

ISSUE 66

MARCH 2013

Art Review:

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Simon Starling

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Simon Starling

The artist continues to test the limits of what one can squeeze into – and out of – a work of art

By Mark Rappolt

Portrait and studio photography by Andrea Stappert

Here in Britain we've been having a problem with our beef. You may have heard about it. It turns out that some of the stuff that's labelled 'beef' in our supermarkets isn't beef at all. It's horsemeat. I know that in some countries the horse is the superior delicacy, but here, where we never eat what we ride, this is serious stuff. The police have even taken time off from phone-hacking investigations and the infiltration of suspect political groups to 'raid' several British meat firms. It also turns out that some of this horsebeef came from processing plants in France. And that those plants bought some of it from slaughterhouses in Poland. And that international criminal gangs are probably involved. And that it's all the fault of an EU law that changed the definition of meat on food packaging last year, forcing British meat firms to buy-in approved meat from foreign suppliers. I could go on here. Really. There's a new twist to this tale almost every day, and googling is a dangerously addictive thing. But the point I want to make is that for the past couple of weeks most of our newspapers have been decorating their front pages with photographs of 'beef' lasagne ready meals. And how and why an apparently ordinary object can come to represent a sophisticated network of international intrigue is precisely the kind of thing that British-born, Copenhagen-based

artist Simon Starling has been exploring during his 20-something-year career.

Of course revealing the intrigue contained within an object doesn't have to be couched in quite as much hysteria as this beef business. Starling first came to the attention of popular (as opposed to contemporary art) audiences when he won the 2005 Turner Prize. One of his prizewinning exhibits was *Shedboatshed (Mobile Architecture No 2)* (2005), a shed that he'd come across during a bike ride along the Rhine, disassembled (having persuaded the owners to let him have it), reassembled as a boat, rowed to a museum in Basel, then reassembled as a shed and exhibited. You might argue that this is a better story than it is a shed, but as a work of art, the shed offered up an object for ontological (what is the object, a shed or a boat?) and epistemological (how do we know this?) discussion, while celebrating human craft and ingenuity, and suggesting that objects don't endure with absolutely fixed identities and functions.

There are plenty of artists who have explored similar issues during the course of the twentieth century – from Magritte and his pipes to Marcel Duchamp and his readymades to conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth and his chairs – but Starling's work escalates such issues





Rappolt, Mark: 'Profile: Simon Starling', Art Review Issue 66, 03/2013

this page:
Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima): The Mirror Room, 2010 (installation view, the Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow, 2010), 3 of 6 wooden masks (carved by Yasuo Miichi), 2 cast bronze masks, metal stands, bowler hat, suspended mirror, dimensions variable. Photo: Keith Hunter. Courtesy the artist and the Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow

facing page:
Shedboatshed (Mobile Architecture No 2), 2005, wooden shed, 390 x 600 x 340 cm, production photos, River Rhine, Switzerland. Photo: the artist. Courtesy the artist and the Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow

preceding pages:
Work, Made-Ready, Kunsthalle Bern: A Charles Eames 'Aluminum Group' chair remade using the metal from a 'Marin Sausalito' bicycle / A 'Marin Sausalito' bicycle remade using the metal from a Charles Eames 'Aluminum Group' Chair, 1997, bicycle, chair, 2 plinths, glass, vinyl text, dimensions variable (installation views, Glasgow, Kunsthalle Bern, 1997). Photo: the artist. Courtesy the artist and the Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow





on a networked, more human and less strictly philosophical or linguistic register. Yes, it can be nerdily complex – and there’s a certain pleasure to be had in tracing that complexity – and it can be just as absurdly simple (see the titles of the majority of Starling’s works). But most of all it’s work that chimes directly with our post-Internet world, with its increasingly interwoven issues of environment, ecology, capital and globalisation.

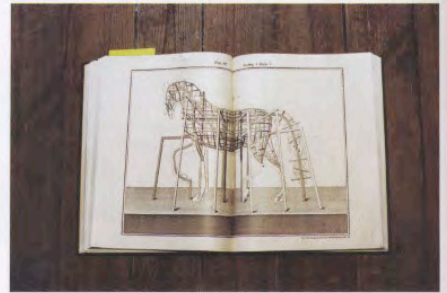
Starling’s work uses objects to generate sprawling tales – often concerning the fabrication, display and dissemination of art objects, woven together with their connections to the political, social and economic systems that more generally structure and locate the position of objects within the world. An early work, *A Charles Eames ‘Aluminum Group’ Chair Remade Using the Metal from a ‘Marin Sausalito’ Bicycle / A ‘Marin Sausalito’ Bicycle Remade Using the Metal from a Charles Eames ‘Aluminum Group’ Chair* (1997), features objects designed to hold stationary and moving bodies. The bike (exhibited leaning against a plinth) looks like a bike, and the chair (on a plinth) looks like a chair. But we know, on some originary level,

that the chair was once a bike and the bike was once a chair, and then start thinking about the similarities and differences between the pair of California-designed objects. The objects become subjects – or at least the two categories become blurred. Quite literally in *5 Handmade Platinum/Palladium Prints of the Anglo American Platinum Mine at Potgieterus, South Africa, produced using as many platinum group metal salts as can be produced*

