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Contemporary Art and Culture

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140 June • July • August 2011

## Politics & Art in Italy

Anthea Hamilton

William Leavitt

Cosima von Bonin

Lee Ufan: Interview

UK€5.95 US\$16 €10



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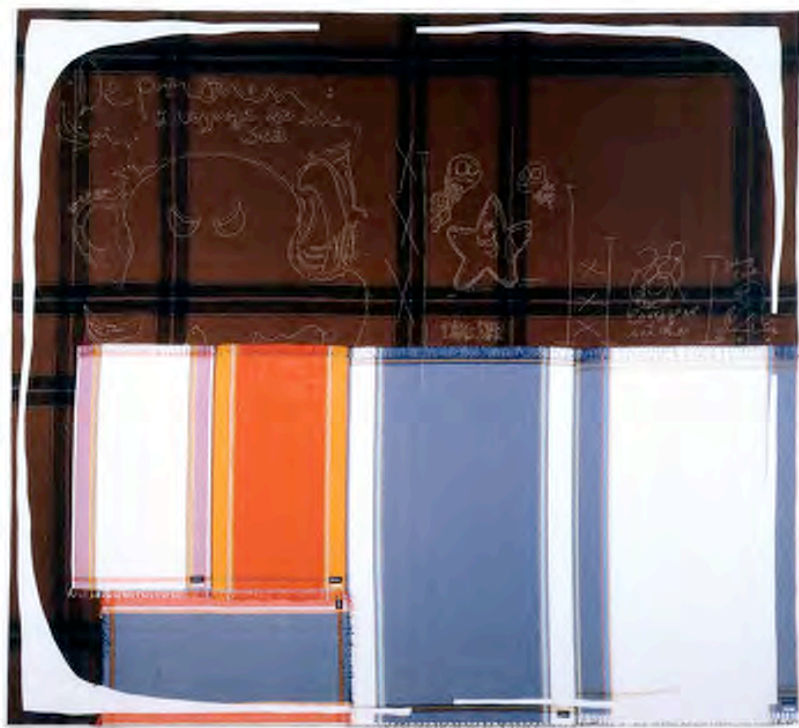
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# Marine Core

*John C. Welchman* explores the historical and metaphorical parameters of 'the marine' in the installations, sculptures and wall pieces of Cosima von Bonin

This is a brief meditation on the stakes and substance of referentiality, an attempt to stand on the other side of – or at least to peek through – the veil of allusive, poeticizing, insider and appositional criticism in which Cosima von Bonin's work is so often creatively immured. My approach is quite simple: to think through some of the metaphorical, relational and historical parameters of one of the signal discursive clusters with which Von Bonin's work engages: the *marine*.

A point of commencement can be found in a *rapprochement* between the recursive provisionality of Von Bonin's practice and the curatorial programme of documenta 12 (2007), where she was exhibited so prominently in the cavernous first room of the documenta-Halle and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> In an interview published immediately before it opened, the artistic director, Roger M. Buergel, noted his desire to reinvent the routing system of contemporary curatorial practice, to break with the conventional metropolitan 'trade routes' plied between New York and London, Paris and Berlin, and to offer new forms of semantic sequencing predicated on systematic 'fragility', 'idiosyncratic connections' and what he termed 'radical' transhistorical exchange.<sup>2</sup> That Von Bonin's work is held as emblematic of Buergel's orientations was attested to by the reproduction of her wool and cotton piece *Deprivation: A Voyage to the Sea* (2006), with its cryptic aquatic menagerie set atop a series of geometric swatches. Not only was hers one of only two contemporary art works pictured in the interview, but *Deprivation* purports to negotiate with the very conditions of journeying



and its route systems. Typically, however, it short-circuits these references rather than in some sense exemplifying them: for by using the preposition 'to', Von Bonin seems to refer not to some actual ocean voyage or maritime trade route, but rather – as confirmed by the caravan-like disposition of the composition – to an approach to the sea, presumably overland. Deliberately associated by Buergel with the fragility his exhibition espoused, Von Bonin's productions are held at the same time to 'resemble an ironic grammar of historical form'.<sup>3</sup> It is, of course, the irony and play attached so promiscuously to her work and its penumbra of associative allusions that activate the consequentially tenuous nature of her negotiation with history.

