

by Catrin Lorch

Expeditions in the Coral Reef

“The ancient hordes are best imagined as floating islands. (...) under whose protection *homo sapiens* was able to develop into a being that outwardly avoids conflicts and inwardly luxuriates.

“Im selben Boot”, Peter Sloterdijk (1995)

The philosopher seeks new images to describe the *polis*; unlike Plato (“the farmer from Athens”), Sloterdijk does not want to characterize the city-state and its surrounding territory as figures from the agrarian age, using motifs related to plant growth and animal breeding which then work their way through to defining the nature of control in cities. He therefore develops a three-stage theory: a generic history based on the imagery of shipping and seafaring. “Nothing could be more natural than to represent the first period with the symbol of rafts, upon which small groups of people drift through vast expanses of time; the second as the age of coastal shipping, with state galleys and command frigates bound for dangerous distant destinations and guided by a vision of greatness that is psychologically embedded in the holy order of men; and the third as the era of the super ferries which – almost unsteerable due to their enormous size – move through a sea of drowning souls, with tragic turbulence by the sides of the ships and anxious conferences on board about the art of the possible.” The book “Im selben Boot” (In The Same Boat) carves the stages of civilization into the masts of history, and from the primitive form of shipping Peter Sloterdijk shapes an extended womb.

This metaphor is upturned in “Straßenbild mit Squatterwagen” (Streetscape with Squatter Wagon); here, the streetscape resembles a simple raft. Olaf Holzapfel created the sculpture from layers of fibreboard and PVC sheeting, tied up with lengths of different-coloured string. It hangs inside the gallery space as if it has been stretched out to dry – or are we just meant to imagine the accompanying breakers? The plastic ropes recall unhitched rigging, the transparent plastic sheeting lies on deck like slack sails, and the genuine Erzgebirge fibreboard looks more like rotten wood than solid building material. The “streetscape” – which could just as well be a tacked-together map or the blown-off roof of a slum dwelling – might conceivably serve as a backdrop for a scene from a morality play set on the open sea.

There is a tradition behind this: less than two hundred years ago, the sinking of the *Medusa* established a very different myth to that of the protective womb, presenting the raft as an existential realm beyond the bounds of civilization. With a deliberate sense of absurdity, Théodore Géricault’s famous painting of castaways crammed together on a flimsy wooden raft has been chosen to grace the cover of Sloterdijk’s book. The painting was made in 1819, a year after the “Confidential report for the Ministry of the Marine” was published – a detailed description of the castaways’ twelve-day odyssey. Of the one hundred and fifty people left stranded off the West African coast, only fifteen survived, including those who wrote the account: the ship’s surgeon Jean-Baptiste Henri Savigny and geographer Alexandre Corréard. The anarchy on board the raft reached horrific proportions: sick or injured people were thrown overboard in order to increase the wine rations, while others were devoured as ‘provisions’. In the early twentieth century, Siegfried Kracauer likewise evoked the myth of the *Medusa* with his interpretation of the film screen – the successor to the painting – as “Athena’s polished shield”: a way of being able to behold horror with impunity.

A Collection of the Most Interesting Narratives of Shipwrecks, Fires, Famines, and Other Calamities Incident to a Life by Maritime Enterprise; With Authentic Particulars of the Extraordinary Adventures and Sufferings of the Crews, Their Reception and Treatment on Distant Shores “The Mariner’s Chronicle”, Archibald Duncan (1806)

Literary history does not record whether the young editor of the “Southern Literary Messenger” was familiar with Savigny and Corr ard’s account – but he certainly approached the topic of seafaring by reading about it. He worked his way through the four volumes of Archibald Duncan’s “The Mariner’s Chronicle”, the subtitle of which promises a panorama of horror. He reviewed Jeremiah N. Reynolds’ “Report on the Committee of Naval Affairs” and studied the South Seas with the aid of Benjamin Morrell’s “A Narrative of Four Voyages, to the South Sea, North and South Pacific Ocean, Chinese Sea, Ethiopia and Southern Atlantic Ocean and Antarctic Ocean”. Besides useful “Sailing Instructions”, this book also contains an episode entitled “Massacre Island”, which describes how cannibals massacre and eat thirteen members of the ship’s crew. In 1837, “The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket” was serialized in the “Southern Literary Messenger”; a year later it was published in book form in New York and a parallel printing was released in London: Arthur Gordon Pym was the first novel written by Edgar Allen Poe.

