
Interview with Simon Starling
Berlin, March 2005

Philipp Kaiser (PhK)
Simon Starling (SS)

PhK Let's begin at your beginnings. In the early nineties you started dealing with concepts of modernism. Why do you think that subject was so virulent at the time and why were you particularly interested in it?

ss I've talked in the past about modernism for me being related to a mapping process that I was involved in and still am. It became a kind of framework for locating myself in the world. I suppose the interest coincided with the fact of living in a "provincial" situation in Glasgow. I was trying to think about that in a proactive way. The buildings of International Modernism became a focus for my travels, my mapping —my activity as an artist. I started to behave a bit like an architectural tourist; it gave some form to the practice, if you like. So, for example, when I came to make an exhibition in Australia, I located this experience within the history of International Modernism and made a project connected to an exemplary modernist house designed by two Australians, David McGlashan and Neil Everist in the suburbs of Melbourne.



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PhK Boats, cars and airplanes—modern means of transportation—keep cropping up in your work.

ss My work thinks out loud about what it means to constantly travel as an artist. The first flight from Europe to Australia took something like two weeks; now it's less than 24 hours. These notions of a

collapsing globe, of accessibility, have become central to my practice and were certainly the starting point for the project I pieced together for Melbourne. I discovered this tree in the grounds of the Museum of Modern Art at Heide: it's a 200-year-old River Red Gum tree and has a scar in its bark—the trace of an Aboriginal canoe builder's activity and a typically ecological process.



That ancient process triggered the notion of using a tree to create the work. From there I started to collapse these different narrative strains, one onto the other. A global dimension developed; me coming from Northern Europe to make an exhibition in a sixties house of the International Style, the local story of the Aboriginal “canoe tree” and then, laid on top of all that, the story of a Spanish guy called Vital Aslar, who made a journey from Ecuador to Australia in the seventies on a reconstruction of a traditional balsa raft. Aslar built his raft from seven Ecuadorian tree trunks—it got him to Brisbane in around four months. It sported a sail painted by Salvador Dalí. All these narratives were forced together into one very simple gesture or performance and that was to fly a model aeroplane above the sixties house just once for the opening of the exhibition. I decided to build a scale model of a plane that was itself somehow linked to International Modernism. I chose the Farman Mosquito, which is one of the planes illustrated in Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture*.¹⁾ I made my copy of the plane using the wood from a balsa tree that I personally sourced in Ecuador on what became a kind of secular pilgrimage. In general, the places I go to, and the kinds of things I get to see, run contrary to a normal understanding of tourism.

PhK Could you describe how your early work was linked to artistic practice focused on contextual frameworks?

ss When I was finishing my studies in the early nineties, there was

1) Le Corbusier, “Towards a New Architecture”, in: *Essential Le Corbusier: L'esprit nouveau articles*, Oxford, 1998. French original: *Vers une architecture*, Paris, 1923.

a lot of talk about the idea of context. It was a time when artists like Renée Green, Mark Dion and Christian Philipp Müller were coming to the fore. But also in Glasgow, such concerns were central to the work of people like Roderick Buchanan, Christine Borland and Craig Richardson. I suppose I was thinking about the idea of "institutional critique" much more when I was studying than I perhaps do now. It was part of an ongoing discussion that influenced me greatly; there were a lot of prominent artists at that time dealing with these things. I made some very specific, perhaps rather dry projects in relation to some of these issues: for example, *Museum Piece* (1991), the project I made with a fellow student, Paul Maguire.



We were both studying in the Glasgow School of Art that is essentially a museum, the studios were in the famous Mackintosh building. Tourists would walk into your studio and smile at you nervously. At times it was like being in a zoo. Paul and I started thinking about that, and what transpired was this crazy installation using several miles of electric cable and the fluorescent tubes from the display cases in the school's museum. We took an existing structure and then reworked it in a very efficacious way. For me it is still an important work. I remember some years later being so excited to discover Michael Asher's project with the radiators at Kunsthalle Bern²⁾—there seemed to be a genuine connection there.



Michael Asher, installation view at Kunsthalle Bern, 1992

It is a way of working that has since come back time and time again. This very simple model of unpacking something, and then tweaking it a little bit, runs right through my practice to the *Kakteenhaus* in

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2) Michael Asher, Kunsthalle Bern, 16 October – 29 November 1992.

