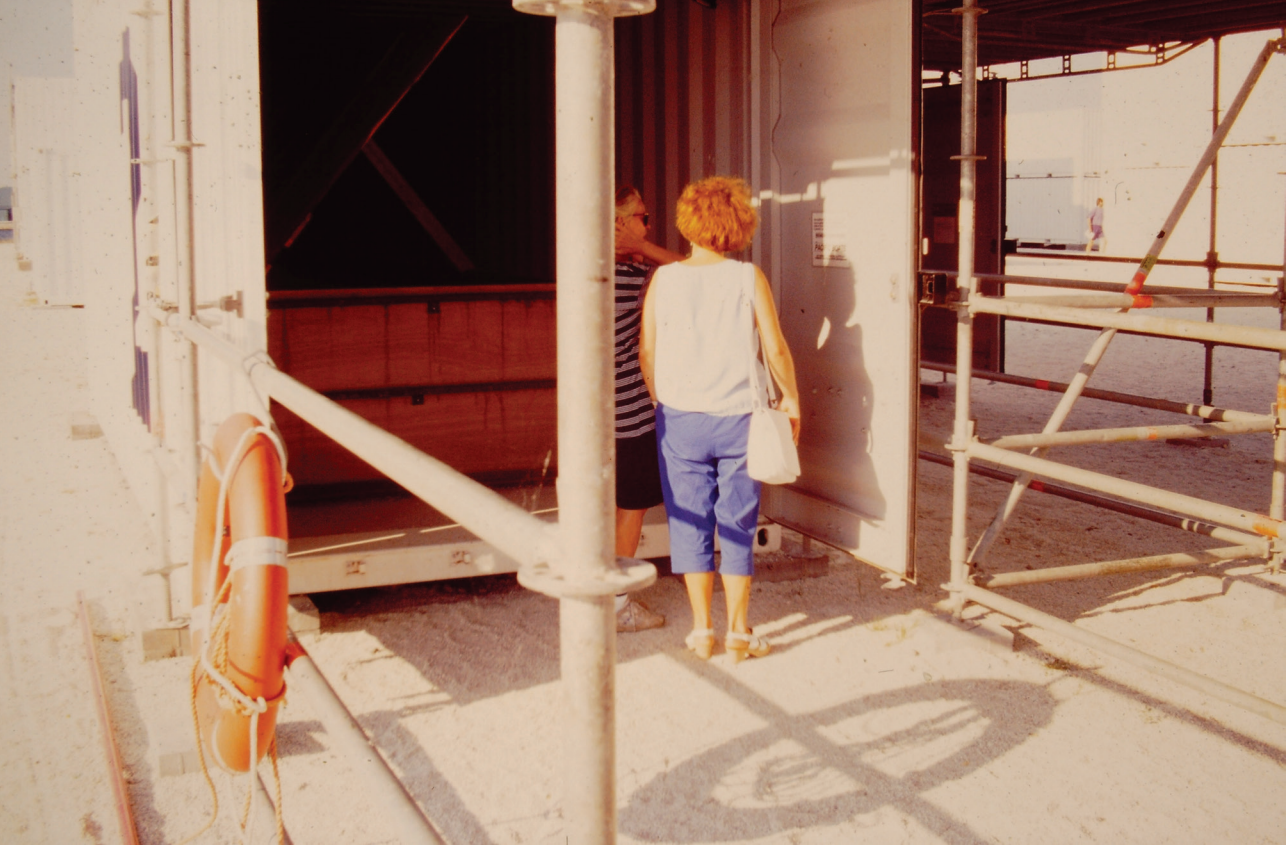
Art in the Age of Containers?

Whenever I think of containers I always think of the man I killed in Shanghai. A hundred containers filled with art stacked up on a quayside. I visited Copenhagen in 1996 when it was the European capital of culture. In one exhibition, *Art across Oceans: Container 96*, ninety-six containers were arranged on a quayside, stacked three high, linked by metal stairs and bridges to maker a "global village". Each container was given over to an artist from another harbour city to make or display a work in: Beverly Semmes filled hers with a gigantic dress; Richard Torchia made his into a camera *obscura*, but the one I remember best was that by the Cuban artist Kcho: inside his container was a big wooden box and that was filled with water, and floating on that water was a small, neat dinghy or rowboat. Of course, at one level I knew that his work referenced the many ways Cubans who wished to escape Cuba for a richer life in Florida tried to cross the ninety miles of sea between. (In another exhibition in town, he showed *Infinite Column No.5*, a work made with inner tyres from trucks and rope, the sort of flotation device the truly desperate had used to get to the land of the free.) But on a more general level the work was profoundly paradoxical: a boat that floated but could go nowhere. Containers are like that too: built to be infinitely transportable, yet incapable of any volition. They are inert.