As if the author has taken his source material as literally as maps, the nautical world he has distilled from adventure novels appears confined, lawless, perilous, disastrous and claustrophobic. The young stowaway Arthur Gordon Pym first becomes the victim of a mutiny, then of a shipwreck; he is brought to the boundaries of civilization and beyond, into the maelstrom. By the middle of the book, four men are adrift on board a listing whaling ship following a violent storm, having survived only to be condemned to a worse fate. On a few square metres of wooden planks floating only centimetres above the water level, humanity is negotiated – the men steal from each other and get wildly drunk; as sharks circle around them they show courage, despair, greed and skill; they collect rainwater in white sheets, and before they eat a Galapagos tortoise a great deal is learned about the species. One man dies of gangrene, and one is to be eaten by the others – they draw straws, and the very man who made the appalling suggestion draws the shortest straw. A ship appears – but not to save them, as the entire crew of the Dutch schooner are corpses. Then, however, the brig turns. Again the men are sitting on board the ship, but the wind of history has changed: now the keel is thickly covered with nutritious barnacles, a shower of rain brings drinking water, and shortly afterwards a schooner comes to their rescue.

Amid this phantasmagoria, the reef coral – with greater earnestness – displays its less lively colours. Its beauty lies in the form. It stems above all from the context, the noble view of the jointly built city. The single individual is modest; the republic, on the other hand, is imposing. “La Mer”, Jules Michelet (1860)

If “Stra enbild mit Squatterwagen” were a stage on which Arthur Gordon Pym and the three mariners were huddled together, perhaps reason could sail across the sea and pick up the castaways? Then it would not be the horror of the Flying Dutchman crossing the lurching path of the capsized crew in the early 1830s, but rather the MS Beagle on her return journey from Argentina. Charles Darwin himself would rescue the unfortunate souls – all four of them, the strong and the weak – in time to prevent their self-mutilation. The sick would be cared for, there would be enough water and food for all on board, along with Galapagos tortoises and a piece of coral which the young Charles Darwin had found on the beach by Puerto Deseado.

As a naturalist accompanying the expedition, Darwin was fascinated by the tiny red branch – coral was neither animal, nor plant, nor mineral, and yet was all of these. Darwin’s drawing skills were limited: for years he attached his thoughts about the origin of species to the branch tips of coral; the traditional image – the hierarchical model of the genealogical tree with its high and low branches, its dead wood and its strongest shoots at the top – was almost forgotten. “The tree of life should perhaps be called the coral of life,” he wrote. The art historian Horst Bredekamp has followed Charles Darwin in his reflections and recounts the naturalist’s enthusiasm for coral: “Coral was not only able to convey the image of evolution as a battle painting with living victors and fossilized dead in a particularly vivid way; in its growth form it also represented the anarchic aspect of the development, and as such it contradicted a mimetic understanding of the tree model.”

Such models were extremely popular in the mid-19th century. Any natural scientist who wished to argue against divine creation and the theology of the cross had to find manifest symbols. Hugh E. Strickland, for example, a zoologist and geologist, recorded bird species in cartographic fashion – his depiction of the relationships between the species resemble late antique maps of the world: the species are shown as different countries, spread out like islands in the sea, with relationship lines connecting them like the routes taken by seafarers.

When Alfred R. Wallace, a younger naturalist, published brilliantly argued essays on the origin of birds, using of all things the model of a tree (an oak) to exemplify the branching of the species, Charles Darwin ungraciously commented that Wallace was “using my image of the tree” and hastily readopted the genealogical tree model. His book “Origin of Species” triumphed shortly afterwards, not least because Darwin cleverly conveyed the results of decades of research in concise, catchy phrases (e.g. “struggle for life”, “survival of the fittest”) and at the same time linked them to the archaic metaphor of the “tree of life”. Darwin never forgot the coral, however; throughout his life he enthused about the beauty of coral reefs and banks.