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from one ton of ore (2005), for which Starling travelled to platinum mines to make photographs of the mines using platinum from the mines. *Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima)* (2010–11) is a more complex and recent work that spans a set of Japanese masks, nine characters (icons of the Cold War), a film and a proposition for a theatrical performance. Like several of Starling’s works, it also incorporates the story of an artwork – a Henry Moore sculpture that exists in different forms and contexts (*Nuclear Energy*, 1967, a large public monument in Chicago, and a small bronze edition, *Atom Piece*, 1964–5, acquired by the Hiroshima Museum in 1987, shortly after Moore’s death, the first appearing to celebrate the dawn of the nuclear age, the second, to mourn it) – and then poses questions regarding how we know what this object is. ‘I like the idea that works don’t die but keep being remade, reconstituted and retold in different ways,’ Starling said in a recent interview with curator Francesco Manacorda.

It’s tempting to think of Starling’s work as the product of a postquantum (and with this, particularly for an artist who grew up during the last few decades of the Cold War, postnuclear)



this page, clockwise from top left: Simon Starling's studio, including sign by building entrance; two views of Denis Diderot, *A Diderot Pictorial Encyclopedia of Trades and Industry*; drawing table with catalogue from the Starling-curated exhibition *Never the Same River (Possible Futures, Probable Pasts)*, 2010, Camden Arts Centre, London, a working sketch for Starling's *Trois Cent Cinquante Kilogrammes par Mètre Carré*, Kunsthalle Mulhouse, 2012, *100 Chairs in 100 Days in Its 100 Ways*, 2007, by Martino Gamper, conical borer and reamer

this page, from right: interior view of Starling's studio, including, on the pinboard, a working sketch for Tate Britain Commission: Simon Starling, 2013, and the artist's *Venus Mirror* (05.06.2012), 2012; framed print from *Illustrations for the Moon: Considered as a Planet, a World, and a Satellite*, 1874, by James Nasmyth and James Carpenter, one of 25 prints exhibited in *The Inaccessible Poem*, 2011, Fondazione Merz, Turin, alongside work by Starling and other artists



age, an age of uncertainty and instability. In 1927 the German theoretical physicist Werner Heisenberg speculated that the more you know about the position of a particle, the less you know about its momentum (and vice versa). One could see Starling proposing something similar with regard to artworks. His artworks tend to operate as both narratives (velocity) and objects (position); start thinking about the boat bit of the shed's past and you cease to be thinking of its shedness.

The tricky thing, however, is judging to what extent the objects Starling displays are capable of divulging the narratives he conveys. Indeed many of his critics accuse him of loading objects with more ideas than they can communicate without the help of lengthy and involved background stories or explanations. But like the horsebeef (to take a relatively crude example), this is the case with most objects in

the world, which are, in essence, accumulations of data tracing their passage through space and through time. Some of this data is obvious in the object, some of it isn't.

It's a painfully cold January afternoon when I meet Simon Starling in Tate Britain's members' room. He's not allowed to discuss the specifics of why he is here. Not because he doesn't want to, but because exhibitions in these kinds of institutions need to be dramatic.

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So no one can know the details until 12 March, when his instalment of Tate Britain's annual commission series opens to the public in the institution's neoclassical Duveen Galleries. The official press release (which I'm handed) promises an installation that's going to be ambitious, new and site-specific. That's the lot. It feels not a little ironic to be chatting around this void of information, given the centrality of data to Starling's work. Still, some of Starling's

most intriguing projects have tackled the history and function of the art institution, the most recent example in London being *Never the Same River (Possible Futures, Probable Pasts)* (2010) at Camden Arts Centre, a show curated by Starling that featured 30 works by various artists installed in the exact positions they had been originally exhibited over 50 years of Camden exhibitions. That show made the institution's past present and invited the visitor to think of the passage of artworks and institutions through time and, like many of Starling's works, through changing contexts. If his project for Tate is anything like as good, it will be a show you won't want to miss. •

Tate Britain Commission: Simon Starling is on view at Tate Britain, London, from 12 March to 20 October