

Metamorphology

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Materiam superabat opus
– Ovid, *Metamorphoses*¹

On August 12, 2008, a little more than a month before the largest bankruptcy in US history – the signal event that helped usher in the global financial crisis, the economic consequences of which are certain to be felt for years, if not decades, to come – the British-born art historian Michael Baxandall passed away at age seventy-four. Baxandall is perhaps best remembered today for his groundbreaking studies of Renaissance art. His best-selling 1972 classic, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, begins with the timeless observation that “money is very important in the history of art.” Baxandall expands:

It acts on painting not only in the matter of a client being willing to spend money on a work, but in the details of how he hands it over. A client like Borso d'Este, the Duke of Ferrara, who makes a point of paying for his paintings by the square foot – for the frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia Borso's rate was ten Bolognese *lire* for the square *pede* – will tend to get a different sort of painting from a commercially more refined man like the Florentine merchant Giovanni de' Bardi who pays the painter for his materials and his time. Fifteenth-century modes of costing manufactures, and fifteenth-century differential payments of masters and journeymen, are both deeply involved in the style of the paintings as we see them now: paintings are among other things fossils of economic life.²

(Earlier in the book, the author had already defined paintings as “deposits of a social relationship.”) One of the most demonstrative ways that this fairly crude economic logic expressed itself in the era's art production concerned the use of colors, and Baxandall points out that blue in particular was the recurrent subject of financial anxieties on the part of patron and client

(i.e. painter) alike: “After gold and silver, ultramarine was the most expensive and difficult color the painter used. . . .

Ultramarine was made from powdered lapis lazuli expensively imported from the Levant; the powder was soaked several times to draw off the color and the first yield – a rich violet blue – was the best and most expensive.”³ The meaning of money in

1. This quote from *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's masterpiece of Roman narrative poetry, composed in the early years of the Common Era, is usually translated as: “The workmanship surpassed the material.”

2. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (New Edition), (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1–2.

An obituary by Christopher Wood, published in *Artforum* in January 2009, four months after the onset of said global financial crisis, first drew my attention to the relevance of Baxandall's insights into the economic underpinnings of Renaissance art for our current cultural predicament.

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the art of the *cinquecento* is strongly dependent, in other words, on the actual worth of the materials used.

The early economic history of art is therefore a "natural" history of sorts, its economy a matter, first and foremost, of (organic) materials found, quarried, traded – and magically transformed. The peculiarly "magical" quality of this transformation – the mysterious crux of which constitutes the creation, seemingly *ex nihilo*, of that most elusive of artistic qualities, *value* – has been a consistent, defining presence throughout the history of art ever since. As the role played by the market value of the various materials involved in the production of the work of art has diminished over time (a historical process that is undoubtedly an integral part of art's very own "modernization," and tied to the long, quintessentially modernist process of deskilling as well), this magic, this mystery, has only deepened. Indeed, to paraphrase Baxandall, the mystique of metamorphosis – including that of art into money, to return to the global financial crisis – is very important in the history of art; it *is* the history of art.

"All art has been contemporary," the Italian artist Maurizio Nannucci once noted. On a deeper philosophical level, one could hazard that all art, as that which we look at and experience in the here and now, *is* always contemporary. Some art is more contemporary than other art, however – it is not merely contemporary, it is *current* – and this seems to be true, for a variety of reasons, of Simon Starling's work in particular.⁴ Its currency is related to the poetic acumen with which it addresses the fundamental, and fundamentally immutable, fact that *economy* (and not just money, i.e. *currency*) is very important in the history of art – something that surely becomes more pronounced in times of economy-wide (i.e. not just financial) distress. Starling's work engages economy by way of two distinct, though occasionally intersecting, thematic trajectories: the first approaches the economic sphere head-on, through Starling's interest in the materials and tools of his trade (limestone, marble, platinum, silver, steel, uranium, different kinds of wood – the stuff of which so much art is made, even that which appears to have been thoroughly "dematerialized"); in the second, the economic realm is conjured primarily in the recurrent trope of the

3. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, 11. The other primary expense in this economic relationship is time, which brings this unexpectedly relevant anecdote to mind:

In 1878, the painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler took John Ruskin to court for libel. Ruskin had written a rather positive review of an exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery – a privately owned space exhibiting works that had been rejected by the Royal Academy. Ruskin singled out Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold; The Falling Rocket*, accusing the artist of charging too high a price for what Ruskin thought was a hastily made painting: "For Mr. Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of willful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." Whistler was outraged and sued Ruskin for a thousand pounds and the costs of the trial. The trial became a public spectacle, the first of its kind. It also became a public seminar on art. Whistler's case was based on his argument that a painting is about nothing but itself; Ruskin's case was based on his belief that art should have moral value. The court heard arguments about the duties of art critics and the role of labor in art. Ruskin was too ill to attend the trial and was represented by lawyers who asked Whistler how long it had taken him to make the painting. Whistler replied that it was completed in a day or two. "Lawyer: The labor of two days, is that for which you asked two hundred guineas? Whistler: No, I ask it for the knowledge I have gained in the work of a lifetime."

Quoted in Anton Vidokle, "Art Without Market, Art Without Education: A Political Economy of Art," *e-flux journal* 43 (March 2013), e-flux.com/journal/art-without-market-art-without-education-political-economy-of-art.

4. "Current art" is a phrase borrowed from British artist Liam Gillick, who coined it "as a way of dropping the association with the contemporary of design and architecture and simply find [sic] a term that could contain the near future and recent past of engaged art production rather than an evocative post-modernistic inclusion of singular practices." Gillick, "Contemporary Art Does Not Account for That Which Takes Place," *e-flux journal* 21 (December 2010), e-flux.com/journal/contemporary-art-does-not-account-for-that-which-is-taking-place. The resultant association of art with "currency" adds an interesting dimension to our ongoing exploration of the intersection of art and economy.

5. His prolific activity in the adjoining disciplines of film and photography notwithstanding, Starling's avowed attachment to the sculptural tradition is clearly tied to his interest in matter and materiality, in objecthood and thingness. The fact that the two artists most often referenced in his work are the arch-modernist sculptor duo of Constantin Brancusi and Henry Moore, both paragons of the mastery of organic form (stone, wood), only helps to underscore this point. This enthusiasm for the brute facts of matter – how hard it is, how much it weighs, how resistant it remains – undoubtedly helps to remind artist and viewer alike of the irreducible materiality of the world, even the Internet, in the end, is little more than an archipelago of silicon held together by a worldwide maze of optical fiber – *stuff*. It is precisely this heightened awareness of our dependence on "stuff" – by no means a self-evident truth in a culture entranced by the mirage of its own so-called dematerialization – that also lends an ecological charge to some aspects of Starling's practice, as materiality effectively equals finitude. To continue our recycling of Baxandall's *bon mot*, in these instances of Starling's work, ecology has proven to be just as important in the history of art.

6. Appropriately, I have chosen to recycle some of my own thinking and writing on Starling's work, as the following discussion borrows heavily from my essay "Simon Starling: The Metamorphologist," first published in the monograph *Simon Starling* (London: Phaidon, 2012), with thanks to the publisher. One of the works discussed in that essay, which is not included in the MCA exhibition and whose consideration therefore falls outside the scope of the present text, is Starling's iconic *Shedboatshed* from 2005 (fig. 3), the piece that secured the artist that year's Turner Prize and probably best encapsulates Starling's preoccupation with the circular act of transformation. For this work, Starling dismantled a shed encountered along the banks of the Rhine in Basel, and turned it into a boat that took him to the city's contemporary art museum, where it was remade into the original hut and exhibited as what looked like a readymade but obviously wasn't. The work's paradigmatic quality is derived in part from the fact that its production incorporated an element of physical travel (metamorphosis as movement, transformation as transportation), which lends added weight to the profoundly processual nature of Starling's practice.

