

# Aquatopians

Alex Farquharson  
Ralph E Lapp

*With great generosity, the director of Nottingham Contemporary readily agreed to The Spokesman's request to run his informative 'Afterword' to Aquatopia: The Imaginary of the Ocean Deep, a stunning collection of images and selected writings published to accompany the exhibition which he co-curated with Martin Clark. From landlocked Nottingham, Aquatopia travels to the sea at Tate St Ives where it is on show until January 2014. Tony Simpson recounts some impressions of the show, while Ralph E Lapp, writing in the 1950s, documents a truly horrific dystopia visited on the Pacific Ocean and its peoples.*

What goes on in the ocean deep has haunted me, as it does most people, for as long as I can remember. *Aquatopia* has had a long and sometimes slow gestation and has taken form and gained definition in the space between other projects – my own projects, Nottingham Contemporary projects and other people's projects. Exhibitions are never entirely unique; they open up and occupy conceptual space between and in relation to others. Some of the artworks and texts in this publication are markers of those relations and the developmental journey that *Aquatopia* has taken.

Kodwo Eshun's essay, 'Drexciya as Spectre', is based on an extraordinary lecture he gave at Nottingham Contemporary in 2008 as part of a season of events dedicated to the cultural after-images of slavery, around our *Godfried Donkor* exhibition, presented in collaboration with New Art Exchange. *Aquatopia's* title was suggested by a reference in his lecture, as was some of the impetus for its Black Atlantic – or Black Atlantis – thread. The Otolith Group's *Hydra Decapita* 2010, which emerged out of their long engagement with the Drexciyan mythos, is a key work in the exhibition, and I would like to thank Kodwo and Anjalika Sagar for our long dialogue on this and other projects.

This is the third occasion a film of theirs has featured in a group exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary, and I think of the aggregation of these Otolith appearances in our programme as an alternative to the orthodox solo exhibition, through time and across diverse contexts.

A lecture by historian Marcus Rediker, 'Hydrarchy and Terracentricism', provided

the initial impetus for an exhibition we held at Nottingham Contemporary of the extraordinary popular art of Haiti in 2012, entitled *Kafou: Haiti, Art and Vodou*, which I curated with Leah Gordon. Rediker's essay ends with a discussion of Frantz Zéphirin's *Slave Ship Brooks*, which went on to feature in *Kafou*. The inclusion in *Aquatopia* of Madsen Mompremier and Zéphirin is an aquatic footnote from *Kafou* in *Aquatopia* – one that speaks of the significance of the oceanic in Caribbean religions, a significance at once mystical, political and historical. That interest was shared by Ana Mendieta, some of whose performances referred to the closely related gods of Cuba's own syncretic religion, Santería. I have Anna Colin to thank for introducing me to Rediker's influential work on power and resistance in the Atlantic world (as well as *Sea-Women* by Mikhail Karikis and *Atlantiques* by Mati Diop in *Aquatopia*), which partially informed her contemporaneous research, with Mia Jankowicz, towards *Hydrarchy*, an exhibition at Gasworks, London (2010), and CIC, Cairo (2012). *Kafou* ended up leapfrogging *Aquatopia* in our exhibition schedule; it shared with *Aquatopia* an interest in the oceanic anti-colonial imaginary of Caribbean literature (here represented by excerpts from Derek Walcott's *Omeros*), which is reflective of the archipelago's position at the geo-historical centre of the Atlantic world.

The occasional symbolist or decadent accent in *Aquatopia* reminds me also of my collaboration with Alexis Vaillant, *Le Voyage Intérieur*, at Espace Electra in Paris in 2005 – an elaborate exhibition *mise-en-scène* that suggested there had been a revival of a *fin-de-siècle* sensibility in the work of a number of contemporary British and French artists. Steven Claydon and Vidya Gastaldon – with Jean-Michel Wicker, on this occasion – feature again in *Aquatopia*. Not enough exhibitions feature aquariums – both these exhibitions do.

