

**SculptureCenter**

**Cosima von Bonin: Who's Exploiting Who  
in the Deep Sea?**

## OFF SEASON

### Ruba Katrib

On a menu, octopus, scallop, lobster, shark, and crab mean one thing, and when brushing up against your leg in the ocean, another. In Cosima von Bonin's work, they resemble oversized stuffed toys, approachable and perhaps even friendly. The hermit crab in *LACANCAN*, 2010, slumps on the slats beneath the seat of a lifeguard chair and faces two microphones. His audience awaits a speech, or warning, but he remains silent. Like all of von Bonin's sea creatures, he has invaded a space of human recreation that is normally off-limits. Though he seems to be having a good time doing so, he doesn't give anything away.

Our encounters with the sea and its inhabitants are shrouded in mystery. We seek sun and warmth, entering the shallows of a watery expanse that extends toward the unknown. We stay near the edge, imagining what might be swimming next to us as we wade in and what might be lurking in the depths once we have taken the plunge. The sea does not provide the only imagery in von Bonin's work of the last twenty years—there are dogs, bears, trucks, and plenty of other motifs—but as an otherworldly realm that resists human domination it provides a pervasive and distinctive frame of reference. The sea offers specific limitations to access and knowledge. A place of pleasure and a supplier of resources, it pushes back against humans, and, confusing the distinction between public and private, makes us vulnerable.

Themes of inclusion and exclusion run throughout von Bonin's work. Noted for her role in instigating yet resisting art cliques, particularly in the well-documented Cologne scene in the 1990s, von Bonin participates in a way that is never simple. She explores the boundaries of any place or series of relationships; she circles the perimeter, dipping in and out as she sees fit. While collaboration is central to her work, she critiques idealistic notions of inclusion. She has been known to refer to assistants and collaborators as “slaves” to underscore the power inequities and feelings of oppression experienced even within the dynamic of consensual work, which von Bonin considers to be reciprocal.<sup>1</sup> Following suit, the ocean metaphor speaks to the complex and slippery condition of being inside or outside one's normative element.

Von Bonin's characters recur throughout her body of work, appearing in a slightly different setting in each iteration. When their scale is enlarged, their bodies become relatable to ours. In *HAI AM TISCH 1*, 2014, a shark sits at a desk, his soft stuffed body contrasting with the hard furniture in a way that is typical of von Bonin's work. The anthropomorphizing of the shark as a studious predator not only creates an absurdist comparison but also speaks to domestication, both human and animal. Compared with the dogs that von Bonin also uses in her work—a species particularly entwined with humans—the aquatic animals defy intimate human relationships. They evoke fear, fascination, and sometimes hunger, and they resist adjectives like cute or cuddly. We worry that sea animals might take a bite out of us when we are helpless in the water, but we don't mind taking a bite out of them at the dinner table; this is the conundrum of the food chain. Dogs can also be dangerous, but domestication has

turned their viciousness into a means of protection and their dependence into a source of affection. This turning of the tables is important in von Bonin's work. Nothing is what it seems, as roles can rotate, a theme that informs her *LAZY SUSAN* project, in which she uses the familiar revolving tray as a strategy for adapting works and exhibition forms depending on the site.<sup>2</sup>

The soft surfaces of von Bonin's sculptures dispute the toughness of the carapaces and the sharpness of the teeth of their real-life counterparts. In *THE BONIN/OSWALD EMPIRE'S NOTHING #05 (CVB'S SANS CLOTHING. MOST RISQUÉ. I'D BE DELIGHTED & MVO'S ORANGE HERMIT CRAB ON OFF-WHITE TABLE)*, 2010, a hermit crab's shell has been rendered impotent in plush. At the same time, scaled up, the crab has gained power and individuality. The nineteenth-century illustrator J. J. Grandville drew animals from classic fables dressed and behaving as Victorian humans; while not quite dressing them in clothes, von Bonin positions aquatic creatures that recall and confound social roles. She references the French caricaturist in her series *GRANDVILLE AND THE DECISION AT GRANDVILLE*, represented in the current exhibition by three sculptures in which decorative porcelain seashells with seahorses, ducks, or lobsters combine with the wave-evoking soundscape "White Noise" by von Bonin's frequent collaborator, the musician and producer Moritz von Oswald.