7. "The process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live in." Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1994), 83.

cycle and the motif of circulation (cycles of production and reproduction, the circulation of energy, recycling, loops and rotations, *trade*).⁵ The governing principle of metamorphosis – sometimes enacted with literal, disarming immediacy, sometimes deployed much more obliquely – anchors both trajectories in a singular conception of art as *metamorphology*.

Metamorphosis, considered within the broad framework of the economic logic outlined above, is at the heart of some of Starling's best-known projects, such as *Autoxylopyrocycloboros* (2006), *Bird in Space, 2004* (2004), and *Flaga 1972-2000* (2002), all of which occupy a pivotal position in *Metamorphology*, the exhibition this catalogue accompanies; metamorphosis is also, to a certain extent, the subject of *Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima)* (2010/11), another key work in the exhibition.⁶ A slide piece made up of thirty-eight images, *Autoxylopyrocycloboros* (pls. 1–5) documents a boat trip on Scotland's scenic, perennially mist-covered Loch Long in a small smack whose steam engine was powered by a stove fed by the boat's very own wood (the work is shown using an archaic Götschmann slide projector, whose analog rhythm resembles that of the boat's chugging steam engine). The sequence concludes with the boat's complete dismemberment and the artist's inevitable submersion in the cold waters of Loch Long. A patient dissection of the work's unwieldy title lays out a number of key tropes in Starling's practice: *auto* means self, *xylos* means wood (symbolic, here, of Starling's larger materialist instincts), *pyr* means fire, *cyclos* means circle (or cycle), and *boros*, itself meaningless, is a suffix alluding to Ouroboros, the mythical serpent known for eating its own tail and a powerful symbol of early alchemy (a notion to which I shall return shortly). That the work records an act of "creative destruction" through which surplus value (i.e. art) is created brings to mind, among many other things, Joseph Schumpeter's classic description of the economic logic of modern capitalism as a matter of ceaseless "creative destruction."⁷ The presentation of *Autoxylopyrocycloboros* as a slide carousel piece, finally, further emphasizes Starling's formative fascination with cycles, circuits, circulatory systems, and their inherent logic of eternal recurrences.⁸

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Autoxylopyrocycloboros's concluding slides are pure slapstick. In *Bird in Space, 2004*, the equilibrium between the lightness – frivolity, even – of the work's execution and the weight of its narrative grounding is reversed. The piece's visual quality as a literal balancing act is already hinted at in the list of its key ingredients: a two-ton slab of imported Romanian steel on the one hand, and a trio of helium-inflated air cushions on the other hand. *Bird in Space, 2004* is based on a well-known art-historical anecdote dating back to the early days of the avant-garde's gradual migration from Paris to New York. In 1926, Marcel Duchamp arranged for Constantin Brancusi's original *Bird in Space* (1926; fig. 1), one of the sculptural icons of modern art, to be shipped to New York, where it was to be exhibited at the Brummer Gallery and subsequently sold to renowned photographer Edward Steichen. (The sculpture was also shown at The Arts Club of Chicago, in the first major US survey of Brancusi's work.) The shipment was held up in New York Harbor, however, because US customs officials refused to accept the elegant, elongated bronze sculpture's status as a work of art (which would have enabled it to enter the country free of charge), instead claiming that, as a banal, manufactured metal object, it was subject to a 40 percent customs tariff. A widely reported court battle ensued, eventually concluding with a ruling in Brancusi and Duchamp's favor, which declared the former's *Bird in Space* to be a work of art after all.

