

# Aquarium

...Ripa doesn't conceal or suppress, but rather puts himself—both technically and visually—in the same position as the average visitor; he doesn't isolate the object of his attention in order to highlight the extraordinary nature of his gaze—and of his camera—but, on the contrary, contextualizes it within a constant flow of forms that intentionally emphasize their context, the transitory, and in many respects even casual, chance conditions in which the photographer finds himself at the moment of taking the shot (an exemplary image in this regard is the one of the *Pesce Luna / Ocean sunfish*, wherein a visitor's profile unwittingly transforms the fish, bringing an entirely new animal to life—one that might well be included in Borges's *Book of Imaginary Beings*).

The fish, humans, and objects herein don't *seem* to be viewed through the plate glass of these tanks, rather they *are* viewed through it: right from the start, Ripa declares that the barrier set between animal and man is one of the main subject of his photography, one of the key motives behind this work, since it is precisely the glass tanks and water that allow for a certain indeterminacy of form, creating a disorienting, estranged, surrealistic vision—at times disquieting, at times comic—that characterizes not only this series of work, but Ripa's entire creative oeuvre.

Ripa's gaze isn't innocent, nor is it ideologically programmatic, aimed at objectively documenting the spaces of a reclusive area, according to the tendency so present in the aesthetics of contemporary photography (consider, for example, Richard Billingham's zoos, Lucinda Devlin's death chambers, or Taryn Simon's *American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*): Ripa's gaze still focuses on the totality of an experience that internally contemplates the ideas of plot, wonder, and chance—all based upon a rhythm that can only be described as *narrative*. There is also an element that is strongly coherent with Ripa's previous projects: the book *Anima Mundi* focused upon the idea of the voyage—both real and metaphorical—as the core of meaning for the entire series; while *Lightly* played, even in its very title, with the visual assonances and dissonances present within a place as full of architectural and functional connotation as the Fiera di Milano (the Milan Trade Fair).

So, in effect, Ripa is constantly working on a double register: on the one hand, there is a documentary aspect of his work (broadly speaking), tied to the nature of each place recorded; on the other hand, there is an imaginative dimension, present in the same locations, born of an inspiration and creative flair that is always receptive to catch any element of surprise or incongruity along the horizon, any moment of rupture in the otherwise smooth, apparently pacific unfolding of the narrative. At this point, it becomes apparent that an aquarium is naturally suited to the exploration and expression of such poetics.

Before you proceed to look at any one image on its own, note how Ripa has organized their sequencing, the order in which they appear, according to the continuous alternation of the various elements upon which his attention focuses. There is a rhythm in the appearance of subjects, just as there is a rhythm in their photographic rendition—a non-linear progression that runs from moments of extreme objectivity and clear recognition to moments of almost complete indeterminacy of form, from concentration upon a single detail to a panoramic view, from a nearly exasperated realism to an almost equally extreme desire for abstraction. Fish, humans, architectural elements—everything is involved in this mechanism, and not a single aspect remains immune from this process because Ripa's attention is invariably destined to draw upon the totality of such locations, rather than just any one part.

It is clear, furthermore, that each individual image makes this reading possible, not just the cross-

references reverberating throughout the book as a whole. The visitors, for example—there isn't a great number of photographs in which they act as protagonists, yet certainly in many of those particular photographs the people seem transformed from the observers into the observed: in *Vasca dei pinguini / Penguin tank*, where they end up behind the glass; or in *Vis à vis*, where the perfect one-to-one correspondence between animal and man creates a paradoxical situation; that same paradox is repeated, albeit in a different form, in *Dolphin tank*, where the visitors, seen from behind, seem to be intently staring at schedules posted on some airport or train station timetable . . .

Two series of photographs deserve particular attention, as they characterize the entire book, thanks to both their intrinsic qualities and their conceptual exemplarity: the images of jellyfish (*meduse*) and those showing details of the architecture and installation in some of the aquaria constitute the polar extremes of Ripa's investigation. The jellyfish are the fully conscious ostentation of a certain desire for astonishment, verging upon the oneiric, dreamlike realm that is an integral part of the artist's poetics. Be it because of their physical conformations or because of his photographic technique, they emerge from the photographic surface like authentic apparitions, like mysterious, fascinating beings. At times, they become pure drawings in space, or indefinable creatures—which are also reminiscent of the symbolist imaginary that reached its apotheosis in the work of Odilon Redon, but also influenced an approach to photography at the dawn of the twentieth century characterized by its focus on the relationship “between the occult and the avant-garde” (to quote the title of a famous exhibition of those works).

At the other extreme—at least in appearance—are images like *Vasca cilindrica per i pesci svuotata per la manutenzione / Cylindrical fish, Oblò espositivo / Viewing window*, and *Display case*, where the rationality of the constructed framework and the pictorial frame itself are dominant. This is a rationality from which the human presence then emerges—the human presence that designed these places, created them, and adapted them to the cultural customs and needs of the time, generating an artificial environment that is functional not only in terms of the (rather secluded) existence of the animals and the temporary presence of human visitors, but also aimed at facilitating the recreational and educational purposes for which such locations were made. And yet, even these photographs end up sending our thoughts elsewhere, transporting the viewer into a world reminiscent of science-fiction films; and don't forget that one of the first literary masterpieces of that genre was Jules Verne's *Twenty-thousand Leagues under the Sea*. Ripa's images both continue and reinforce a particular reversal of all roles and situations, hinting at one possible key for reading this surprising body of work. This is perfectly consistent, ultimately, with the subject of water itself, and the underwater realm—a fluctuating world, in constant motion, where one's natural, terrestrial perception is altered, forms become uncertain, and surprising treasures are hidden.

**Walter Guadagnini**

Walter Guadagnini teaches contemporary art history at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Bologna. He has been Director of the Galleria Civica in Modena and the international arts event *Modena per la fotografia*. He is currently president of the scientific board of Unicredit Group's contemporary arts initiative. In 2007 he curated the exhibition *Pop Art! 1956–1968* at the Scuderie del Quirinale exhibition space in Rome, and was named Commissaire Unique for the Italian section of the *Paris Photo* project. In 2008 he curated, alongside Francesco Zanot, *Faces-Ritratti nella fotografia del XX secolo* at the Fondazione Ragghianti in Lucca. His previous publications include *Fotografia* (Bologna, Zanichelli) and *100-La fotografia in cento immagini* (Milan, Motta Editore).