Von Bonin's coded titles are full of puns, idioms, and references to relationships we can only guess at. The full title of *THE BONIN/OSWALD EMPIRE'S NOTHING #05* includes the monikers and initials of von Bonin and von Oswald, referring to an inside joke perhaps only they are privy to. The half-invitation into her personal realm piques our curiosity, pointing to an intimacy without disclosing the full story. For the title of the current exhibition, *Who's Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea?*, von Bonin pulled the phrase "who's exploiting who" from Róisín Murphy's 2015 song "Exploitation." Taken as a whole, the title seems to be more naturally phrased in the question, who's afraid of whom in the deep sea? The reference to exploitation comes as a surprise in relation to the sea, summoning an economy of relations in an unlikely place. Humans demonstrably exploit the sea, like the rest of the natural world, but the question of who is doing what in von Bonin's scenarios challenges that established power dynamic. Are aquatic animals capable of exploitation beyond the symbiosis of the suckerfish and shark? The title makes us wonder what is really going on in the murky waters in which sentient beings interact.

Perhaps the complexity of these ideas can be found in the octopus, an animal von Bonin regularly references. The octopus, so unlike humans, is nevertheless capable of human-like behavior. Stories of octopuses opening jars and escaping from labs give rise to the speculation that they can defy human constraints.<sup>3</sup> They are outlaws. Using their intelligence as well as their agile command of multiple limbs to extraordinary advantage to get what they want, they have been called "alien" by some.<sup>4</sup> The title of a von Bonin octopus sculpture not included in this exhibition, *LE PRIMITIF DU FUTUR*, 2008, nods to the ancient creature's uncanny and as yet

poorly understood qualities. The octopus that does make an appearance in the show expands the potential of the octopod's stealth and capacity for camouflage: *TOTAL PRODUCE (MORALITY)*, 2010, includes brightly colored and patterned Japanese fishing flags.

We cohabit the beach with all manner of beings, whether consciously or not. When we enter the water or walk on the sand, creatures are all around us. But von Bonin's work is also about the missed connections. Two works in the exhibition, *MR. BURGER* and *YELLOW/RED/BLUE*, both 2006, represent food trucks. Palm trees framing a sunset are painted on the side of *MR. BURGER*, providing a boardwalk context. A muscular man is featured on the other side. Shuttered and locked-up, the trucks suggest that it is after-hours or off-season. Activity and access is temporarily suspended. In *JOHN JAMES*, 2002, named after the soap opera actor who starred in *Dynasty*, two freestanding dressing room doors are just a façade, standing for rather than lending privacy. Again, entry is withheld. In another work on view, *LE PETIT CAFE, COCKTAIL BAR*, 2011, letters spelling out the title are crafted out of white cardboard and mounted on a wall. The other cardboard elements on what would be the front of the café are a blank mailbox, non-functional vent, and other suggested architectural forms. The Specials board is empty. The bar is closed.

1 Zoe Gray in *Source Book: Cosima von Bonin*, Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art (2011), 14.

2 Past presentations of *THE LAZY SUSAN SERIES, A ROTATING EXHIBITION* were held at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam; Arnolfini, Bristol; Musée d'art moderne et contemporain (MAMCO), Geneva; and Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

3 See Dan Bilefsky, "Inky the Octopus Escapes from a New Zealand Aquarium," *New York Times* website, April 13, 2016.

4 A study published in the journal *Nature* found that octopuses have an "unprecedented level of complexity" in their genome sequence. Caroline B. Albertin et al., "The Octopus Genome and the Evolution of Cephalopod Neural and Morphological Novelty," *Nature* 524, no. 7564 (August 13, 2015): 220–24. Many writers have picked up on the humor of the octopus's uniqueness making it alien to all other animals. See "Octopuses Are Aliens with Weird DNA and Superpower Capabilities," *Science World Report* website, June 13, 2016.



OHNE TITEL, 2016, installation view.



Installation view.



Installation view.



Installation view.



Installation view.



Installation view.



Installation view.



*IDLER, LEZZER, TOSSPIECE (THE WDW SWING NOSE & SCALLOP VERSION)*, 2010, installation view.



Installation view.



Installation view.



GRANDVILLE AND THE DECISION AT GRANDVILLE III (SEAHORSES, DUCKS & LOBSTERS), 2011, installation view.