For his 2004 solo show at Casey Kaplan Gallery in New York, Starling sought to recover something of the confusion that had seized the city's customs officials eight decades earlier. Visitors to his exhibition were greeted by a huge slab of rusty steel that leaned against the gallery wall (pls. 6–8), held afloat by three air cushions filled with helium. The question here was obviously no longer whether this was a work of art or not; the core of the project rather related to the steel's provenance: a steel plant in Romania. A nod to Brancusi's country of birth, the work simultaneously responded to then-President George W. Bush's introduction of a significant tax hike on foreign steel imports to increase domestic steel production. Starling managed to circumvent this tax by labeling a seemingly banal slab of European



Figure 1 Constantin Brancusi, *Bird in Space*, 1926.



Figure 2 Simon Starling, *Archaeopteryx Lithographica* (detail), 2008.

8. The insertion of the Greek word for fire in the title of this emblematic work links its discussion to the long history of spirited hermeneutic debate that has followed in the shadow of one of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus's better-known fragments, namely that "all things are exchanged for fire and fire for all things, as wares are exchanged for gold and gold for wares." Heraclitus's comparison of money with fire unsurprisingly drew the attention of Ferdinand Lassalle and Karl Marx, the nineteenth century's most vocal critics of the emerging capitalist world order. The pre-Socratic philosopher, known for his gnomic pronouncements, effectively presaged Schumpeter's observation concerning the destructive core of capitalism's own metamorphology. The triangulation of art, fire, and money has some history in Scottish lore, incidentally: it is on the Scottish island of Jura, 120 miles from Loch Long, that the British artist collective K Foundation "burned a million quid" in August 1994.



Figure 3 Simon Starling, *Shedboatshed* (Mobile Architecture No 2), 2005. Installation view, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel, 2005.

steel a work of art (predictably, no court case ensued), which he transformed back into a "bird in space" in the gallery by placing it atop a couple of helium-inflated plastic bags, thereby also returning the discussion of the work to the more traditional sculptural parameters of weight, gravity, and balance.

As is so often the case with Starling's deceptively simple objects, a complicated political subtext tethers the work –

its immediate *raison d'être* culled from an innocuous twentieth-century art-historical footnote – to a broader framework of global geo-economic quandaries. Bush presumably introduced this steel tax with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's express support, since this happened at a moment when the Afghan and Iraq wars had strengthened their transatlantic bond. Blair plays a not-so-minor part in *Bird in Space, 2004*'s vertiginous back story: the steel used to "make" the New York sculpture was sourced from a formerly state-owned Romanian company that had recently been bought up by the Indian-born steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal, after Blair personally intervened in the acquisition on Mittal's behalf, just a month *before* the tycoon

donated a whopping £125,000 to the reformed "New" Labour Party. As Joe Murphy noted in the *Daily Telegraph*, "Mr. Blair later told MPs [in his defense] that Mr. Mittal's company was British. In fact, LNM Holdings is based in a Caribbean tax haven. It operates almost entirely overseas and competes against British steelmakers that have shed 6,000 jobs in the past year."⁹

With these insights acting as *Bird in Space, 2004*'s key narrative ingredients, we are far removed from the relatively harmless, virginal vision of art as a type of lofty alchemy espoused by the likes of Joseph Beuys et al.¹⁰ In Starling's project, the transformation of muck (in this case, Romanian steel) into gold (in this case, a Romanian-modernist-master-inspired work of contemporary art) is not merely channeled through the elusive, ethereal circuitry of genius; neither does its (hardly birdlike) monolithic slab of rust-covered steel merely denote the minimalist heroism of a Judd, a Serra, or a Smith, all of whom are in some way or other indebted to Brancusi's formalist legacy. The founding myth of art's magical powers of transformation is transferred here to the altogether more sobering context of our global economy, with its characteristic rhythm of crises,

9. Joe Murphy, "Blair Pushed Through Deal for Indian Billionaire Who Gave Labour GBP 125,000," *The Daily Telegraph*, February 10, 2002.