Portikus (2002), where I gutted my car and separated the car from the engine and then reconnected them 30 meters apart.

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< 838 PhK You produced home-made copies of Poul Henningsen lamps and Eames chairs and you once mentioned that you work like a professional amateur. What is your approach to modernist design?

ss There is the idea of the “prototype”, which I have used quite often. The idea of returning objects to a kind of innocent state, taking an existing object and rethinking it again, as if for the first time. That was what I was doing with these design-related projects. If we understand the idea of the prototype as an action made outside the generic, then my lamps and chairs sit somewhere in the space between that idea and some sense of democratised design—or the reclamation of that spirit. They are utopian on that level. All the work I make deals with existing structures, with readymades if you like. I am quite resistant to the Duchampian idea of taking an object, an industrially manufactured object and rarefying it. There is a sense of intellectual condescension in that gesture and also perhaps a religiosity—Duchamp takes a bottle rack, sticks it on a pedestal and it takes on the form of some kind of relic. Robert Smithson described him as the “spiritualist of Woolworth’s”.



Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913/1964

PhK Yes, your role as an artist is very different from Marcel Duchamp's. Your work is much more related to labour and craft.

ss Exactly. My attitude toward these things is maybe much closer to a Marxist idea of labour, the alienating effect of mass manufacture—an estrangement from things. It's also quite clearly connected to

the more radical aspects of the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain with all its wonderful contradictions. I've even been compared to the Luddites³⁾ by one critic.

PhK What importance has the material itself for you? Is there any relation to the use of material in artistic practice? Aluminium, for example, is closely related to Minimal Art.

SS I wouldn't put too much emphasis on those relationships in the work. The choices of materials usually have their origins in, say, mass manufacture rather than in art history.

PhK Yes, I agree, but there is a kind of iconography of material.

SS Of course, I am deploying a received sculptural language when making work but more as a sort of alibi to look at other things—other issues. For example, the project I made in New York—*Bird in Space* (2004)—was an attempt to collapse two stories one onto the other: a contemporary story about the global production of steel and an art historical story about Brancusi's *Bird in Space* sculpture from 1925. The story goes that in 1925 Duchamp imported a Brancusi sculpture into America. The US customs, who at the time didn't charge import tax on artworks, refused to accept the fact that this polished piece of metal was a sculpture and they charged Edward Steichen, who bought the sculpture, the 40 percent tax applied at the time to industrially manufactured goods. A court case followed which radically redefined the definition of an artwork within the American legal system. I was interested in that story because there was this debate last year about import duties on steel entering America. The Bush government was trying to protect US steel by imposing a 40 percent tariff, exactly the same amount as in 1925. I decided that I would attempt to bring a piece of Romanian steel into the US as an artwork, to circumvent this tax. The formerly state-run steel industry in Romania had recently been bought by the British-based steel tycoon Lakshmi Mitta, with a little help from the well-greased palms of Tony Blair. In the end the WTO forced Bush to withdraw his illegal tax but the metal arrived in New York and was floated in the gallery on some helium filled inflatable jacks. I suppose it was an attempt to use the art historical narratives as a sort of investigative tool, if you like.

3) The British Luddites opposed industrialisation in the 19th century because it threatened to deprive them of work, wages or status.

And, of course, this two-ton slab of branded Romanian steel floating on helium had a parodic relationship to Richard Serra and his deeply romanticised view of heavy industry.

PhK A lot of your works seem to be connected to the tradition of Conceptual Art. As you suggested, the *Kakteenhaus* project is connected to Michael Asher's Kunsthalle Bern piece and there is also this nod to Bas Jan Ader in your boat projects. How do you see your work in relation to an art historical tradition in general?

ss Another example of this kind of art-historical bootlegging is a work I made last year, *Tabernas Desert Run* (2004). It's a rerun of a Chris Burden piece.



