



The medium of feeling

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Our relationship with water could hardly be more intimate, and the sea's longstanding role as inspiration to art could hardly be more apt. We owe our sentience, our ability to experience our lives, to processes of evolution that took place in the sea.

Life itself almost certainly first evolved in an aquatic medium. Charles Darwin's cautious speculation, expressed in an 1871 letter, pictured a 'warm little pond' at the beginning, a pond furnished with salts, light, heat and electricity — a primordial pool we can imagine to the side of Olafur Eliasson's artwork *Riverbed* 2014 (pp.15, 39, 160, 162–5).

Present thinking about the origin of life still countenances Darwin's possibility, although recent work has focused especially on deep ocean vents, where porous mineral structures might partially enclose self-sustaining chemical reactions taking place in a flux of Earth-derived energy. The chemistry of our bodies in some ways resembles that of the sea, and in other ways mirrors inland waters, such as springs. Cells actively control and refashion that chemistry; our bodies are rebuilt echoes of those environments rather than remnants of them. Whether life began in Darwin's sunny pond or the blackness of a deep-sea vent, water was at the start of it, and you cannot build a living cell out of dry-land parts.

Animal life, which came later, evolved in the sea itself. We only understand the early stages as a series of uncertain tableaux, taking animals from deep-water frond-like forms through slow crawlers on the beds of shallower seas. With the 'Cambrian explosion' of about 540 million years ago, more familiar animal groups appear and the picture becomes clearer. Vera Möller's works, inspired in part by present-day coral forms, evoke some of the ancient stages of animal life — creatures that are stationary but reaching.

Vera Möller
cajalla (detail) 2019
 p.48
 The transparent anemone
 shrimp *Ancylomenes holthuisi*
 p.49
 William Forsythe
The Fact of Matter
 (installation view) 2009



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Nervous systems, the eventual basis for thought and sentience, evolved before the Cambrian and probably in creatures with some kinship to corals and anemones, but with many unknown features. These first nervous systems established new kinds of connections between the parts of a body, and new kinds of coordination between living activities. The projections of nerve cells reach through the space of the body like Trevor Paglen's undersea cables (pp.34, 126, 128–9), electrically linking what are, in the body's terms, distant parts. One of Möller's artwork titles, *cajalia* 2019 (pp.46, 132), recalls the pioneering neurobiologist Santiago Ramón y Cajal, who uncovered hidden and pivotal features of the layout of nervous systems; brain cells reach to each other with cable-like threads, but leave tiny gaps between.

By means of these networks, corals and anemones perform actions, although with a different shape from our actions and without guiding intentions. Their acts are organised radially, in circles and discs, rather than with the left–right rhythm of most other animals. Our own bodies have that 'bilaterian' form, built on a left–right symmetry. This, too, first arose in the sea, perhaps first in a nondescript worm-like creature, but then giving rise to a huge range of active forms: octopus, crab, kingfish.

The sea is a context where different actions come naturally. In a viscous medium where gravity fades, bodies can move freely and in three dimensions — in half-drifts, glides, hovering crawls and sudden jets. In William Forsythe's installation *The Fact of Matter* 2009 (opposite and pp.10–11, 96–7, 99), bodies sway and hover in a partially aquatic manner, while still being challenged by gravity.





The rewards and difficulties of resuming contact with our first milieu are seen also in Martina Amati's videos of free divers (opposite and p.110). Free divers, perhaps more than anyone, occupy an interface between where we came from and where we are now, and they do this in a way full of dangerous tension. They venture hundreds of metres down — venturing home, in a sense — but held by the resources of a single breath.

Animals arose in the sea, nervous systems arose there, and the ability to sense and act did too. Somewhere in the evolution of these particular ways of being alive, *sentience* arose — the capacity to feel, to occupy a point of view, to experience. No one can confidently say yet when sentience made its way onto the scene, and which animals first had these capacities. I suspect that the lives of corals and anemones are not experienced, but those of crabs, octopuses and kingfish are. If that is right, then there is also reason to think that sentience originated several times on distinct evolutionary lineages, rather than once, and each time in the sea. The evolutionary lines that led to different kinds of active animals with acute senses had diverged from each other well before those animals arose. An alternative view is that the origin of sentience takes us even deeper into the past, and has to be understood in a more gradualist manner, without discontinuities or breaks.

The mind evolved in the sea, but this exhibition is not held in the mythical Atlantis or some other underwater city. Instead we are on dry land. In animal evolution, the roles of land and sea are complementary. The sea was the site of fundamental early inventions — the animal body, the nervous systems that tie bodies together as agents, eyes and other senses, tactile and chemical. Soon after the Cambrian, animals began making their way onto land. There they faced the special demands of terrestrial life — the drag of gravity, the threat of desiccation — and also its opportunities. Those opportunities include high rates of energy flow channelled through the voracious photosynthetic appetite of land plants, and scope for new kinds of engineering, for building and fabrication.

In that context, animals changed again, explored new evolutionary paths, and one species made its unanticipated way to where we are now: walking around collaboratively built spaces, bringing novel objects forth from the imagination and responding to those objects together. Human creativity and the cultures that house it are built on prior products of evolution's own creativity, working at a different time in a different realm.

Land and sea each have their role in bringing us — in bringing our bodies, these individual living outposts of the ocean — to this place. A place where we can reflect on and represent in art the many states of water, and remember our place of origin: the sea.