Philip Hoare, who spoke eloquently on Byron and dandyism during *Histories of the Present* (our pre-opening programme), published his extraordinary book on the whale – *Leviathan, or The Whale* – in the early days of the development of *Aquatopia*. We are delighted to feature a new essay by Philip – aptly titled 'Homo-Aquaticus' – which draws on his oceanic work, most recently manifested in his latest book, *The Sea Inside*, whose launch happily coincided with the opening of *Aquatopia* in Nottingham. The literature of the ocean deep has been an important touchstone for *Aquatopia*, as manifested in the selection of many of the artworks in the exhibition and texts in this publication. *Moby Dick*, the key literary reference in *Leviathan*, is one of many of these, naturally. Our own editorial approach shares with Philip's writing a concern with situating an art form – in our case the visual arts – within a transdisciplinary and transhistoric field of ideas. Several of the artists

in *Aquatopia* work the interstices of the intimate, the historical, the poetic and the queer, and in that sense share something of the sensibility of Hoare's work.

*Aquatopia* gathered momentum when Martin Clark responded with enthusiasm to our invitation to collaborate on the exhibition by bringing it to Tate St Ives. The sharing of our financial and team resources has made an exhibition of this ambition achievable. The partnership has also given *Aquatopia* a fittingly oceanic backdrop to complement Nottingham's landlocked condition. Martin became my key interlocutor on *Aquatopia* over the past two and half years, informing the final selection of works, helping to articulate some of its intellectual contours, collaborating with me on re-conceiving the exhibition's installation for Tate St Ives, and co-editing this anthology of sub-aquatic texts. It has been an enriching dialogue.

We soon became aware of another exhibition concerned with the history of cultural responses to the ocean happening in Monaco, *Oceanomania*—an extraordinary solo exhibition by Mark Dion within the beautiful period displays of the Oceanographic Museum, together with an engaging and intelligently selected group exhibition, curated by Dion with Sarina Basta and Cristiano Raimondo, of other artists' responses to the ocean and the oceanic at Nouveau Musée National de Monaco. NMNM, in particular Cristiano, were generous and collegial with all our enquiries. Ashley Bickerton's *Orange Shark*, Bernard Buffet's *Le hublot géant du Nautilus* and Dion's *The Sturgeon*, which all featured in *Oceanomania*, are included in *Aquatopia*, as an intersection or twinning between the two exhibitions.

Finally, to complete this sketch of *Aquatopia*'s curatorial filiations, *Aquatopia* also tangentially descends from two previous exhibitions at Tate St Ives: *If Everybody Had an Ocean*, which I curated at Tate St Ives in 2007, and *The Dark Monarch*, which Martin curated with Michael Bracewell and Alun Rowlands at the gallery in 2010. *If Everybody Had an Ocean* was obliquely inspired by the music and life of Brian Wilson – its oceanic utopianism was undercut by depression and hydrophobia, and brother Dennis Wilson's drowning at sea – while *The Dark Monarch* mined an esoteric and occult seam in British modernism through the last century (Philip Hoare also featured in its catalogue). At St Ives, the more Lovecraftian aspects to *Aquatopia* make it something of an oceanic sequel to *The Dark Monarch*, while also elaborating the theme of submergence beneath the surf touched on in *If Everybody Had an Ocean*.

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## Taking a Dip

*During the gloriously clammy summer of 2013, Tony Simpson refreshed himself by making regular visits to the galleries of Nottingham Contemporary to bathe in the teeming waters of 'Aquatopia: The imaginary of the ocean deep'. These are some impressions.*

*Aquatopia's* tentacles curl about the moist outcrops of this uplifting show. Hokusai's exquisite book illustration, 'Pearl Diver and Two Octopi', lays wide open close by Spartacus Chetwynd's short video, 'Tentacle Porn', whose heroine is engulfed by one suckered cephalopod, rather than two in the Japanese print. On the adjoining screen to Chetwynd's burlesque, a far more tense drama unfurls: 'The Love Life of the Octopus', a delightful French film, speeds up the creature's reproductive cycle so that hundreds of baby octopuses float above the ocean floor, stroked into life by their mother, until the single word 'fin' flickers across the screen, concluding proceedings.