One way to understand the effects that Von Bonin solicits with her marine metaphors is to look across to the wider issue of the sonic and semantic spaces negotiated by many of her works. The kinds of reference for which she reaches relate to a loosely configured historical series which turns on a playful, sometimes dissident unfurling of the signifying energies caught up in certain denominations of speech and writing – especially those imbued with the concentration and density of vernacular rhetoric. Aspects of this tradition were already established in

Above right:  
*Deprivation: A Voyage to the Sea*  
2006  
Cotton and linen  
3.2x3.6 m

**THE BONIN / OSWALD  
EMPIRE'S NOTHING  
= 03 (C/F/B'S S.A.N.S  
CLOTHING, MOST  
RISQUÉ, I'D BE  
DELIGHTED @ MYO'S  
ORANGE HERMIT  
CRAB ON OFF-WHITE  
TABLE NEXT TO PINK  
TABLE SONG)**  
2010  
Installation view  
Kunsthhaus Bregenz



marginal and secular representation in the Middle Ages, where they emerged with special vigour in various capitals (illuminated and architectural) and misericords which took on the visualization of proverbial discourse. A large stock of sayings and common wisdom, often misogynist and derogatory, scatological or defamatory, was mobilized, then, alongside references to romances, riddles and 'marginal' episodes from the Bible. As Michael Camille has suggested, these visualizations were not simply illustrations of the texts that partly underwrote them but active commentaries on the values and implications of written lore. More than this – and more clearly aligned with the provisional exchange systems reckoned with by Von Bonin – they testified to and seemed 'to celebrate the flux of "becoming" rather than the [deliverance] of "being".'

Local aphorisms and saws were subject to literal visualization in many works by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, especially his oil-on-panel *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559), which assembles more than a hundred renditions of Flemish proverbs, including several – still in circulation, with variants in languages such as German and English – that relate to maritime lore and fisheries: 'swimming against the tide' or 'big fish eat little fish'. Remarkably, these fraught, coiled, phrases, and their like, form part of the semantic mobilization of Von Bonin's own peripatetic 'journey to the sea' which zigzags through photographs (with altered texts) taken in a fisherman's club in Newcastle, used for the artist's first exhibition at Galerie Christian Nagel, Cologne, in

1992; the small, coloured, varnished clay simulacra of *Obne Titel (Fisch I)* (Untitled [Fish I]) and *Obne Titel (Fisch II)* (Untitled [Fish II]), both 1992; *Eel's Lounge* (1998); as well as – in a linguistically *détourné* variant – across the front cover of the *New York Daily News* used in *Untitled (Not Bad for Openers)* (with Colin de Land, 1993), the headline of which reads, 'Off the Hook' (next to a headshot of Woody Allen, and referring to the judgment in his trial for molestation).

But this is only the beginning of Von Bonin's engagement with the sea, its people and the creatures that live in it. In 2002 we witness the arrival of a faintly absurd, beaming, behatted, sailor's face with attenuated body in Von Bonin's wool and cotton canvas pieces such as *Marine find ich stark* and *La Marine – Des Sensations Fortes!* (both 2002). The smiling 'marine' figure recurs in a diptych that pairs a c-print photograph and the drawing *Really Stuck and Dropping Out by Staying In* (2002), where it becomes party, as the title suggests, to one of the most confessional – and difficult – moments in Von Bonin's career, when the artist felt somewhat blocked and isolated. While the most famous cartoon sailor, Popeye, who first appeared in 1929, did occasionally smile he was more often associated with a grumpy disposition fuelled by his intermittent, spinach-induced, super-human strength. What motivates the crypto-Nietzschean cheerfulness of Von Bonin's choric sea dog only becomes apparent, however, in the context of the larger framework of marine references she develops around him.

