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## Aquariums

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## Aquarium

Aquariums may be analyzed as places of display based on capital and innovations accumulation, taming the underwater otherness by a scenography and an ordering of what is presented.

Even as oceans cover about seventy percent of the Earth's surface and present an important diversity from seashores to abyssal floors in terms of landscape, fauna and flora, they stay mostly unreachable to our terrestrial mammal condition. The underwater experience is limited to few people and to a very limited part of the global ocean, making it one of the last limits of our Earth, along with the outer space.

Aquariums organize an encounter between Humans and non-Humans in conditions that are unique: we may be affected, moved and impressed by animals that are no more indifferent to us. As they unveil a situated vision of the underwater world that we may experience and place it into wider social issues their main function appear to be their capacity to expend the *Ecumene* (the places we live and practice on Earth as Humans).

More than 200 million visitors pass through the door of the 240 or so worldwide aquariums and marine life centers every year. On the individual side, roughly twenty million households -six million in the United States only- own an average of twenty fishes each, fueling a business of five to six billion dollars for the yearly exchange of fishes. Ornamental fishes follow a global circulation from productive and fishing zones (Singapore, Malaysia, Brazil, Sri Lanka, Porto Rico...) to important markets places (US, Europe –UK, France, Germany-, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, China) to an ever faster pace as their medium value is almost hundred times the one of fishes as food. The combined attendance of aquariums can measure up with important sport events. Institutions such as the Monterey Bay Aquarium (California) or the Tokyo Sea Life Park attract 3 to 4 million visitors every year.

The practice of keeping alive fishes is acknowledged in the Roman Empire or China, as early as 1000 BCE. At that time, tanks had to be connected to the sea or a waterway. In 1850, the discovery by R. Warrington and H. Gosse of a possible equilibrium between animals producing carbon dioxide and plants producing oxygen is implemented allowing aquariums to be constructed afar from open waters. The Regent's Park (1853), Vienna and Paris (1860) or Berlin (1869) aquariums are the firsts of a long series. An *aquarium mania* is even described among wealthy city dwellers in England and France around 1850-1870 with specific furniture designed to highlight their fish collection, displayed in their living-room.

Aquariums develop a narrative as scientific institutions producing knowledge by ordering species, offering suitable conditions to study rare specimens and even establish a place to protect and reproduce endangered species.

Throughout their spatial organization aquariums display the separation between Humans and non-Humans as they are located on different sides of the tanks. Species limits also become material as they are located in specific zones. At Monterey's aquarium, all jellyfishes are gathered in a zone standing for the specie as a category and partly presenting its diversity. The discourse on species classification and evolution is thus embodied in the aquarium materiality and practiced by visitors.

Animals and Plants are also organized according to the place they are supposed to be coming from. In the mid-nineteenth century, fishes are mostly local but as transportation techniques are developed and a strong network of catchers and animal dealers follows the European colonial expansion, aquariums tend to mimic zoos by gathering exotic animals from abroad.

Many aquariums present a classification based on a miniature of the World. The Lisbon aquarium is based on the idea of a global ocean subdivided in large zones. A huge central tank is surrounded by the Arctic World, the Indian Ocean presenting a reef barrier, the North-Atlantic and its jellyfishes and the temperate Atlantic with giant octopuses.

Even as aquariums are supported by scientific practices, they are mostly based on entertainment as they present the spectacular show of non-Human Animals and Plants. Tanks are filled with stones, wreckages, sculptures or buildings that emphasize their exoticism, wilderness and otherness. Contemporary aquariums tend to organize a scenography mimicking a travel for visitors: we are not only looking at fishes but should experience the immersion in a new underwater environment. The Monterey Bay Aquarium uses special tanks whose limits seem to fade thanks to an optical illusion to present its jellyfishes.



*Picture: The jellyfish tank, Monterey Aquarium, 2008, Jean Estebanez*

Most aquariums present important exotic collections and ornamental fishes mostly come from tropical environments. They also focus on local fauna and flora. Brest Océanopolis in France has about a third of its surface inviting to dive off the Brittany coasts. The Monterey Aquarium is about animals and micro-environments from the Bay area. Even local underwater animals are very different from us: fishes have no faces and coral or jellyfish body is radically different from ours. The local otherness is strong enough to be worth displaying and made esthetic enough to be attractive and to enable a form of bond between them and us.

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Cross-references:

Aquaculture; Coral Reef; Dolphins; Fisheries; Human-animal Bond; Marine Mammal Parks; Non-food Animal Products; Sharks; Taxonomy; Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation; Zoos

Blind Entries:

Fish; Jellyfish

Further Reading:

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