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Chris Burden, *Death Valley Run*, 1976

In the seventies he crossed Death Valley on a very ergonomic moped he'd designed, which was basically a bicycle with a tiny Japanese motor. He tried to make the most efficiently powered crossing of Death Valley as possible. I took this idea and transposed it into a desert in Spain, which was also the source of the cactus for my *Kakteenhaus* project. There is a whole industry in the Tabernas desert related to Sergio Leone, who tried to recreate a cut price Wild West in Europe and so it seemed very natural to collapse Burden's real Wild West story onto the Tabernas Desert. I made the crossing of Europe's only true desert using a fuel cell powered moped—a kind of contemporary version of Burden's little machine. The only thing the fuel cell produced was water.

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PhK Would you say your work is nostalgic?

ss Perhaps it's a little bit—in terms of the idea of "action". An artist like Burden had a great belief in the power of action and I suppose

I feel an affinity to that idea. I think I have a much less heroic presence than he does and, in fact, generally vanish in the final work. It may sound contradictory, after all our talk about the significance of materials in the work, but the idea of the “dematerialised artwork” is something that is central. My work is about material on a very fundamental level—about stuff, about atoms. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, Robert Barry and Lawrence Weiner are really important for me. The elegance and precision of a work like Barry’s *Inert Gas series* (1969) is very attractive to me: on one level it’s only about matter, about argon, helium, but it’s mediated—matter as information, a poster, a telephone call.



Robert Barry, *Inert Gas Series: Helium*. Sometime during the morning of March 5, 1969, 2 cubic feet of helium will be released into the atmosphere, 1969

It’s ultimately wonderfully contradictory. I think my desert crossing on a moped that only creates water is very closely linked to releasing a quantity of inert helium in the Mojave Desert.

PhK What role does photography play in your work? Are the photographs and the remains of actions just a kind of index for the performative?

ss Yes. But perhaps this is where the work starts to depart from the Conceptual Art of the sixties and seventies that we were talking about earlier. Those artists used photography in a knowingly amateur way. They found a free space for themselves within a highly codified pictorial photographic tradition. I started making work as a “trained” photographer—I have more of a connection with professional photography—which is why an artist like Christopher Williams is so important for me. He’s locked into a different history, the history of The New Objectivity, from Renger-Patsch and Blossfeldt through to the Bechers. He has a very rigorous understanding of that tradition. I suppose I connect myself more to that understanding of photography than perhaps to how, say, Robert Barry or Douglas Huebler used photography. I suppose the photographs I make are invested with a business-like sense of clarity and professionalism. It is certainly

related to the sculptural process, which is similarly invested. They have to carry something of the energy of the work.

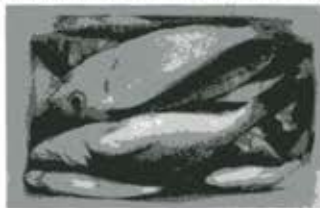


Christopher Williams, 1964 Renault Dauphine – Four
1096 (No. 2), 2000

PhK You very often dismantle a specific system and literally visualise a deconstruction. How self-referential are these circular processes?

ss I think they aspire to the state of a closure. They model themselves on a scientific understanding of a closed system. But I think the degree of closure varies quite radically from work to work. These systems are clearly a device for investigating other things and are therefore not self-referential; they talk to the wider world. It isn't reductive in the sense that, say, Robert Morris' *The Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961) is.

PhK A lot of your work deals with different relations and connections between geographic sites, codes, histories and stories. In *Blue Boat Black* (1997) you mention the fish names with utter conceptual sincerity. You focus on specific details, which seems to me very close to the strategy of the Nouveau Roman, a way of obscuring narrative structure. Are you interested in contemporary forms of narrative?



ss I plunder narrative structures from all over the place. A lot of the time, the ideas come from literary sources but they are not necessarily contemporary. Like Italo Calvino's early, tough little political satires – these very condensed short stories that he wrote in the fifties and sixties. An example I have quoted in the past is *The Black Sheep*,⁴⁾ about a country where the economy is based on everyone stealing

4) Italo Calvino, "The Black Sheep", in: *Numbers in the Dark and Other Stories*, New York, 1995.

from everyone else. One day an honest man comes to live amongst the thieves, he doesn't want to steal, he stays home at night when he should be out stealing from his neighbours. Of course very quickly society breaks down and is transformed. They're like subversive parables. There are other writers, like Jorge Luis Borges with his re-mappings, his museums and his labyrinthine libraries. These literary models really feed into the way I structure my projects. But ideas come from science and philosophy too. When Manuel De Landa's *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* was published some years ago, it seemed to come at a perfect moment for me. His interdisciplinary approach to historical processes as they occur in the development of society, language, physical systems such as thermodynamics or geology, etc. seemed very persuasive to me. Similarly important was George Bataille's *The Accursed Share*, which was a fantastically liberating text to discover as an artist. Bataille's notion of a "general economy" in which expenditure rather than production is the primary object, his overturning of a conventional understanding of economy seemed to resonate very strongly in relation to some of the projects I was making at the time—and it still does. It is really a handbook for artists, somehow.