With wit and good humour, Alex Farquharson, together with Martin Clark of Tate St Ives, has curated another lively show at Nottingham Contemporary. *Aquatopia* was several years in the making, as Farquharson recounts elsewhere in this issue of *The Spokesman*. That brings to mind some of his earlier shows such as *Star City*, in 2010, which revisited 'how the future was experienced and imagined under Communism through the works and words of artists, designers and writers'. In part, *Star City* assembled the posters and graphic art of the Soviet Union and its satellites in the Warsaw Pact. It was a somewhat more ponderous experience, though not without a measure of official cheerfulness as workers briefly contemplated continuous improvements in living standards promised by a superior mode of production. By contrast, *Aquatopia* is more fanciful and whimsical, whilst grounded in some gritty realities. For example, Anthony Blunt, ace spy and art historian, turns up in the bilge-water of Soviet ships visiting Canada and infesting the Great Lakes and a maquette of an Henry Moore sculpture with invasive species. Both shows, in differing territories, imagine how another world might be possible.

In *Aquatopia*, the seawomen of Jeju Island in the Korea Strait dive in small teams for pearls, clams and other seafoods. They do so without breathing equipment, and communicate by whistles. Their thick black bodysuits hang in the depot where one of their number cooks up what looks to be a steaming hot seafood chowder. These ladies are in their seventies and eighties, and the noisy, sea-blown commentary suggests there may not be a successor generation of seawomen. Traditional ways of

life on Jeju are under acute threat. Elsewhere on the island, against the express wishes of local communities, a huge new naval base is under construction for the US Navy Aegis ships, which carry seaborne elements of the global radar systems underpinning enduring US ambitions for worldwide military dominance. In this region, China is the target. (See K.J. Noh's article elsewhere in this issue, and also *Spokesman 117, Keep Space for Peace*, available in Nottingham Contemporary's Study).

In another *Aquatopia* gallery, gathered around a night-time beach fire in Mauritania, refugees from Senegal contemplate the risks entailed in their forthcoming journey by sea to Europe, in search of work. Breakers crash and whack across the film's soundtrack. Later, we see the gravestones of some of these young men who perished at sea, never having reached Europe's shores.

*Aquatopia* is, variously, dystopia and utopia. Nottingham Contemporary's associated public programme (curated by Isobel Whitelegg) included a notable presentation by Nicholas Higgs of the Marine Institute, Plymouth, entitled 'Imagining the Deep: the future of deep-sea science'. In fact, it proved to be *imaging* the deep, illustrated by video and photographs, shot in the main from remotely controlled vehicles, with some of the images shared in real time via the internet. Increasingly, private money funds such explorations, as public means shrink. Hitherto, manned submersibles descended to depths in excess of 6,000 metres. During his presentation, Dr Higgs issued a public plea, via the online streaming, to be allowed to make such a dive. Actual images of giant squid and other rare creatures of the ocean floor are now safely recorded in the World Register of Deep-Sea Species, to which Dr Higgs contributes. In a sense, authentic images of such strange-looking creatures confronted the 'imaginary of the ocean deep' spread across the galleries upstairs.

In more playful mode, the Aquaphobia Film Season opened with *The Call of Cthulhu* (in 'Mythoscope'), adapted from HP Lovecraft's *Cthulhu Mythos*, and shown on Hiroshima Day (6 August). *Creature from the Black Lagoon* and *It Came from Beneath the Sea* followed later, in a B Movie Double Bill. Hideo Nakata's *Dark Water* concluded the season, reflecting the significant Japanese contribution to *Aquatopia*.

The Space, where Dr Higgs had clicked us through his presentation, transformed into a spectacular Octopus's Garden at weekends and during school holidays. It was much used and gave real pleasure. The Nottingham Contemporary is truly for everyone, for free, for now.

*Aquatopia* has now transferred to Tate St Ives.