10. It is impossible to exhaustively map out the relationship between Starling and Beuys – or between art and alchemy, for that matter – within the confines of this essay. Suffice it to say that for Beuys, art pretty much equaled alchemy (famously revolving around his fetishistic use of unconventional materials such as fat, felt, and honey), and that Starling's working method has quite often been compared to that of an alchemist. A 2004 *New York Times* review described him as "a tinkerer with objects of design and bits of history, an alchemist of arcana and late modernism"; an artist-colleague characterized "Starling's role [as] that of the stereotypical B-movie medieval alchemist" in an early issue of *frieze*; most significantly, Starling himself has asserted that "to me alchemy is particularly interesting when understood in terms of process and not product. It's not really about attaining gold from base metals but rather the mental space that that process allows – that utopia, if you like." See artandresearch.org.uk/v1n1/starling.html. Indeed, even though it may not really be about attaining gold from base metals, it is nevertheless very much about the transformation of one thing into another, with both the notions of value and materiality functioning as that transformative process's key components – the elements that trigger the metaphorical chain reaction at the heart of the alchemist's endeavor.

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recessions, and resurgences – the defining backdrop against which so many of Starling's exercises and experiments in metamorphology can be read.

The vagaries of metal and the steel-processing industries likewise color our perception of *Flaga 1972-2000* (pls. 9-10), which involved a Fiat 126 produced in Turin (where the work debuted in 2002), the traditional center of Italian automobile production and a city blessed with an especially rich history of artistic experimentation, engineering ingenuity, and industrial innovation. The car was customized using parts manufactured and fitted in Poland following a roughly 800-mile journey from Turin to Cieszyn, a town near Bielsko-Biala (where production of one of Italy's most iconic cars moved in the 1970s, when so many traditional industries across the world suffered the first in a series of cataclysmic crises). Upon returning from Poland, Starling's Fiat 126, or *Maluch* (meaning "little one" in Polish), its doors and hood a shiny, speckless white in the car's carmine body, was attached to the gallery wall, where it now resembled the flag ("flaga" in Italian) of the country of its transplanted origin. As a three-dimensional painting of sorts, *Flaga 1972-2000* also functions as a still life or memento mori, conjuring the ghost of the car industry – once the mighty citadel of labor activism – in a city now more closely associated with art (i.e. post-Fordist post-production) than heavy industry (i.e. Fordist production).

Starling's most ambitious work to date, *Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima)* (pls. 11-13), revolves around the same kind of seemingly minor art-historical anecdote that grounds his *Bird in Space* – this one with another Promethean modernist at its midst: Starling's compatriot Henry Moore. This work is more solidly rooted in Chicago history than the Brancusi-inspired *Bird in Space, 2004*. Its point of departure is a famous public sculpture, *Nuclear Energy* (1964-66; fig. 4), which stands at the site on the grounds of the University of Chicago in Hyde Park where, in 1942, a team led by the émigré Italian physicist Enrico Fermi built the first nuclear reactor, Chicago Pile 1.¹¹ This was a decisive step in the so-called Manhattan Project that led to the production of the first atom bomb, and the subsequent annihilation of the Japanese port cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Moore, a frequent apologist for pacifist causes, presumably felt some discomfort when he was invited to propose an artwork commemorating this fateful day (oddly, the University of



Figure 4 Henry Moore, *Nuclear Energy*, 1964-66.

11. When Starling first visited Chicago in the winter of 2013, a pilgrimage to Moore's *Nuclear Energy* was predictably at the top of his to-do list (the nuclear chain reaction, one could venture, marks the apex of the "creative" powers of the metamorphological model – it effectively stands as nature's most forceful transformative process). It is not without significance, within the context of the current discussion, that the University of Chicago is also ground zero for another pivotal development in midcentury global politics: as the academic home of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, it was the birthplace of the neoliberal doctrine of unfettered free-market economics that has transformed the world in our lifetime. (Starling was twelve when one of Friedman's most zealous disciples, Margaret Thatcher, began her eleven-year reign as the UK's prime minister.) Starling's work, *Bird in Space, 2004*, can be read as commentary, however oblique, on the overarching framework of neoliberal economic globalization that was partly theorized in offices and seminar rooms lining Hyde Park's tree-shaded streets.