LE PETIT CAFE, COCKTAIL BAR, 2011, installation view.



Opening performance.



Opening performance.

# Checklist of Works in the Exhibition

## *BIKINI II (GHOST VERSION), 2011*

Cotton  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist

## *CUT! CUT! CUT!, 2010*

Three microphone stands, two  
umbrellas, adhesive tape, fiberboard,  
dispersion paint  
96.5 x 59 x 39.4 in  
(245 x 150 x 100 cm)  
Courtesy the artist

## *GRANDVILLE AND THE DECISION AT GRANDVILLE I (WHITE PORCELAIN), 2011*

Porcelain, SoundSticks  
Electronic music: Moritz von Oswald,  
*WHITE NOISE*, 2011  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist

## *GRANDVILLE AND THE DECISION AT GRANDVILLE II (WHITE PORCELAIN), 2011*

Porcelain, SoundSticks  
Electronic music: Moritz von Oswald,  
*WHITE NOISE*, 2011  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist

## *GRANDVILLE AND THE DECISION AT GRANDVILLE III (SEAHORSES, DUCKS & LOBSTERS), 2011*

Porcelain, SoundSticks  
Electronic music: Moritz von Oswald,  
*WHITE NOISE*, 2011  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist

## *HAI AM TISCH I, 2014*

Iron, blockboard, lacquer, rubber,  
cotton, terry, foam material, polyfill,  
bulb with fitting, cable, galvanized steel  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Neu,  
Berlin

## *IDLER, LEZZER, TOSSPIECE (THE WDW SWING NOSE & SCALLOP VERSION), 2010*

Steel, fiberglass, aluminum,  
styrofoam, rope, wood, velour, velvet,  
satin, felt, sand, paint  
Dimensions variable  
Paul van Esch & Partners Collection,  
The Netherlands

## *JOHN JAMES, 2002*

Chipboard, hard fiber, fir, acrylic lacquer  
65 x 88.6 x 19.7 inches  
(165 x 225 x 50 cm)  
Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/  
London and Hauser & Wirth

## *LACANCAN, 2010*

Mohair, polyfill, cotton, spruce,  
lacquer, steel, aluminum  
70.9 x 74.8 x 126 inches  
(180 x 190 x 320 cm)  
Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel  
Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial  
Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-  
Hudson, New York

## *LE PETIT CAFE, COCKTAIL BAR, 2011*

Cardboard, electric wiring  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist and Petzel Gallery,  
New York

## *MR. BURGER, 2006*

Mixed media  
86.5 x 79 x 66 inches  
(219.7 x 200.7 x 167.6 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and Petzel Gallery,  
New York

## *OHNE TITEL, 2016*

Inflatable pool toys  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist

## *OHNE TITEL (fence), 2000*

Wool, foam  
46 x 55 x 8 inches  
(116.8 x 139.7 x 20.3 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and Petzel Gallery,  
New York

## *SCALLOPS (DARK VERSION), ROCKING, 2014*

Mohair velour, polyfill, foam, satin, felt,  
wood, lacquer, hemp rope, glittering  
garland  
Dimensions variable  
Collection of Eleanor & Bobby Cayre,  
New York

## *SMOKE, 2008*

Acrylic, LED, neon, steel  
60.24 x 25.2 x 3.54 inches  
(153 x 64 x 9 cm)  
Collection of Eleanor & Bobby Cayre,  
New York

## *THE BONIN/OSWALD EMPIRE'S NOTHING #05 (CVB'S SANS CLOTHING. MOST RISQUÉ. I'D BE DELIGHTED & MVO'S ORANGE HERMIT CRAB ON OFF-WHITE TABLE), 2010*

Mohair velour, polyfill, styroplast, brass  
48.8 x 29.1 x 59.1 inches  
(124 x 74 x 150 cm)  
Private collection, Cologne

## *TOTAL PRODUCE (MORALITY), 2010*

Various fabrics, polyfill, rubber, foam,  
wood, fluorescent lights  
33.5 x 90.6 x 98.4 inches  
(85.1 x 230 x 250 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and Petzel Gallery,  
New York

## *YELLOW/RED/BLUE, 2006*

Mixed media  
90.3 x 80.5 x 78 inches  
(229.4 x 204.5 x 198.1 cm)  
Courtesy the artist and Petzel Gallery,  
New York