PhK History is indeed just a construction, a fictional way of dealing with the world.

- 054 In a lot of your pieces like *Work, Made-ready, Kunsthalle Bern* (1997), you are not really sure if they are fictitious acts or not. It could be also a faked documentary piece. How literary is your art and how close is it to fiction?

ss When I say I do something I do it. In all production processes there is a degree of slippage. But the factual or empirical aspect to the work is something that I hold onto. It is very important. Again it comes back to this idea of the specific nature of the object, the sculpture or the photograph. I suppose it is an attempt to carry people along with the convoluted narratives. The feeling of investment in the work is hopefully there in the experience of each piece—in the phenomenon
- 054 if you like. In works like the *Kakteenhaus* I am actually dealing with fiction too ... the Western genre ... it's just another layer on the top of that.

PhK Do you see your work metaphorically as a kind of critique of science in general?
Our understanding of science is always based on analogies.

ss Over the last few years I have been more and more preoccupied

with science, particularly in its relation to our understanding of nature. I am very taken with Goethe's approach to science founded on direct observation and engagement—a kind of phenomenology. It seems to have a certain currency again particularly in relation to ecology. I guess it's an approach to science which has a relation to my practice. All the work has a kind of strange relationship to economics and to labour but maybe also to rational science. Perhaps it's Bataille's notion of "exuberance" again. I think the idea of taking the long road is absolutely central. There is a very nice piece by Francis Alÿs, which dramatises that perfectly. He made this beautiful proposal called *Crossing the US—Mexican Border* (1997). A line marked on a globe maps the route from one side of the border to the other but the long way round via the poles. It's a sense of things that I feel quite attached to. An absurd detour with political implications. Where you start and where you end are often very nearly the same place—it's the journey that's important. It is the same with this crazy *Shedboatshed* project I'm working on in Basel at the moment. You find an object, take it apart and you build something else with it, a means of transport; you make a journey with it and then put it back together in a new location. A shed becomes a boat becomes a shed.

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PhK Is your work ironic?

SS I don't think so. Does this structure propose irony to you somehow?

PhK No. But some of your projects seem to be related to the work of Andreas Slominski and his form of "friendly rebellion".

SS What I described before is simply the structure of the work, but you cannot separate the structure from the subject of the work and I think it is the counterpoint between those two things where it starts to get interesting and certainly escapes any sense of irony. *Rescued Rhododendrons* (1999), for example, brings with it a whole load of notions about alien species, indigenous cultures and migration, which become quite politicised on a certain level.

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< B50 The project I made in Venice, *Island for Weeds* (2003), can also be read as a political satire of a particular situation in Scotland. The starting point was a commission to make a site-specific work for the new National Park in Scotland but that became completely impossible and convoluted and strange. Subsequently, though, it took on an interesting new trajectory when it was transposed to the Biennale in Venice. Perhaps it comes back to my comments about Calvino's very pithy stories. They have a kind of innocence to them and I suppose there is something of that in the way that I deal with these things in my work, too. I'm not interested in irony particularly.

< A1-16 PhK Tell me more about the Basel *Shedboatshed* project.

ss As you said, modes of transport are a recurrent motif. Perhaps it is worth putting the new work in the context of other boat projects.

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< B60 There was *Blue Boat Black*, the Surinam project *Quicksilver, Dryfit, Museumbrug* (1999) and *The Mahogany Pavilion* (2004) in São Paolo. The Surinam project has a kind of classic Starling logic somehow.



It is based on two journeys I made—one journey being completely dependent on the other. The project links Amsterdam, where I finally exhibited the work, to Surinam, the former Dutch colony. The Dutch struck a really bad deal with the British, which led to the British taking

control of New York and the Dutch of Surinam.