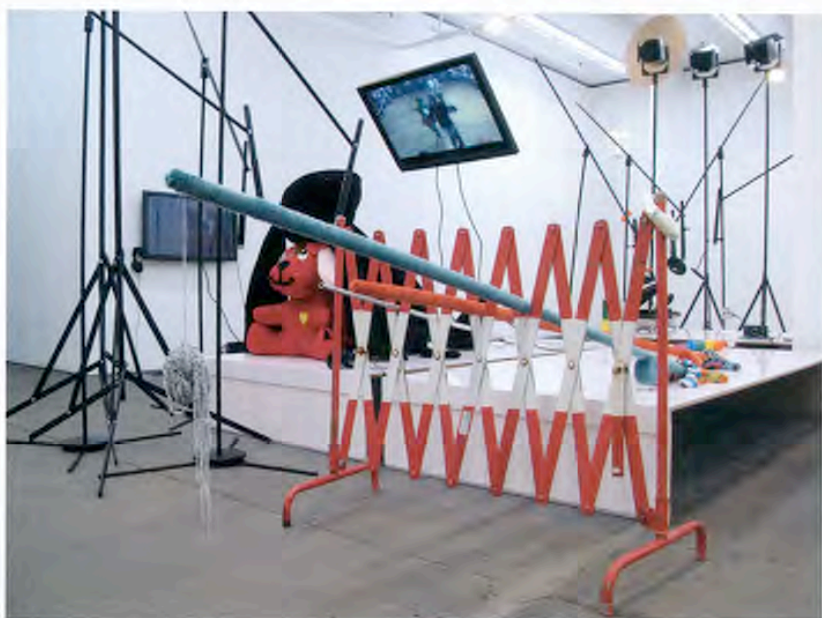
Another round of maritime references arrives in a different mode of appropriation, this time of the shapes and forms of the central and defining part of a water-going vessel, the hull, which gave rise to a notable series of works in 2001 and 2002. For an

Below left:  
*Life's Too Short to Stuff a Mushroom*  
2003  
Wool, cotton and felt  
2.7x2.9 m

Below right:  
*'The Juxtapositions of Nothings'*  
2011  
Installation view  
Friedrich Petzel Gallery,  
New York

exhibition at the Künstlerhaus Graz ('Cosima von Bonin's Fund-Oriented Equipment') in October 2002 she showed a skerry cruiser (also known as 'square metre yachts') of the type first designed in the early 20th century by the young Finn, Gustav Estlander, an icon of nautical rationality and design finesse. The referential implications of this hull were described by the curator at Graz as 'not only [...] a metaphor for unfettered proliferation and boundless world domination but, above all, as a symbol of failure, of misadventure, perhaps even of hubris'.<sup>4</sup>

Somewhat earlier, Von Bonin had cross-referenced the hull shape with performative elements – the 'actors' appearing in sailor's costumes – and her signature mushrooms, a conjunction that was brought to fruition in a series with the governing title *Life's Too Short to Stuff a Mushroom* (2002), which uses a hull shape based on the design of a warship by the well-known Swedish shipwright, Knud Reimers. These hulls (in German, *Schiffsrumpfs*) went through several stages of modification under the same general title as they lay on their sides beached out of their aquatic element, propped on their keel fins with the hull itself often covered with patterned materials. In *Perception-Object* (2001) Von Bonin covers the pure shape and colouration of the hull into a post-Minimalist