Figure 5 Simon Starling, *Infestation Piece* (Musselled Moore), 2006–08.

Chicago's plaque accompanying the sculpture fails to mention what the first human-controlled, self-sustaining nuclear reaction led to). Throughout the process, Moore, a one-time sponsor of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, found a number of outlets for his conflicted feelings about this particular commission—there are clear echoes in the final sculpture of a famous antiwar poster designed by F. H. K. Henrion, for instance, and the work's initial title, *Atom Piece*, is said to have been changed to *Nuclear Energy* only after the university asked Moore not to include any references to the word *peace* in the title.

Starling's *Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima)* was originally commissioned by the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, whose holdings include a scale model of Moore's sculpture acquired *before* its title was changed from *Atom Piece* to the potentially triumphalist *Nuclear Energy*—presumably not a title that a museum in Hiroshima would be interested in promoting. Starling's *Project* encompasses a film showing a solitary Japanese mask-maker painstakingly producing a set of six traditional Noh masks, as well as an installation consisting of these same masks (plus two cast bronze masks and a hat) mounted on welded steel frames. Each mask represents one protagonist in both the Byzantine saga of Moore's *Nuclear Energy* and in *Eboshi-ori*, a little-known sixteenth-century Noh play whose narrative structure provides the stage on which the key characters in both tales play their part: Moore is the hatmaker, Fermi the messenger, Moore's iconic sculpture *Warrior with Shield* (1954) a brigand, *Atom Piece/Nuclear Energy* the tragic hero Ushiwaka.

A couple of surprise appearances help remind us of the story's broader, Cold War-era geopolitical backdrop: James Bond plays a gold merchant; Anthony Blunt plays the hatmaker's wife; and other cast members include Joseph Hirshhorn, Colonel Sanders, and a choir named the Back of the Yard Boys. Blunt, appointed Surveyor of the King's Pictures in 1945 and an influential defender of Moore's work, was unmasked as a Soviet spy in 1979; Hirshhorn, whose legacy lives on in Washington, DC's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, made millions exploiting uranium mines in northern Ontario. (Hirshhorn's uranium played no role in the development of the Manhattan Project, but his obvious talent for transforming this particular mineral into the symbolic capital that fills his eponymous museum serves as yet another reminder of our metamorphological subplot.) Colonel Sanders is the name of the benign figure whose effigy, smiling Buddha-like, graces millions of

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Kentucky Fried Chicken packages worldwide, an early symbol of the postwar Americanization of Japanese society; the Back of the Yard Boys were the Polish American teenage gang whom Fermi hired to help build Chicago Pile 1.

In 2010, Starling's two-part project debuted at Glasgow's Modern Institute, where only the masks were exhibited, installed in front of a giant mirror suspended from the ceiling; there, the work was titled *Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima): The Mirror Room*, a reference to the mirror-clad rooms in Japanese Noh theaters where the actors put on their masks and become ritually possessed by the characters they perform on stage – effectively laboratories for experiments in personal transformation. (*Eboshi-ori*, the Noh play on which Starling based the piece, is structured around the well-established narrative trope of trading places and shifting identities.) One can easily imagine the mirror room as a metaphor for both Starling's prodigiously associative imagination and this particular work's doubling of identities, in which the sight of the-artist-filming-a-mask-maker-sculpting-a-mask-resembling-a-model-of-an-artwork-renamed-*Nuclear-Energy-by-the-Janus-faced-Moore* perfectly captures one crucial aspect of Starling's practice: the studio or exhibition space remade as a shape-shifting *hall* of mirrors, triggering a veritable cascade of *mise-en-abîmes*, rather than just one measly mirror room.