As a one-time librarian I recognize that a container is like an empty bookshelf: a taxonomic device awaiting taxonomy. But when the library is filled we can see the taxonomy clearly: here is fiction, there is marine biology, there is the history of Singapore. But we can never know the taxonomy of the containers, what is in each, how the types of products are arranged or dispersed—that can only be known by the shipping companies.

Containers nag at me like a bad conscience. Like white plastic shopping bags blowing down the street in the wind they are ubiquitous; like those bags containers are devoid of advertising or any ostensible statement save of ownership: Maersk, Cold Storage, Textainer, Fairprice, Hapag-Lloyd.

Containers made convenient prisons in Lebanon or Afghanistan, and used as such were sometimes left closed until in the oppressive heat all inside had suffocated to death, or else shot inside, the metal walls peppered and punctured by the bullets of machine gun. Inside, in the final silence, brilliantly, sharp shafts



KCHO, in Container '96, Copenhagen.

of summer sunlight traverse the inner darkness. Containers do not speak of this: they do not speak; they mean nothing. They are solely passive, awaiting use.

In 2005, I went to the Art Basel Miami fair and there amongst all the glitz and ostentatious display of wealth one artist—Kader Attia, a Frenchman of Algerian descent—had been given a container to put art in outside the exhibition hall. He had made a sweatshop shop, filling it as tightly as he could with migrant workers with sowing machines working hard, long hours though unusually, on this occasion for decent wages. He made his point.

Containers were not meant to cause evil: they were invented and developed to tidy up international transport and make the world more efficient—*ergo* better. They are a convenience that is there to be used. Of course, apart from their phenomenal convenience, they can be used to morally good purpose: When in 1987 Kaspar König was made director of the famous art school in Frankfurt (*Städelschule*) he insisted that also, for he always curated, he be given an exhibition space but that, in a protest against the museum mania then so gripping West Germany that every city had to have a slick, posh, hyper-modern art museum with a more architecturally radical (and hence more expensive) building than other cities, it would cost less to build than the annual budget for exhibitions. (I doubt, in comparison, that the annual budget for exhibitions at the new National Gallery of Singapore will be a fraction of the cost of the architecture). The

architect (female by his choice) constructed a simple top lit box behind the façade of a bombed out library and added for office and storeroom a container on either side. Containers can be used in a poetic, kooky or trendy way: last night I passed by a groovy bar and events venue in Gangnam's bizarrely called *Platoon Kunsthalle*—it was made with containers. Shigeru Ban likewise made an elegant gallery for the second Singapore Biennale with containers.

Of course containers are not evil things, they intend no harm, in fact they have no intention or opinion at all: they are passive, ubiquitous and available. Nevertheless they mean many things. Above all else, perhaps they mean the end of the sailor and at a cultural level the end of the sea. As a child in England like others of my generation, I dreamed of becoming a sailor and travelling the world. Sailors then wore neat uniform with peaked caps and a boy could still aspire to become a sailor and have an exciting life on the ocean waves, a life of adventure, a life of exploration. (Even, we hoped, as we became teenagers, a life with a girl in every port.) But containerisation meant the end of sailors. When Captain Cook sailed these seas, "discovering" Australia in the process, his ship weighed all of 388 tons and needed 71 sailors to keep her moving. 240 years later a large container ship weighs 150 times that, or 450 times when loaded, requires a crew of only 13. It also means the end of dockers, the people who unload ships — like sailors an archetypally male profession. Sea travel is managed now in landlocked offices, on laptops. There is even talk of fully automating ships and doing away entirely with sailors. This bureaucratisation of the sea is typified by Rotterdam and Singapore. Once houses and streets clustered around the port, now the Rotterdam or London docks are far away from the city centre—the Singapore docks soon will be, too. Think of how rarely one seas the sea in Singapore! Nothing save Jumbo seafood restaurant on the East coast seems to actually face the sea.

We English were a nation of sailors, but now are merely a nation of yachtsmen—though one should add yachting, provides a wonderfully physical sensation—scudding across the sea, in a boat so small that you can skim the water with your hand and appreciate the curvature of this world.

At a conference for the first Liverpool Biennale in 1998 Allan Sekula, who was known for his profoundly unromantic photographs of container ships sailing from port to port, talked of how the sea had become uncanny, something repressed, the image still there but no longer experienced as a real thing. His meditations were set off firstly by the Winslow Homer painting *Lost on the Grand Banks* bought by Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates for more than $30 million – expensive because it was the last major seascape by Homer still in private hands rather than a museum; and secondly, by the recent defeat of the dock workers in Liverpool who had opposed containerisation but after a long and painful labour dispute had all lost their jobs and been replaced by a few technicians with machines to move the containers around instead. "The sea," Sekula said, "had become uncanny"—it was there in the imagination as a romantic or scary thing—think of movies such as John Carpenter's *The Fog*

or *The Perfect Storm* or, squirming at the thought of it, *Pirates of the Caribbean*. But we didn't experience it for real any more.

