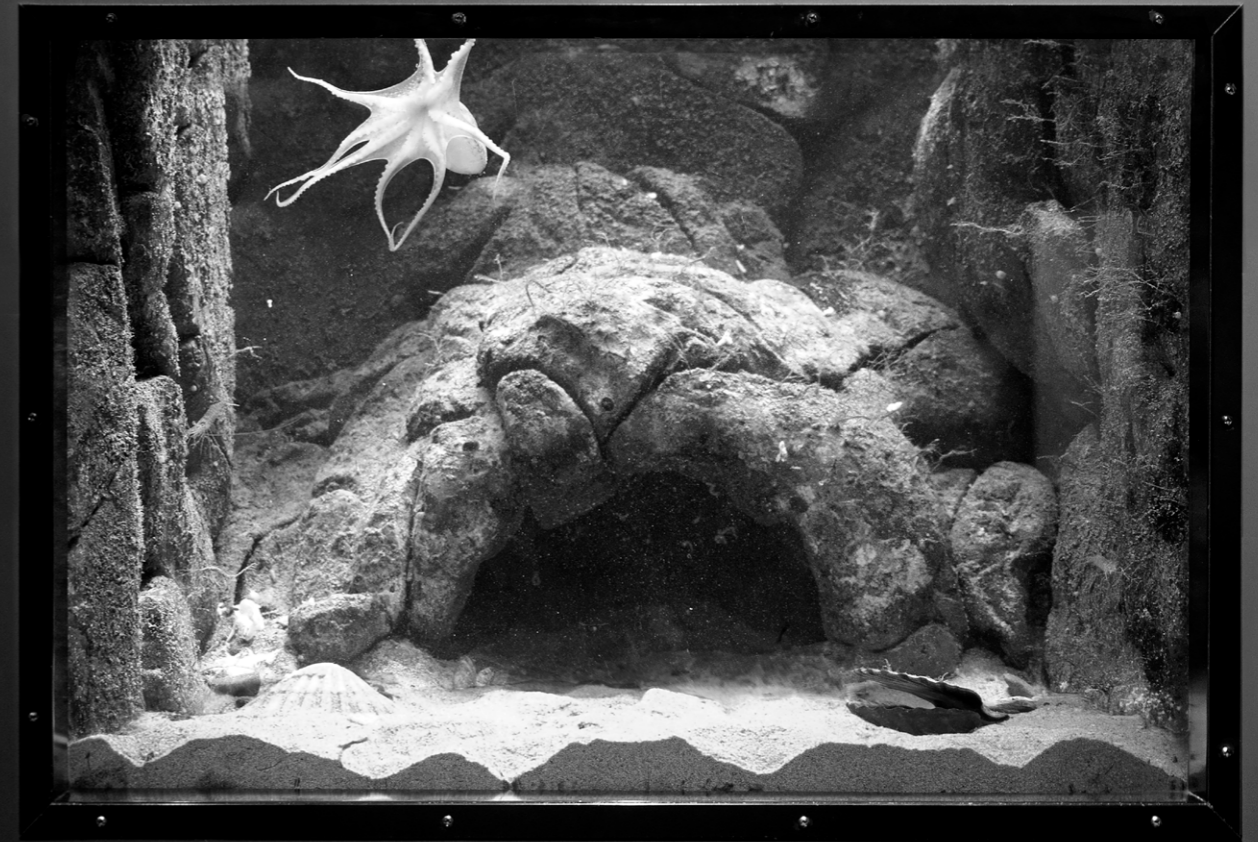
If I sit on this scallop, then I know precisely how big it is, how it feels, with all of its grooves. Very similar to with my (human) hand, but much quicker, as the heart, which is, at the same time, also the head, perceives everything much more directly. My food for example, that was rather playful — there were shrimps that swam around

me. I could have taken them, but I didn't take them. I wasn't hungry. I felt fearless, well aware of being trapped in terrain that I wished would be bigger, but also safe.

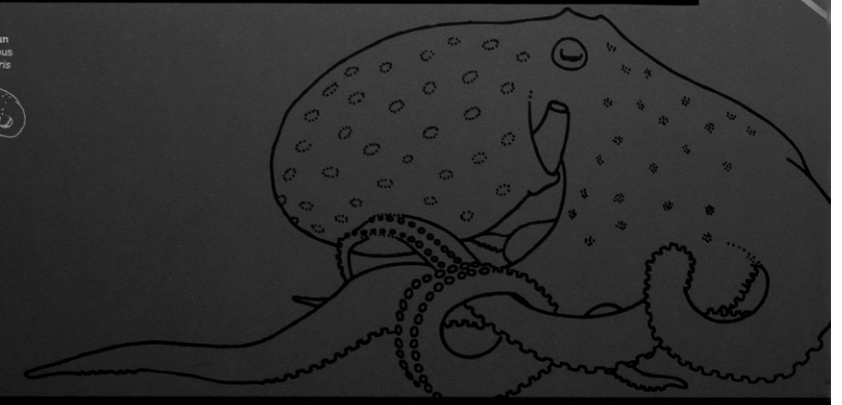
Looking out into the exterior space, making contact with humans, terrified me at first, because they are enormous. From the way they approach the tank it was clear to me that they are beings that try to comprehend everything with their two eyes. They come up to the tank, hold out their hands and contort themselves in some way or another.