The spectral presence of uranium in *Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima)*, even if only by way – characteristically circuitous – of a mask depicting Hirshhorn's features, again hints at the importance of matter in Starling's crypto-alechemistic conception of art. This specifically geological or mineralogical interest is fleshed out in two related works, *The Long Ton* (2009; pl. 14) and *One Ton II* (2005; pls. 15–16). *The Long Ton*, an installation consisting of two massive blocks of rough-cut white marble suspended in perilous equilibrium inside the gallery space, reminds us of the balancing act performed by the two-ton steel plate in *Bird in Space, 2004*, and here, too, a straight-faced economic logic underpins the relationship between the piece's constitutive elements: one block is Carrara marble (Michelangelo's favored sculpting material – in a sense, he is this work's Brancusi), while the other is a much heavier chunk of cheaper Chinese marble. Weighing in at a little more than a metric ton, this latter lump is exactly four times heavier than its nobler Italian counterpart, which has been precision-cut to resemble the bigger Chinese stone to the utmost detail. When viewers get close to the work, they realize its components are different sizes, but the blocks appear equal at first glance, and indeed, one ton of Chinese marble is roughly worth a quarter-ton of Carrara marble in



Figure 6 Simon Starling, *Work, Made-ready*, Kunsthalle Bern (A Charles Eames 'Aluminium Group' chair remade using the metal from a 'Marin Sausalito' bicycle. A 'Marin Sausalito' bicycle remade using the metal from a Charles Eames 'Aluminium Group' chair), 1997. Installation view, Kunsthalle Bern, 1997.

12. The massive impact of China's growth on the global economy is not only a matter of cheap consumer goods, increased greenhouse-gas emissions, and the accelerating depletion of natural resources around the world – it has also transformed the contemporary art world beyond recognition, not least in the field of art production. Starling's project *The Nanjing Particles* (2008) (see Mark Godfrey's essay in this volume, fig. 11) partly takes this circumstance as its point of departure: it consists, among other things, of two giant stainless steel sculptures depicting silver particles extracted from a late nineteenth-century group portrait of Chinese migrant workers employed by a North Adams, Massachusetts, shoe factory. The sculptures were manufactured in the ancient Chinese city of Nanjing, where artists like Anish Kapoor customarily go to have their public art leviathans produced.

13. Yet more mineralogical musings, yet more geological gesticulations – an entire essay could be devoted to the pervasive presence of these exact metaphors in Starling's practice alone. Images and depictions of mining fold into the allegorical language of excavating and exploiting (as in "the artist mining the history of mining"). It seems only logical that Starling's work was included in an earlier exhibition organized by the author at the MCA, *The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology*, in which both the subject and metaphor of mining and/or digging symbolized the investigative, research-oriented dimension of a certain type of art practice with which Starling's work has long been associated. One of Starling's works included in that exhibition, the series of lithographs *Archaeopteryx Lithographica* (fig. 2), likewise had the serendipitous history of geological (and paleontological) exploration as its subject.

purely financial terms: held in place by a rudimentary pulley system, *The Long Ton* operates as a terse meditation on the impenetrable vagaries of value. That the bigger, cheaper chunk of marble should have been quarried in China seems only logical, given both China's role in the current world economy as a mass producer of cheap consumer goods, and continuing Western anxieties surrounding the supposed inferiority and/or falsity of much that is "made in China."¹²

The looping story of *One Ton II* is told in large part by the work's lengthy subtitle: "five handmade platinum/palladium prints of the Anglo American Platinum Corporation mine at Potgietersrus, South Africa, produced using as many platinum group metal salts as can be produced from one ton of ore."¹³ Here, in these images of a mine whose contents

actually enabled – it truly is a kind of magic – the production of the images in question, we find ourselves back in the company of our old friend Ouroboros, the tail-biting serpent that has long acted as a symbol for the alchemist's secret knowledge of the unity of oppositions. But we also find ourselves returned, in a sense, to the microcosm described by Baxandall with which we began our discovery of Starling's world: that of paintings paid for by the square foot, and of "ultramarines . . . made from powdered lapis lazuli expensively imported from the Levant." And somewhere in this spin cycle of extraction, production, and reproduction, value suddenly arises; that is to say, from "mere" work art emerges. Or: *opus superabat ars*.

