

# **Sinking, Feeling**

SIMON FAITHFULL  
**REEF**

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Video stills from *Escape Vehicle no.6*, DVD, 25 min, 2004

Thus Jules Verne in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) described the sort of sunken dreamworld that had long been a common motif in myth and literature but which took on a rich, strange new life in the latter half of the 19th century. In Verne's fantastical fiction, in popular science periodicals and in the precincts of the new natural history museums, the Victorian public discovered the baroque geology of the ocean bed and the teeming creatures that lived there. With this curiosity about marine life and its setting came an odd fantasy: the idea that one might live at the bottom of the sea, surrounded by alien beings and among ruins or wreckage from the world above.



Video still from *Going Nowhere 2*, HD video, 6 min, 2011

It was a notion stimulated by the image of Verne's Captain Nemo and crew walking around on the sea bed, by illustrations showing aquatic flora and fauna published by naturalists such as Philip Henry Gosse, by the craze for domestic aquariums that Gosse's books and magazines helped to create. Suddenly it was possible to project oneself imaginatively onto the ocean floor, which had until then been a terrifying void, home to unspeakable horrors, among them the bones of the drowned and the rotting hulks of sunken ships. For a time—the craze was actually at its height before Verne's novel, in the 1860s—bourgeois domestic life could be carried on in constant proximity to reminders of this watery realm: vitrines filled with fish, molluscs, crustaceans, underwater forests of plant life and carefully wrought miniature shipwrecks or drowned columns from mock-classical ruins.

Simon Faithfull's *REEF* involves, for sure, a more sober view of the sea bed. But there is still something about it of the Victorians' urge to overcome the distance between the domestic interior and the depths of the ocean, to somehow inhabit mundane and fantastic worlds at the same time—and also to see the forms and processes of the deep as sculptural, to think of nature itself as an artist. Several of Faithfull's previous projects have seen him invoke these desires, though not without comedy. In his video *Going Nowhere* (2011), a figure in jeans and a white shirt—it's the artist himself—walks about on the sea bed, apparently without any breathing apparatus, as if he were wandering on the sea shore and not ten metres below the surface of the Adriatic. As we'll see, this sort of incongruity is everywhere in Faithfull's work; but, for now, it's enough to note that one of his recurring gestures is this positioning of the everyday at the edges not only of knowledge or culture but of physical plausibility.



At the time of writing, *REEF* is still a matter of plans and projections, Faithfull having to trust to logistics, technology, environmental conditions and the many collaborators without whom the project would be impossible. The work involves towing a boat—a ferro-cement hull at the end of its useful life, cleaned and prepared according to regulations set down by the Marine Management Organisation—out from the coast at Weymouth, where it will be set on fire and then sunk. (Fire has played a part in the artist's work before: his 2012 video *EZY1899: Reenactment for a Future Scenario* sees him silver-suited inside a plane-like structure used to simulate aircraft fires.) The 'sinking event', as Faithfull calls it, will be subject to an array of observations and recordings. Five cameras on the boat itself, powered by wind turbine and solar panel, are to be linked to a buoy that will remain floating above the eventual wreck. Another camera will record the event from a nearby ship, and a seventh from cliffs overlooking the scene. The onboard cameras will continue to transmit from underwater; the others will stop when the sea is calm and empty, and night falls. *REEF* will be exhibited at Fabrica in October 2014 as part of Brighton Photo Biennial, the footage of the sinking to be shown on two large screens, while five smaller monitors transmit live from the bottom of the sea.

Two timescales then, at least: the sinking event itself and its protracted aftermath. If *REEF* is a collaboration on the surface—with maritime authorities, a marine biologist at University College London and the harbour master at Whitstable in Kent, from whom Faithfull sought advice—

it will also be a collaboration with the sea itself, or rather with the algae, barnacles and other organisms that will slowly begin to colonise the wreck. It is common now as part of the management of marine environments to sink artificial reefs in the form of old boats or even railway carriages, which form habitats for all manner of living things, from the flora that attaches itself to a wreck to the creatures that hide within or around it. The live camera feed to the sunken boat will continue until 2017. Faithfull's *REEF* will not be a finished sculpture, nor the mere residue of an event or performance, however spectacular, but an artefact that will go on making itself, encrusting and elaborating itself, for years.

In that sense, the project takes its place among several of Faithfull's works that have to do with entropy and environment, with a certain kind of productive or generative failure. There are the obvious instances of destruction, of literal overreaching, such as the fate of a domestic chair sent by balloon to the edge of space in *Escape Vehicle no.6* (2004). Or his failed journey into the Arctic Circle in Finland to witness the northern lights, resulting in the two-screen video piece *Aurora Borealis (Unseen)* (2008). There have been more ambiguous journeys, however. In the course of a two-month trip to Antarctica in 2004–05, Faithfull made a number of works that both acknowledge the alien sublimity of the seas and territory into which he was heading and, at the same time, record his own, or the environment's, failure to live up to that natural and aesthetic extremity. *En route*, Faithfull filmed the sea and ice through the porthole of his cabin: a partial, sequestered view that appears in '44' (2006). In Antarctica itself, he visited Stromness, the whaling station reached by Ernest Shackleton's stranded exploration party in 1916: in Faithfull's film the place is a ghost town, a ruin frequented only by seals.

There is, then, a bathos attached to Faithfull's physical and imaginative excursions: the work sets up expectations of spectacle or sublimity only to dash them with a deadpan sort of conceptual slapstick. This may be the case with *REEF* too: the drama of the burning boat declining to muddy footage as the sunken hull does very little indeed, or apparently so, given the slowness of the natural processes to which it's about to be subject. Except of course that it will have become a new environment, a reminder of actual reefs under threat elsewhere, and an oblique reminder too that the very concept of environment owes its development, in scientific terms, to the period in the 19th century when artificial (including underwater) worlds were the rage: from the domestic aquarium to the Crystal Palace. Faithfull's *REEF* will be an artificial environment inserted into the natural. Or will it—considering how much it is hedged about with historical precursors, present significance and artistic machinery—be the other way round?