**IN THE GRIP OF THE  
LOBSTER**

2006  
Cotton and linen  
2.9x4 m

object – though one with a streamlined appearance unknown to the predominant rectilinearity of the earlier movement. The hulls and related items were brought into a more sustained relation to performance and manipulation in the videos that make up *2 Positionen auf Einmal* (2 Positions at Once, first produced for the Kölnischer Kunstverein in 2004); and in the performance, sculpture, and video of *KAPITULATION/CAPITULATION* (2004) which addresses conformity, indoctrination and ritual in the context of obedience school, for humans as well as dogs. At Von Bonin's exhibition at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 2007–8 – the title of which was named for maritime communication, 'Roger and Out' – the piece took the form of a constellation of rooms connected by interior tunnels and slides. It was viewed using overhead mirrors and staircases positioned so that the spectator could look in from the top at a variety of interior elements, including an actual-size sculpture of a catamaran sailboat covered in grey tweed, enlarged soft sculptures of dog toys, and chalk drawings on blackboard-like walls. Surreptitiously converting vessel into vassal, Von Bonin images the awkward manipulation of a catamaran in a confined space,

with a hint that the dysfunctional sea-going craft might be a surrogate aquatic biped.

Making a move for which we should now be well-prepared, Von Bonin unfurls an indirect commentary on her own metaphorical proclivities in the marine field (and by implication on metaphors themselves). For in *Too Quick for Binoculars – Backdrop for a Boatswain* (2001), shown in the 2001 exhibition 'FREE PORT' at Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall, she seems to allude to the fugitive nature of her own allusive scenes: whatever makes it up passes by too quickly to be visible under scrutiny or be seen from far away with the prosthetic aid of binoculars. In this sense, her marine metaphoricity can only be a 'backdrop' (*Hintergrund*) even for someone who works on the water like a boatswain (*Bootsmann*). The subjects of Von Bonin's aesthetic aquarium wait like free radicals to form unstable compounds with the shifting valences of objects, performances and photographs. At the same time they are quietly mustered as a form of anecdotal obverse – or vagrant verso – to the poeticizing revitalization of social documentary forms negotiated by Allan Sekula in *Fish Story* (1989–95), a work that was as central to the ethos of documenta 11 as Von Bonin's work was to the next installment in 2007 (where Sekula showed *Shipwreck and Workers – Version 3 for Kassel*, 2007).

Von Bonin not only moved from caught and displayed fish, to fish simulations and linguistic and formal metaphors, deploying sailors, hulls, nautical knots and many other referential forms, but situated several of her marine pieces in a variety of actual port cities, including Stockholm and Hamburg. *Portside Home – Port Said*, made in

collaboration with Jan Timme in 2001, might be an emblem for these locative contexts. But what other kinds of sense can we make of the persistence of marine imagery in Von Bonin's work? We have already encountered one possible interpretation, which Bennett Simpson summarizes in the catalogue for 'Roger and Out': 'KAPITULATION and HUNDESCHULE speak of maintaining; making the boat fit. Von Bonin's boats have always seemed symbols for herself: the artist-out-of-water, met or mastered by others, cumbersome with grace.' Another interpretative route would follow the references of these works out of the immediate situation of the artist as they track aspects of the marine metaphoricity taken on in the Modernist tradition – by Vladimir Tatlin, Pablo Picasso and others. We might recall, for example, Picasso's study for a figure which was finally relegated from the brothel scene represented by *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907). While the sexed-up, masculine sailor is eventually ushered off the stage of one of the iconic images of 20th-century art, the latency and motivation of this figure were never forgotten. More directly relevant, perhaps, is the work of a range of more contemporary figures, including Poul Gernes, whose building of a ship in order simply to burn it on the open sea is referenced in the title of the Hamburg show, 'Brother Poul Goes to Sea'; and Bas Jan Ader, who set off alone in a small unfashionable



Opposite page:  
*THE BONIN / OSWALD*  
*EMPIRE'S NOTHING*  
= 03 (*CVB'S FATIGUE*  
*RAFT & MYO'S WHITE*  
*RABBIT SONG*)  
2010  
Installation view  
Kunsthhaus Bregenz

Below:  
*Total Produce*  
(*Morality*)  
2010  
Installation view  
Arnolfini, Bristol,  
2011

Below right:  
Tim Hawkinson  
*Octopus*  
2007  
Photographic collage  
on foam  
2.4x3.6 m



**Von Bonin not only moved from displayed fish to formal and linguistic metaphors, she situated several of her marine pieces in port cities.**

sailing boat in 1975 – the antithesis of the sleek-hulled part objects presented by Von Bonin – in order to cross the Atlantic in 60 days, a project that ended in his vanishing without trace.