Eventually I realised that they cannot harm me. Nevertheless, it is always frightening to see them from up close.

Lieu jaune
Pollack
Pollachius pollachius



Poulpe commun
Common octopus
Octopus vulgaris





Sea Life Melbourne | light-boxes (32 x 22 cm, 44 x 32 cm, 39 x 49 cm, 72 x 102 cm), sound loop approx. 3 min

Fourth Visit *Sea Life* Melbourne

It's not a good day to visit *Sea Life* Melbourne. It's Boxing Day. A day to go shopping with the family, or to do something with the children. Long queues to the various ticket booths stretch back to the entrance. It looks as though you can only get in with pre-booked tickets. The staff are struggling to control the flow of visitors. I ask a young keeper, whether there is an octopus in the display and whether we still had a chance of a ticket. Yes, there is one he says, and we can queue up for a ticket if we like. We decide to give it a go.

We move slowly towards the entrance. A young man in a hat entertains the children in the queue with little magic tricks. After a bottleneck around the corner we finally reach a slightly more spacious area. There are cardboard cutouts of comic figures all over, 'giving information' about the individual areas of the exhibition. The fast-food restaurant is just around the corner. A deafening noise fills the room and mixes with the swelling background music, its melodic progression lost in the whooping of the excited children. Our route leads us past a petting zoo containing various sea creatures. A cluster of parents and children forms around it, all wanting to splash wildly in the small tank. Finally, in the furthest corner of the display room, we find a small aquarium, set into the wall, where the octopus is supposed to be.

The theming of *Sea Life* Melbourne has more to do with Jurassic Park than underwater worlds. The display designers have clad all of the aquaria and tanks with ornamental, interwoven giant bones and teeth, as if a T. rex had fallen into the water, its bones scattered everywhere and grew together through the sediment into massive picture frames.

There's pushing and pulling everywhere. "Look there's an octopus!" a father says to his child and points to it with his finger on the pane of glass.

Apparently it is not that spectacular, so his suggestion wanes. As with most children, his child shows no particular interest in the animal, which has withdrawn into a modelled diver's helmet, roughly the size of a handball, where it remains motionless. The octopus is not to be lured out, even by violent banging. Warnings are issued. The barren tank has nothing more to offer. Just this miniature diving helmet, a couple of shrimps, nothing else.

Now and then the octopus opens an eye and you can see the siphon, that sticks out of the contracted body. The arms border the inner edge of the helmet and give it its typical ornamentation. We try to catch a quiet moment in order to take a photo of the tank and make contact with the small octopus. But it seems this isn't the right day.

On the way to the exit we pass by the real attraction at *Sea Life* Melbourne: the penguins. In a large, conically expanding room is a glass aviary with roughly 5- to 6-metre-tall screens that separate around 30 birds from the visitors. The space inside is suggestive of a landscape of frozen ice blocks over which the penguins move and drop things here and there. A keeper speaks over a headset and explains to the audience what they are seeing. A digital display announces the coming spectacle – feeding time. "Holiday in hell" I think as we step back into the daylight.



*Sea Life, Melbourne, Australia
December 28, 2019*

It wasn't easy for me to connect with the animal; the visual impressions of my morning visit to the aquarium kept forcing their way to the front of my mind. What I felt was a whirr, a kind of sprawling out – as if I am reaching out with all of my arms, like a wheel, a sun or a pleated skirt spinning on its own axis, in stark contrast to the oppressiveness of the actual situation.

My body has a centre – for as long as I have existed I have learned to sense space with all of my cells from out of this centre, like a living blob of plasticine. I have scanned the tank in which I find myself. It is boring and unimaginative. The only available place for me to take refuge is an artificial cave, a head. I'm in your head! I have filled it. I know how it feels, my flesh, my body is in it. I only have to be able to open one eye in order to see out and lie in such a way that I can breath comfortably. My very existence is reduced to this cave. There is no other place. I close my eyes and breath the water always tastes the same. There must be something edible swimming around somewhere, but I'm not interested in that NOW! I have all the time in the world to take it. When I'm hungry, when the light goes out, when this movement, all this noise and the constant pressing on the glass stops.

I keep my eyes closed. In my imagination I am somewhere else: in open shallow water, where the sunlight is broken by the waves

and casts shadow on the floor. Where I can decide to swim wherever I want. There are stones of the most varied sizes lying all around, with crevices into which I can crawl, in which I can hide myself but also swim out again. It feels good.

If I could imagine being another being, e.g. a tree, then I'd like to be an oak, a strong oak or ... a sky, a living sky – in the evening when the clouds are lit up from behind, a fantastical sunset in dazzling colours.

I cannot judge my relationship to humans: for me they are all just confusing apparitions. Brights surfaces that are held against the glass. Fidgeting tentacles, screaming, knocking. Completely distracted and haphazard. I don't feel that I can make contact with them or that one of them wants to make contact with me. It is more like the noise on a motorway that I just have to accept. I am completely alone here.



VISITING OCTOPUS

First presented in the exhibition

OktoLab19: Gallery of Octopus Aesthetics
at Plimsoll Gallery Hobart, Tasmania

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