<872 If you've been to Surinam you'll know that that was a mistake. For a long time in my work, I had been interested in aluminium—the modern metal. When I was invited to make this exhibition at De Appel in Amsterdam, it was a nice moment to try to deal with that again. I knew about Surinam's history as a bauxite producer; the country is extremely scarred from this activity; a huge area was flooded in order to generate hydroelectric power. I devised a structure for the project that involved making a boat journey from Paramaribo to the Afobaka dam, which is the heart of aluminium production in the country. On that journey I took a 90-amp hour battery and a single solar panel and loaded up with tropical sunshine. I also went to visit a bauxite mine and came back with some fragments of ore and lots of photographs. Back in Amsterdam I got hold of a small, light aluminium boat and an electric outboard motor and I made a journey around the canals of Amsterdam until the battery from Surinam ran out.

<880 PhK In São Paolo you turned a wooden boat upside down to create a kind of pavilion.
ss I think that work is related to the new Basel project. Buckminster Fuller once wrote about how the Vikings used their longboats as buildings in the winter.⁵⁾ They turned them upside down and put them on trestles. A lot of terminology in architecture comes from maritime sources—the "nave" of a church comes from the word for the floor
<885 of a boat. When I was making the charcoal for the *Blue Boat Black* project, I worked with a charcoal burner, who had a barn on his farm that was built from a ship. Anyway, there are these very beautiful Scottish boats called "Loch Longs", which were produced from the thirties until the mid-sixties. They were often made from South American mahogany. So I decided in a way as a response to Oscar Niemeyer's Biennial pavilion to make a piece of mobile architecture

5) Buckminster Fuller, "Tetrascroll", in: *Your Private Sky*, exh. cat. Museum für Gestaltung, Zurich, 1999, p. 516.

in the spirit of the Vikings. So I took the mahogany back to South America in the form of a boat that was placed upside down on its mast. It became a very simple architectural structure.



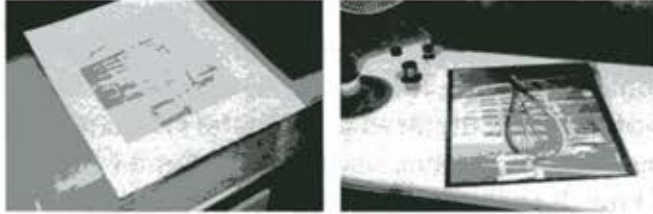
PhK Did you sail the "Loch Long" to Brazil?

SS No, I didn't. They are only 22 feet long. You would be mad to sail it all that way, even if it is probably a little bit bigger than Bas Jan Ader's boat. I suppose thinking about the São Paulo project led me to the work I am doing now for Basel. In a way the Basel exhibition, probably more than ever, is focused on ecological issues. It goes back to Noah's ark, of course, and the idea of creating a self-contained life support system. Within certain architectural circles the idea of mobile architecture is discussed more and more because it is perceived to have a relationship to ecology and to a sensitive use of land and resources. It is, of course, an ancient tradition. All of that thinking informed this new project, this very self-contained idea of taking a structure, a simple wooden shed and then taking it apart and using it to build a boat, un-building the boat and re-building the shed again in a different location. The only energy involved is the energy of the River Rhine, which takes you from one place to another. It also has a coincidental relationship to another exhibition space in Basel, the Kunsthalle, the building of which was totally paid for with the proceeds from the art association's concession to run one yawing ferry across the Rhine from 1854 to 1877.

PhK Another recent project is closely connected to Christopher William's seven photographs of the Swiss dam *La Grande Dixence*.

SS As I mentioned before Christopher Williams has been an important artist for me.





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He's similarly involved in a convoluted form of mapping, a kind of interconnectedness, making pilgrimages which relate to some journeys I have made. One of his pilgrimages took him to the *Grande Dixence* dam, which was the subject of Jean-Luc Godard's first film—a short eulogy to concrete.