But there is yet another vein of reference – on the surface, at least, more menacing and fearsome – that supplies Von Bonin's nautical imaginary. This sense emerges gradually, almost comically, in a canvas and cotton piece from 2006, *IN THE GRIP OF THE LOBSTER*, before taking up with an ironic anxiety in *IMAGE SEASONS IN THE ABYSS* (2006), which is then crossed with formal menace in one of the gate-like structures that provide another metaphorical subtext for Von Bonin: the powder-coated steel piece, *SHARK LOCK* (2007). As often, this serial reference backs itself into a kind of quietly declarative bathos, signaled by the addition of colourful materials to a would-be dangerous marine creature, which we see in *STRUKTUR* (2007). Von Bonin draws this all to a knowing conclusion in *DECOR* (*DER KRAKE* #3) (The Octopus, 2007), in which the mythic monstrosity of the kraken is allied with the aquatic camouflage of the decoy.

Von Bonin is not alone in exploring the implications of cephalopodic imagery. Tim Hawkinson's *Octopus*, also made in 2007, for example is the gestalt product of a body engendered by the manipulation of material sub-units of various dimensions which, considered individually, have an altogether different signification: all are photographs of

various parts of the artist's own body, notably its tactile extremities, including puckered lips, fingers, and hands. Like Von Bonin, Hawkinson alludes to a wide range of representational histories for the octopus, dating back to its presence on some of the founding objects of western art, in Minoan ceramics, its conflation with veritable monsters like the Leviathan and the Kraken, and its emergence in the early 20th century – when Estlander was at work on his elegant hull – as a racialist metaphor for the Yellow or eastern peril.

The notion of marine menace and violence that forms one, perhaps small, part of Von Bonin's interests is of course a defining element in Paul McCarthy's *Caribbean Pirates* (2001–5). Using installation, performance, sculpture and video, this extended project is also one of the few contemporary works that, like Von Bonin's, takes on the specific form and shape of various maritime vessels: centered in McCarthy's case on the massive 'frigate' and the more domesticated 'houseboat'. Both artists also return to nautical design histories, McCarthy to the golden era of the pirate ship and Von Bonin to the heyday of modern nautical engineering. As a consequence, both deploy multiple references to a variety of vessels and small

craft, McCarthy even isolating this as a kind of meta-reference in the form of the ship-shaped bar abutting the scenographic side of the frigate, which itself doubles as a type of abbreviated village architecture. Both artists use the nautical system to reflect on their own performative positions, McCarthy through his role as First Mate and image 'director'; Von Bonin more allusively and vicariously – as we have seen. For both, maritime references have been present in their work from early in their careers – we recall Von Bonin's photograph of a fish in a vitrine from a show in Cologne in 1992; while McCarthy's *Sailor's Meat* (1976) was one of his first exercises in video. Both, of course, use their ships and vessels as models, metaphors and at the same time as sets for video production, McCarthy in his colossal studio at the Santa Fe Dam in Azusa, near L.A. and Von Bonin in the video components of *2 positions at Once* and other pieces. Each develops a network of relational references to both popular and high cultures, Von Bonin to the cartoonish sailor, on the one hand and the legacies of Bas Jan Ader and Poul Gernes on the other; McCarthy to Disneyland and its movie spin-offs, but at the same time to Pier Paolo Pasolini and Edward Albee in the nightmarish degeneration of domestic normality into rage and disgust transacted in the houseboat sequences of his *Pirates* project. Yet, while these congruencies are surely striking, it's also clear that McCarthy attacks his subject-matter of piracy and mayhem using perverid strategies of visceral simulation, while Von Bonin's preference is for diffidence, restraint and almost febrile allusion.