An Afterthought

Not surprisingly, for an artist so passionately interested in trade, traffic, transformation, and transportation, and in cycles, circles, and circularities, Starling's talent for recycling has led to a number of forays into the world of *cycling* – of bicycles. (I should add here that Starling, a native of Surrey and veteran of the justly famed 1990s Glasgow art scene, now lives and works in the exceedingly bike-friendly Danish capital, Copenhagen.)

Most famously, perhaps, he "made" a Marin Sausalito bicycle using the metal from an Eames Aluminum Group chair (*Work, Made-ready*, Kunsthalle Bern, 1997; figs. 6–7).

For *Carbon (Urban)* (2004), he turned an ordinary bicycle into

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a moped using a chainsaw – a formula he repeated in 2011 for *Carbon (Hiroshima)*. Starling crossed a parched desert plain in the Spanish province of Almeria on a bicycle powered by a hybrid fuel cell of his own making (*Tabernas Desert Run*, 2004). And in 2003, he made *Five-Man Pedersen (Prototype No. 1)* (fig. 8), a bike for five riders celebrating the maverick design genius of Danish inventor Mikael Pedersen, whose prototypes revolutionized early twentieth-century bicycle production.

During a test run for *Five-Man Pedersen*, one of the bike's secondhand wheels buckled under the pressure; Starling photographed the torqued bicycle wheel, naming the resulting palladium print *Bicycle Wheel (Failed)* (2003/04; pl. 17) – an obvious allusion to Duchamp's revolutionary *Bicycle Wheel* from 1913, the "assisted" readymade that altered our conception of art forever (though not entirely for the better). The crux of Starling's humorous reference to the Duchampian legacy is not necessarily located, however, in the latter's contribution to the well-worn story of modern art's gradual deskilling (and the concomitant debunking of the myth of the artist as infallible genius, as the sole source of the enigma of value). Perhaps we should consider Duchamp's well-documented interest in alchemy instead – he wasn't called "the alchemist of the avant-garde" without reason – or his love of meaningless, masturbatory machines – the Ouroboros as onanist.¹⁴ Though, for me, this particular photographic work's essence is to be found in the title's bracketed afterthought: "failed." This wheel, the result of an amateur experiment in improvised locomotion, won't get us anywhere; it will transport us in thought, and thought alone. "Failed," that is to say, through failure – recall the closing sequence of *Autoxylopyrocycloboros*, showing the artist going under – it has become a work of art: the most magical transformation of all.



Figure 7 Simon Starling, *Work, Made-ready*, Kunsthalle Bern (A Charles Eames 'Aluminium Group' chair remade using the metal from a 'Marin Sausalito' bicycle. A 'Marin Sausalito' bicycle remade using the metal from a Charles Eames 'Aluminium Group' chair), 1997.



Figure 8 Simon Starling, *Five-Man Pedersen (Prototype No. 1)*, 2003.

14. Cf. John F. Moffitt, *Alchemist of the Avant-Garde: The Case of Marcel Duchamp*, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003). See also Sean Kelly, ed., *Marcel Duchamp/Man Ray: 50 Years of Alchemy* (New York: Sean Kelly Gallery, 2005). Like that of his latter-day antagonist Beuys (see note 10), Duchamp's name is perhaps not the first to come to mind when gathering Starling's imaginary interlocutors around: unlike Brancusi and Moore, Duchamp enjoyed advertising his apparent disdain for work, and this set him apart from the labor-intensive artistic paradigm with which Starling is customarily associated. One thing that unites both artists, however, is a decided taste for the aesthetic marvels of "hard" science, as well as the willingness (not universally found among their peers) to embrace science's latest findings and methods.