Sea travel is to plane travel as walking is to commute by MRT[1]—something experiential in space and time against something disengaged and a denial of time. Of course plane flight is real enough, especially when you hit turbulence, but you are no longer anchored, your view of the world is scarcely more real then looking at the world on google earth. Plane travel in comparison to sea travel is like "beam me up Scottie!"

[1] MRT is Singapore's Mass Rapid Transit system of public transport.

Sea travel is smelly—salt air, oil and fish freshly landed on the quayside. A poetry of departures and arrivals. On a boat one feels the wind in one's hair, the boat swaying under one's feet to the lurching rhythms of the waves. One watches the port grow small on the horizon and above the wake gulls call and wheel, waiting for scraps to be thrown.

Sailors were workers, air-hostesses are comforters, their job is to feed you stodgy food you do not need and keep you passive. Being a sailor not so long ago was a mythical sexy vocation — travel then was still romantic and a little dangerous.

All my memories of sea travel are from before the 1980s. A ship taking us to holiday in Jersey and a boat following it out of Portsmouth harbour filled with striking sailors shouting abuse and carrying banners saying "SCABS". There are not enough sailors to mount a decent strike anymore.

Roaming the ship, watching your home port grow small on the horizon, watching the landscape become one of nothing but boat, water, horizon and sky and in so being becoming aware as never before of how vast and varied both sky and sea with its constant, unrepeating, flux of waves are.

Leaving Plymouth in a force 8 gale: the boat leaning into black, turbulent seas; the passengers bolting their food before running to hide in their cabins. The ship appeared deserted save for my infant daughter and myself, building palaces with Duplo in the play area.

It seems so long ago and presumably most reading this have no equivalent experience: the cruise ships of today are moving dormitories too big to be affected by the waves they move through. You are enclosed in them as in a hotel or in the MRT.

The Twenty-First century is supposed to be one of communication and culture, but it is one where efficiency necessarily rules. A friend of mine who spent his life working in the container industry told me that his firm used to have containers made in Thailand or Indonesia. "We met lovely people, such hospitality, but we could never be sure we would get the containers delivered on time. Now we get them all made in China: we don't meet such nice people or have such an pleasant time when we go there but we can be sure that the containers will always be delivered on time."

Six years ago I came to live here in what was then the largest

Sophie Calle. Voir Le Mer. (Room 2, No.5), 2011.

port in the world – though now surpassed by Shanghai—but in this city where the docks are so central to the economy I have been on a boat only twice—for a weekend in a resort in Bintan[2] and back. Boats are for the very rich (luxury cruises) and the very poor (desperate refugees)—or for containers.

We, as artists and writers, have to reinvent the sea—that is to say rethink what it is now and can be. Nostalgia is pleasant in a melancholy sort of way, but not much use. It is a matter of reconnecting contemporary life and imagination with the communal memory of the preceding ten thousand years when sailing was so common, important and resonant a type of experience.

In a project, *Voir le Mer* (See the Sea), filmed in 2010 and exhibited during the 2011 Istanbul Biennale, the French artist Sophie Calle took people in Istanbul who had never seen the sea to the seaside and filmed their reactions. (Istanbul is, of course, a port. Anyone who lives there and hasn't seen the sea must be very poor, buried in the outlying slums). The exhibition consisted of ten videos, each of a person seen from behind looking at the sea. They all eventually turn and stare at the camera. Some seem moved: one old man wipes a tear from his eyes. But generally we are looking at faces. We hear no words. We cannot tell what they are thinking: it is beyond communication. We assume, but do not know, that they feel awe? Or are moved by the beauty of the sea.

We were, at the same time as viewers, asked to participate in a parallel experience. The museum it was shown in overlooks the Bosphorus—that narrow strip of sea that separates Europe from

[2] Bintan is part of the Riau islands, Indonesian archipelago, and south of Singapore, about 50 minutes away by boat.

Sophie Calle. Voir Le Mer. (View of Bophorus), 2011.

Asia. A curtain is pulled back in the exhibition rooms: a chair is provided and speakers relay the sound of the sea to that area. This may all sound a little sentimental, but Calle offset it by in the last room having a group of five children seeing the sea for the first time. They fidget and pinch each other. Obviously they have been told to behave properly. Eventually they have all turned around and are told that it is over. But the camera keeps on running, filming them jumping around in the water, splashing each other and laughing.

And the man I killed in Shanghai? Well not really, or at least not directly, but I bear some responsibility. Some years I had ordered a desk to be made in China—it was cheaper to have it made there and shipped than be made in England—but when it arrived it was broken. The shipper apologized: the container had dropped from the crane in Shanghai. Yes, several other things had been broken – and the man under the container had died, crushed.

Images courtesy of the author.

Sophie Calle. Voir Le Mer. (View of Bophorus. For some inexplicable reason, all the boats were going one way that day), 2011.