## Lucky Dragon

### *A Pacific Ocean Dystopia*

*United States scientists badly under-estimated the explosive power of the hydrogen bomb they tested at Bikini Atoll on the morning of 1 March 1954. Lethal radioactive fall-out spread across 8,000 square miles of the Pacific Ocean. Japanese fishermen aboard the Lucky Dragon were fishing with baited lines for tuna some 85 miles from Bikini Atoll. That morning they saw the 'sun rise in the west', as the fireball erupted. They were engulfed in the fall-out; one of the 23 fishermen died from radiation poisoning, while others suffered long-term illnesses. At Christmas 1954, in his landmark address on the BBC entitled 'Man's Peril', Bertrand Russell spoke of the deadly dust or rain 'which infected the Japanese fishermen and their catch of fish'. In 1955, the Russell-Einstein Manifesto called on the world's scientists to 'appraise the perils that have arisen as a result of the development of weapons of mass destruction'. Eleven distinguished signatories included Professor Hideki Yukawa of Kyoto University, who had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics. In many ways, these events marked the beginning of the international anti-nuclear movement, particularly in Japan. **Ralph E Lapp**, an American physicist, took it upon himself to discover precisely what had happened to the fishermen of the Lucky Dragon. This excerpt is from his book, **The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon**, first published in 1957, in which he tells their story.*

I began my calculations about the fishing boat long before I went to Japan. They began with the size of the ship, since the smaller the surface of the boat, the less dust was collected, and therefore the less radioactivity there was to affect the men. Although they never realized it, the small size of the ship saved their lives. Had the boat been bigger, say the size of an oil tanker, then all aboard would probably have died. I next began to calculate the roentgen doses which the sailors experienced. I was deeply troubled by the significance of such potent radioactivity spread out to such a great distance from the site of an explosion and only reluctantly did I conclude that this radioactive fall-out had to be produced by a radically different type of bomb. Yet all lines of approach led to the same conclusions, that the Bravo bomb detonated on March 1, 1954, tapped the energy from the previously invincible ramparts of the uranium-238 atom. When I later received a copy of Professor Kimura's findings on uranium-237 in the Bikini dust, I knew beyond all doubt that I had been correct.

These facts permitted me to reconstruct the accident of March 1, 1954.

The bomb detonated had a force equal to the simultaneous explosion of 15 million tons of TNT. A quickly expanding ball of fire formed over the edge of the atoll and roared out until it formed a helmet-shaped mass of incandescence three and a quarter miles from edge to edge. Millions of tons of coral were shattered by the immensely powerful and incredibly hot explosion. This coral was sucked into the raging fireball, leaving behind a yawning cavity as though some giant had broken off a mile-wide lip of the atoll's projection from the sea. This coral, shattered into tiny particles, churned itself deep into the heart of the white-hot furnace and mixed intimately with a half ton of uranium fragments produced by the explosion. Each little cluster of split atoms, too small to be seen with a microscope, became attached to a bit of coral ash. The latter, about a millionfold greater in weight, thus became highly radioactive due to this atomic marriage. The fireball then swept upward with express-train speed, forming the characteristic mushroom cloud. An awesome, almost pure-white cloud spread out over twenty and then even more miles, hovering over a large section of the Bikini Atoll. It was at this point that the unexpected happened. The high-altitude winds pulled and tugged the bomb cloud in the 'wrong direction', that is to say, opposite to that expected by the test experts. The northern edge of the cloud veered downwind, passed over the island of Enyu in the Bikini group and drifted eastward. It took time for the cloud to travel downwind to where the *Lucky Dragon* lay low in the water, and it took additional time for the tiny particles to swirl down from the high altitude.

Farther to the south-east, I knew from the brief Atomic Energy Commission release of March 12, 1954, that the islands of Rongelap and Rongerik experienced a radioactive fall-out of serious proportion. American personnel and Marshallese on these islands were evacuated by ships from the task force and taken to Kwajelein, where they received prompt medical care. The radiation dose which they received was less than that of the fishermen. All in all, I deduced that eight thousand square miles of the Pacific were dusted with serious or lethal fall-out. Some index to the devastating power of radioactivity is given by the fact that the actual weight of split atoms of uranium falling out on a square mile of the ocean was between one and two ounces. The total weight of fall-out ash, meaning the coral dust, was about 100 tons for each square mile.

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