**While sleekness and menace are force-marched down the gang-plank, there's still something fishy on the end of the hook.**

In Von Bonin's most recent exhibitions ('The Fatigue Empire' at Kunsthhaus Bregenz in 2010; the different iterations, or 'loops', of the 'Lazy Susan Series, A Rotating Exhibition' at the Witte de With, Rotterdam, 2010-11, the Arnolfini, Bristol, 2011 and Musée d'art moderne et contemporain (Mamco), Geneva, 1 June-18 September; and 'The Juxtaposition of Nothings' at Friedrich Petzel, New York, 2011), such qualities pass over into highly confectioned regimens of semi-organized lethargy. While sleekness and menace are force-marched down the gang-plank here, there's still something fishy on the end of the hook: comedic bivalve duos (perched on a skateboard at Petzel, on a swing at the Arnolfini), anchor-themed nautical bunting, occasional lazy lobsters (soft or silver) and the enigmatic inertia of 'the divine scallop' come together in a sketchy ambience pervaded by the partial recall described in one of the 'rag paintings' at Kunsthhaus Bregenz as 'more the memory of a shrimp'. But there are indications - fog-horns in the mist, perhaps - that the tide might be turning on Von Bonin's maritime imagination. For one of her latest recent incarnations of the cephalopod seems to raise its florid tentacles in mock protest at the pacific ennui in which its sibling creatures are becalmed, running up a Jolly Roger with another ethical gestalt: *TOTAL PRODUCE (MORALITY)* (2010). ●

**Below:**  
*Devise Scallop*  
2010  
Mohair velour,  
polyfill, cotton, felt  
and swing  
35x100x45 cm

**Opposite page:**  
*Hermit Crab In Fake  
Royère*  
2010  
Steel, cotton, mohair  
velour and felt  
118x115x95 cm



*John C. Welchman is Professor of Art History at the University of California San Diego. He is author of Modernism Relocated (1995), Invisible Colours: A Visual History of Titles (1997), Art After Appropriation (2001), Vasco Araujo (2006) and Tony Oursler (2008); editor of Rethinking Borders (1996), Institutional Critique and After (2006), The Aesthetics of Risk (2008) and Black Sphinx: On the Comedic in Modern Art (2010); and co-author, most recently, of On the Beyond: A Conversation Between Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw and John C. Welchman (2011).*

1 This article draws on two sources: my essay 'Fencing Lessons' in *Cosima von Bonin: The Fatigue Empire*, Kunsthhaus Bregenz (KUB), Austria, 2010, and lectures delivered on 18 July 2010 at KUB and March 26, 2011 at the Arnolfini, Bristol (on the occasion of 'COSIMA VON BONIN'S BONE IDLE FOR ARNOLFINI'S SLOTH SECTION, LOOP #2 OF THE LAZY SUSAN SERIES, A ROTATING EXHIBITION 2010 - 2011', 2011)

2 'What is to be Done?: Jennifer Allen talks with the curators of Documenta 12', *Artforum*, May 2007, pp. 173-7

3 *Ibid.*, p. 177

4 See 'Cosima von Bonin's Fund-Oriented Equipment', 27 October 2001-12 January 2002, Künstlerhaus Graz, Bургring at [www.bit.ly/gTVATF](http://www.bit.ly/gTVATF)

*Cosima von Bonin lives and works in Cologne, Germany. She has recently had shows at the Kunsthhaus Bregenz, Austria (2010) and Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, USA (2011). The third and final installment of her touring exhibition 'The Lazy Susan Series' is currently on show at Mamco, Geneva, Switzerland until 18 September.*



**Left:**  
Paul and Damon  
McCarthy  
*Caribbean Pirates*  
2001-5  
Installation view  
at the McCarthy Studio,  
Los Angeles, 2005

