The Sponge Diver

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KUNSTRUM SNÆVERSTI
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Industrial sponge diving in Greece begins with the introduction of the standard diving dress in 1865. Sponge divers are hired for the season by a captain who remains at the surface, steers the ship and counts the sponges. While on land, he has indebted himself to prepare the boat and hire a crew. The sponge divers are on piecework, only paid for what they collect, always competing. The sponges are animals but cannot flee.

The sea strata outline a hierarchy. The pressure rises the deeper you go. So do the level of immobility and the limit of vision.

The diver is dropped to the bottom and stays down until he is pulled back up. The diving dress is lead-enforced so that the diver can walk on the ocean bed rather than float in the water. He walks against the current like a man leaning into a heavy wind. He wears a surface supplied copper helmet—it is connected via an air tube to a hand-operated oxygen compressor at the deck of the ship. While two crewmembers handle the compressor, a third keeps an eye on the air bubbles that returns from the depth and turns an hourglass measuring the duration of the dive.

Once at the seafloor and adjusted to the low light, the diver performs a continuous act of pattern recognition. When he recognises a black sponge, he approaches it and scratches its surface. If the black crust comes off like the skin of a peach, the sponge can be harvested. The work is monotone—like a computer game with one simple mission: to gather. The longer you stay underwater, the more sponges you can gather, and the more you will increase the pay by the end of the season.

However, working too hard and staying underwater too long also enhance the risk of catching the feared and until the early 1900s unexplained divers' disease, known as 'the bends'. In order to discern whether or not the diver has been affected, he smokes a cigarette with trembling hands. The smell of the smoke holds a message from the body, disclosing whether or not the diver is affected. If the smell is unusual, itching and 'bending' will soon follow: he will suffer from cramps and paralysis. He may hallucinate. His limps may turn stiff, and in some cases a slow and painful death follows.

In October 1900 a specific sponge diving ship runs into a severe storm on its way home from Africa where its divers have been gathering sponges all season. It left the Greek shore soon after Easter with a crew of clean-shaven healthy and hopeful young men. Now, in October, they are exhausted from hard work and competition, poor food and dirty water, sleeping on deck, diving several times a day followed by anxious cigarette smoking. Co-divers and friends were buried on beaches or thrown in the water. Others are returning with stiff limps, crippled for life. But the ship is loaded with dry sponges.

Here comes the storm. The ship's captain decides to drop anchor off the island of Antikythera while waiting for the storm to pass. In the meantime, the crew is sent out to dive for more sponges along the coast. One of the divers gives a sudden signal to be pulled up and reports at the surface that he has seen a heap of decomposed bodies on the seabed below. Ghost-like but sunken as if they too were lead-enforced.

The captain emerges on deck and the diver repeats his morbid vision. His face is pale. The captain assumes the diver is hallucinating, but he puts on a diving dress and jumps in the water to check what´s going on at the bottom. What the captain sees below differs markedly from what the sponge diver saw. He sees the remains of a ship with a cargo of ancient art—marble and bronze sculptures.

The captain was right. The ship was Roman and sank in the first century A.D. But as the marble sculptures are salvaged, the sense of ghostliness lingers. Their surfaces are distinctively divided into areas that have been preserved by burial in the seafloor and areas which have been harshly exposed to sea life, eaten by sponges and other sea organisms and turned in to coral like structures. Smooth white marble skin is situated right next to a highly decomposed surface. One cannot help but think of petrified bodies.

The captain was right, but could the sponge diver also be right?

Marble is a naturally occurring, solid, metamorphic stone; a calcium carbonate compressed at high temperatures and pressures until it becomes crystalline, *calcite*. Inspecting the veins of a (poor quality) marble slab, detailed coral structure may reveal. This structure is not coincidental—the compressed chalk of the marble originates from ancient coral reefs.

Coral reefs are shaped as coral polyps over time build a common skeleton. The common skeleton exceeds the lifespan of the singular polyp. For this reason polyps are not easily distinguished as individuals or groups, and the skeleton is not easily distinguished as alive or dead. This instability of life and death prevails when the reef is compressed. Even in crystalline form it is not possible to differ whether it is alive or dead. The instability prevails when the marble is cut from the quarry, and when the sculpture is carved, painted, sold and stolen. It prevails at the bottom of the ocean for almost two thousand years, when the sculptures are salvaged and, finally, when they are put on display in The National Archaeological Museum of Athens where they reside today. The instability bleeds out from within the material itself, leaving marble 'skin' blushing.

This instability counts for every piece of marble. But in the case of human shaped sculptures half buried in the seabed, the instability of life and death also sinks in from outside—from its shape and its exposed condition. The intrinsic quality of the material and the superficial image carved in stone and eaten by sponges are superimposed on each other. Where they meet is at the surface. Here the distinction between form and material —image and thing—collapse.

Another collapse: A diver working at the ship wreck smokes a strange-smelling cigarette after a dive, falls ill, suffers from cramps, gets paralysed and eventually dies. Several other divers suffer from stiff limbs and bubbles under the skin. The salvage work is finally discontinued in the summer of 1901. Decompression tables are distributed on the Greek islands around 1910. None of the divers know of the nitrogen bubbles that evolve in the blood when compressing and decompressing the human body too rapidly and too heavily.

When a form shifts its material (i.e. a human shape carved in marble or full of nitrogen bubbles) it is with the surface as its fixed point. The surface is the most consistent element in the processes of casting, copying or scanning objects.

Digital 3D graphics do not deal with solidity, but solely with surfaces folded in a three dimensional space. When an object is 3D scanned, the surfaces are saved as 'texture'-files—flat images of surface fragments put on a dark grey background. The spatial form is saved as a 'mesh'-file—a net suspended in three dimensions.

The sponge divers' net and the net of the 3D scanning capture the surface of a life size statue of a boy in a bending posture, carved in marble and half eroded to coral or corpse-like structures.

The texture-file of the 3D scanning is printed and mounted in the showcase Kunstrum Snæversti in Roskilde and can be seen from May 8 until July 20 2014.

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