A Traveller in Japan

When I meet Olaf Holzapfel he has just spent several weeks in Japan. He otherwise lives in Berlin and Dresden, and also studied in New York. When he talks about Tokyo, the conversation quickly turns to the subject of the city’s architecture – fashionably smart by day, the assiduously up-to-date Japanese take suitably unconventional routes at night through a city that disintegrates into many islands. He has brought back business cards; instead of an address they show a round map section with references to nearby train stations or prominent buildings. There is a system inscribed into this city of over a million inhabitants – one that purposefully loses sight of the whole. Photographs show the route networks of the underground system to be a series of complex connections, which can be laid on top of one another like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle printed in different rasters. While the rest of the world has adopted common standards that make it possible to join the metro maps of Paris, London, Berlin and New York together almost seamlessly, the actual geography of Japanese cities is not shown anywhere in the tangled lines of their maps. Paying no attention to scale, topographies, or the binding nature of the points of the compass, these maps focus on specific routes and intersections. There is a history to this: on the complete “Map of 1000 countries” from the 17th century, Japan is depicted at the centre of the world. This image of the world, designed in Nagasaki under the direction of Europeans, may visualize a certain pretension, but perhaps, like old pilgrims’ maps, its intention is merely to help the Japanese find their way in the world.

Keeping the ornamental, autonomous routes of uncoordinated Japanese cartography in mind, Olaf Holzapfel followed the lines of pavements, streets, park paths and footbridges; he was particularly impressed by the paths for blind people, which are laid out with grooved yellow tiles; they cut their own pattern into the road surface and at the same time avoid intricately paved areas by making sudden changes of direction and side-steps. With his gaze fixed firmly on the ground, Holzapfel also traced the stone paths through an old garden, where at least five different patterns and materials alternated in the space of just a few metres.

20 Drafts & 20 Decisions

“Hand und Fuß” (Hand and Foot) was the title of Holzapfel’s 2005 exhibition at the Galerie Gebr. Lehmann in Dresden, for which he brought together works on canvas, such as “Seitwärts geradeaus” (Sideways Straight Ahead), and sculpture. “Seitwärts geradeaus” presents a confusing array of perspectives, rhythms and refractions; if this painting, which is more than four metres wide, were a photograph, one would guess that these were extreme

distortions generated with a special effects lens – like an old street map, the image seems to be split into different sections through folds and creases; if it were a reflection in water, ripples would agitate the abstraction while the refraction of light would cut through its surface perfection.

“20 Entwürfe & 20 Entscheidungen” (20 Drafts & 20 Decisions) looks as if twenty fibreboard boxes have been mounted on a table, exactly covering its surface: not a single centimetre protrudes over its edge. Eight of the boxes have a red exterior, another eight a blue one, and four have been left white. The basic form of the boxes is a perfect square, however the sides are corrugated. When the boxes are placed next to one another, overlaps occur at the edges, creating spandrels and offcuts. Each side of the installation presents a new aspect – a grid formation like a tightly packed city, fluctuating horizons or the shadows of a dense cluster of houses: a talking topography with the potential for seemingly endless recombination. Like a Sol LeWitt piece in which modules become fields of possibility, Olaf Holzapfel’s “20 Entwürfe & 20 Entscheidungen” insist on a potential that is far from being exhausted with this arrangement in the gallery space.

Olaf Holzapfel knows that the secret of architecture and cityscapes cannot be discovered through explanation. Of course there are coordinates, grids and fixed points of reference – plot size, eaves height, angle of light, number of storeys – but what makes a high-rise like the Seagram Building in New York look so distinguished? Is it the narrow, shiny bronze ribs Mies van der Rohe used to give the façade its shimmering texture, which envelops the building like an aura? “First we do a good building, then we consider the site”, the man with the cigar once wrote. In Japan, such absolute consistency would hardly be possible. Olaf Holzapfel experienced it for himself: Tokyo builds incessantly; none of its houses are permanent structures, and for this reason modernity is established there with functionable rather than functional interruptions. What the property owner needs is what is built, and even the most elegant blueprint can be dented by the subsequent addition of a restaurant dome.

Meridians and Notions of Scale

Listening to Olaf Holzapfel, it becomes clear why the leaps and meanderings are necessary; that it makes a difference whether we orient the direction of our thoughts towards the rampant growth of coral or the ascending motion of trees. To what extent may reality avoid our inventions? Olaf Holzapfel’s paintings and sculptures reveal irregularity, potency and beauty. In a world that would rather cling to the tree than get its feet wet in the salty water of the coral reef, that remains true to scale and thinks in centimetres while it crosses meridians, they could act as a map and compass for castaways.

Translated by Jacqueline Todd