

Where do we go from here? A preliminary approach to underwater habitats for the future
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The first principle of epistemology should be that the changeable, shifting aspects of our relations to nature are the primary topics for conscious observation. This is only common sense; for something can be done about them.

The organic permanences survive by their own momentum: our hearts beat, our lungs absorb air, our blood circulates, our stomachs digest. It requires advanced thought to fix attention on such fundamental operations.

Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 1938, p. 29

What is art for?

First of all, for the simultaneous complication and condensation of the burning questions we ask or should be asking.

Second, for a sensory or cognitive jolt.

Martha Rosler, "Frieze," October 2018

The sea, the great unifier, is man's only hope. Now, as never before, the old phrase has a literal meaning: We are all in the same boat.

Jacques-Yves Cousteau

The presentation of *Squid Dinner* constitutes an aesthetic domain in which users are invited to re-negotiate their posture towards what is colloquially known as the biosphere: the sum of planetary ecological systems integrating all living beings and their relationships.

Here I will briefly introduce one path to further develop the sensual encounter with Giovanni Vetere's installation beyond the highly controlled environment of the gallery space.

The fantasy of underwater life has inspired creative thinkers in western and non-western contexts for centuries. Our five oceans – Arctic, Atlantic, Indian, Pacific, Antarctic – occupy seventy-one percent of the planet, yet more than eighty percent remains unexplored, unmapped and unobserved.

How can we *inhabit* – materially and conceptually; in the form of a tangible 'understanding,' – this vast, three-dimensional expanse? And then: could our fascination with the ocean be symptomatic of an *original* bond between us, Homo Sapiens, and the sea?

In answering these questions, the speculative pursuit of an underwater habitat may be comparable to a historicist vector that pushes forwards and backwards simultaneously.

This is a paradox.

But precisely for this reason, it illustrates the state of affairs that underwater habitats would characterize: (1) an increasingly likely future scenario in the face of rising sea levels as result of anthropogenic causes, and (2) an anti-Darwinian anthropological revisionism which posits man's origin in a highly amphibious ancestor, equally common to Homo Sapiens and other primates.

Consequently, producing a *mise-en-scène* for underwater life would also necessarily challenge modernity's globalizing thrust, short-circuiting its ambitions of infinite growth. In fact, among the strongest critiques of globalization is its inherent fetishization of the concept of the Globe, an abstract stand-in for a much more complex reality: the 'lived-in' Earth. Where globalization – in tandem with late capitalist economic interests – aspires to ever-greater diffusion of its value-

systems, it fails to acknowledge the mutability of the planet, wrongly presumed a stable entity to at once exploit, colonize, develop and administer.

Few phenomena like sea level rise, caused by seawater from melting ice sheets and its expansion as it warms, illustrate the current climatic regime as vividly or alarmingly. According to NASA's satellites, the average annual rate of change in global sea levels since 1993 has been + 2.3mm, accruing a total of 86 (\pm 4) mm as of June 2018.¹ This accelerating rise is predicted to amount to approximately two meters by the year 2100.

It is estimated that nearly one billion people inhabit coastal areas – predominantly mega-city clusters – likely to be impacted by rising sea levels. Metropolises like Miami, Shanghai, London, New York, Tokyo and many more are at risk. Though not uniformly distributed, the repercussions of this phenomenon would have catastrophic consequences worldwide: for example, a sea level rise of just 200 mm could make 740,000 people in Nigeria homeless.²

In the face of this looming threat, how could we begin to envision an *aesthetics* of underwater life? What only recently remained a fantastical endeavour is now an increasingly realistic prospect for organized human life on Earth.

This is the task of the artist: to provide a *sensual* encounter that challenges the limits of abstract thought.

The speculation of an infrastructure for underwater life is thus a vector that pushes mankind's existence forward: towards the uncertain future of the Anthropocene.

And yet: would it not be equally plausible to posit this investigation as the simultaneous return to an evolutionary starting point?

So claims Giovanni Vetere's research into the origins of man's rapport to water, explored in two 2018 performances respectively titled *Bodies of Water* and *Homo Aquaticus*.

The Aquatic Ape Hypothesis (AAH), introduced by marine biologist Alister Hardy in 1960 and later developed by anthropologist Elaine Morgan, theorizes that a branch of apes, hundreds of millennia ago, was forced by competition over terrestrial habitats to hunt for food on the seabed, eventually leading to adaptations such as man's functional hairlessness and bipedalism.³ While still highly controversial, this theory has recently gained critical momentum. It posits certain physical properties of mankind's body – subcutaneous fat, regression of the olfactory organ, webbed fingers, direction of body hair – as evidence of a highly amphibious past.

An underwater living environment must consequently imply that humanity, taken as a single unit, re-negotiate its evolutionary history and investigate how its presumed original proximity to the ocean may be exploited in the future quest for organized life on Earth. Following the example of French marine conservationist Jacques-Yves Cousteau, whose vision of a future in which men live underwater was lucidly – if fantastically – presented in James Dugan's 1963 essay "Portrait of Homo Aquaticus," a surgical transformation would allow mankind to 'once again' breath underwater, re-activating the amphibious tendencies that AAH's theories identify.⁴

If the momentum of late-capitalist globalizing forces is pushing us towards the increased colonization of natural resources in the interest of accelerating data-flows, this is simultaneously racing the Earth's biosphere to the brink of irrecoverable loss. At the same time, the possibility of a highly amphibian lifestyle – a force opposite in direction but equal in magnitude – necessarily implies an evolutionary regression of sorts. (It is tempting to dismiss these as two vectors

1 <https://climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/sea-level/>

2 M.L. Parry, O.F. Canziani, J.P. Palutikof, P.J. van der Linden and C.E. Hanson (eds.), *Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

3 Elaine Morgan, *The Aquatic Ape Hypothesis*, (Souvenir Press, 2017).

4 James Dugan, "Portrait of Homo Aquaticus," *The New York Times*, 21 Apr. 1963, pp. 373–378.

producing a zero-sum historical *stasis*, but in fact they are the same: the angel of History is perpetually carried onwards.)

Giovanni Vetere's project provides viewers with a highly sensual infrastructure that invites further inquiry towards this paradoxical vector: propelling mankind towards an extraordinary vision of the future while reaching backwards to question the evolutionary history of our biological identity.

Squid Dinner thus locks the crisis of globalization in a conceptual double-bind: if the future prospects for human survival on Earth presuppose the creation of underwater communities, then it is by going back in time and retracing an ancient, fantastical evolutionary path that mankind may indeed pursue this goal.