Jean-Luc Godard, film still from *Opération Béton*, 1964

With his joint passions for concrete architecture and Godard, Williams made seven photographs of the dam in 1993. I had been thinking about this perverse economic model that the Swiss have developed as a way of making a little bit of money. It is a very beautiful thing. Basically they buy night-time electricity from their neighbours and they use it to pump water in holding reservoirs and then by day when the demand for electricity is high they unleash this water and generate electricity which they sell back to their neighbours at peak rate prices. I suppose this circularity is like many of the narratives in my work. I have been working on a project that attempts to collapse this phenomenon onto the art historical tale of Williams' pilgrimage. I traced his photographs in Europe and took pictures of them in storage.

PhK Why only Europe?

SS Because it is basically the idea of using Switzerland as the sort of centre and just to take the collections that surround the country. And then to return the photographs to Switzerland...

PhK ...and to sell them again?

SS I am going to make a series of platinum prints of my photographs

of Williams' photographs. Again, it is like playing with the materiality of the photographic image. I have made a few works recently that deal with the photographic image as a receptacle for certain quantities of metal—to think of the photograph as a sculptural phenomenon. I have used existing photographs for this, never my own and I suppose that is something new. It seems to heighten this sense of them being receptacles for something, particularly when the image is repeated. In the case of the Williams project the shift is from silver print to a platinum print which, while playing with notions of value, also links this giant engineering project in Switzerland to the source of the material that is being used to make my versions of the photographs—a vast open cast mine in South Africa. The interesting thing about platinum is that it is absurdly energy intensive to produce. To make one ounce of metal you need twenty tons of ore.

PhK On another level the appropriated photographs also work as a kind of import.

SS Yes, but what is nice about appropriating Williams' photographs is that it's almost an extension of his practice. All his photographs reference other photographs in some way. It seems like a very natural thing. He has also made many photographs in archives and store-rooms. It seems to add up.

PhK I was also wondering about your *Rotary Cuttings* project for Basel. Inversion—literally putting things upside down and changing given meanings—is a very postmodern strategy.

SS The project is an attempt to create a different kind of experience within the exhibition—perhaps less language-based. A lot of my projects depend on a certain level of textual information while the *Rotary Cuttings* is much more immediate—and mute. Again it models itself on the idea of the detour—large amounts of work being put in but to minimal final effect. Spatially it ties the show together quite literally. We are going to take a circular section of the wall from one part of the building and the same size section from another part and then exchange them using the most elegant possible device, which is basically a revolving arm. Because the two parts of the wall will weigh pretty much the same, it will require very little energy to make the switch. Potentially you should be able to do it with one finger.

PhK How site-specific is this idea?

ss One starting point was the building's relationship to the river and this stream that constantly runs almost through the museum. In turn, perhaps it refers to the generation of hydroelectric power—to Godard's concrete dam.

^{<88} PhK In your early project *Blue Boat Black*, you dismantled a museum display case to
^{<854} build a boat and in *Kakteenhaus* you used the engine of your Volvo to create a heated space for a cactus. How is *Rotary Cuttings* related to the idea of institutional critique? Is it meant to be subversive?

ss To me critique implies autonomy and it's hard to claim any real autonomy when the institution is so heavily involved in realising the work. Of course, one of the reasons I particularly want to do this is because the building is getting this fantastic multimillion-franc facelift. On the one hand, there is a kind of implied aggression towards the building and the institution, but I think that is defused by the circularity of the gesture—its minimum energy quality. It has, of course, a relation to Gordon Matta-Clark. He always worked with buildings that were in a state of decay. In a way he was just promoting a process of "de-architecturalisation" and there was very much a singular entropic trajectory to his cuttings. The buildings were invariably destroyed afterwards. There is something particular about Robert Smithson's and Matta-Clark's obsession with entropy. It is very seductive and particularly in Smithson's case, very American. It's really the obsession of somebody who comes from this weird fucked-up Hinterland in New Jersey where everything is rusty and decaying. It is really a tough dialectical approach to things—extremely brutal in a way. Even the *Spiral Jetty* is ultimately a nasty scar on the landscape and he celebrates that. He films these huge diggers destroying the landscape. I suppose my project sets itself up in dialogue with that. It proposes an alternative model, one again that is perhaps linked to ecological notions or kicks against an entropic notion if you like—through its balance and circularity.

PhK Do you think that this is a utopian project?

ss Perhaps, if it was never to happen, then it could truly be understood as utopian.