

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW



## SIMON STARLING

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# SIMON MAKING CONNECTIONS STARLING

In his antic romps through history, Simon Starling sometimes takes chancy leaps of logic. His installations are all the more vivid, and elegant, for the risks he courts.

BY WADE SAUNDERS AND  
ANNE ROCHETTE

HUMOR IS LITTLE DISCUSSED in art criticism, though funny art abounds. Many of Simon Starling's projects have been comic—slapstick and harebrained, funny ha-ha and funny peculiar—at the same time that they have been unimpeachably erudite. In his thought and work processes, Starling generally follows one thing with another, a third and a fourth. This shaggy-dog-story method places him in danger of establishing connections that come to feel contrived or attenuated—a risk of failure that he willingly assumes.

Born in Epsom, England, in 1967, Starling earned a degree in photography at Nottingham Polytechnic in 1990, and finished his studies in 1992 at the Glasgow School of Art. He had his first solo exhibition in 1995 in London, followed by one in Glasgow in 1997; since then, he has had

more than 50 solo shows. In 2003, he was one of three artists in the first Scottish pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and he won the Turner Prize two years later.

Peripatetic (he now lives in Copenhagen) and formidably inventive, Starling ranges widely among installations, elegantly fab-

View of the exhibition  
"THEREHERETHENTHERE,"  
2009; at MAC/VAL, Paris.  
Photo Marc Damage.

All photos this article  
courtesy the artist and,  
unless otherwise noted,  
Casey Kaplan, New York.

## POSSESSED OF A STORYTELLER'S KNACK, A RESEARCHER'S ZEAL AND A TRAVELER'S NOSE FOR LUCKY FINDS, STARLING NIMBLY LINKS PRESENT AND PAST IN BACKSTORY NARRATIVES.

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ricated objects, rough-and-ready assemblages, photographs, short films, books and more. He is comfortable at diverse scales, keeps a big toolbox of conceptual and technical strategies, and is equally adept with the obvious and the obscure. Ecological concerns are pervasive. Possessed of a storyteller's knack, a researcher's zeal and a traveler's nose for lucky finds, he nimbly links present and past in backstory narratives that are typically posted on gallery walls and/or printed in handouts. Among the artists with whose work Starling's practice intersects, Ronald Jones is notable for having based his mixed-medium projects as early as the 1980s on complicated fact-based scenarios accessible only in their titles, which can run a page or more. But neither Jones nor Starling is a historian, and both shape their narratives to suit esthetic ends.

"THEREHERETHENTHERE," a large exhibition of Starling's work, opened in France in September 2009. It was split between two venues: the Musée d'art contemporain du Val de Marne, known as MAC/VAL, in Paris's southern suburb of Vitry-sur-Seine; and the Parc Saint Léger, a contemporary art center in Pougues-les-Eaux, 120 miles farther south. He also had a piece in a group exhibition at the Kadist Foundation, which collects and shows art, and sponsors residencies for artists and critics in Paris and San Francisco. The easily misread exhibition title was written in large capital letters on a wall at MAC/VAL. (For the past 30 years, the Los Angeles-based sculptor Peter Shelton has used similar run-on titles; *SWEATHOUSEandlittleprincipals*, 1977-82, is an early example.) Running words together and playing with capitalization is one of the ways Starling forces close attention to language, which is of particular interest to him.

So is site specificity. Starling often develops his projects in relation to the venues where they will be first displayed, and as a result some pieces lose impact when shown elsewhere. The books published in connection with exhibitions are well suited to his discursive method, and help us relate works to their initial contexts, as do other accompanying texts, putting Starling's work in a long tradition of art whose full appreciation relies on a corpus of knowledge outside the frame. Many a Starling critic has been sucked into a vortex of exegesis (an effort that tends to take a toll on one's sensitivity to the artist's humor).

STARLING'S ENTERPRISES have repeatedly involved his getting from one place to another, with the means of conveyance and the journey being as important as the destination. In this respect, the 2005 *Shedboatshed* (not shown in France) is paradigmatic. Having spotted a wooden shed near the Rhine, Starling labeled the planks, disassembled the shed, then built a

### SIMON STARLING CASEY KAPLAN

IF SIMON STARLING DIDN'T have much to work with in terms of site-specificity at this simple white-cube space, he did manage to make local history resonate with particular force. The centerpiece of "Red White Blue" was *Red Rivers (In Search of the Elusive Okapi)*, 2009, Starling's 24-minute film whose voiceover narration is based on an account of an expedition in the Belgian Congo undertaken a century ago by one Herbert Lang. A German mammalogist whose trip was sponsored by New York's American Museum of Natural History, Lang





This spread, views of *Red Rivers (In Search of the Elusive Okapi)*, 2009, HD video, approx. 24¼ minutes. Photos Cary Whittier.

was also an amateur photographer and diligent diarist. His pursuit of the legendary giraffelike animal is evoked in Starling's film by two men paddling a canoe down waterways that course mostly through wooded terrain.

Until it nears its completion and various familiar structures loom into view, the trip looks like it could be almost anywhere, including deepest Africa; in fact, it took the artist and a friend down the Hoosic River and the Hudson, starting at Mass MoCA in North Adams, Mass. (where Starling had an exhibition in which the boat, handmade from African wood, was shown for the second time; its maiden exhibition was at Casey Kaplan, New York, in 2007). The weeklong journey ended at the natural history museum—in front of a diorama containing a spectacularly graceful (and superbly camouflaged) okapi, to be exact.

In its false virginity, the passing landscape encourages reflection on the complicated history of the U.S.—particularly along its Eastern seaboard—as both subject and agent of colonial conquest. But the film's most interesting subtext is about photography as a tool of power. The canoe-trip footage is intercut with scenes shot in a darkroom (in the German town where Lang lived, a gratuitous detail you wouldn't know unless told), and every bit of darkroom

apparatus is made to carry metaphoric weight, from the interrogation-room-like light with which the film begins to the flash of exposure and the guillotine-sharp blade of a paper cutter, and including the ominous ticking of a timer, amplified with gleefully contrived menace. There is, too, the martial business of aiming a camera and shooting, and the whole dark science of making images appear from nothing. While Starling keys photography to Lang's yearning to reveal—and exploit—his quarry ("I am one of the very few white men ever to lay hands on an okapi," the movie's explorer says), the artist also quite precisely rhymes a print coming up in a developing tray with a voiceover passage about the magical beliefs of "the Congo native."

Most symbolically freighted of all is the red tint that throws a sanguinary cast over the entire film—the conceit is that it is from the darkroom's safelight—turning the pictured waterways into rivers of blood. But the implicit message is pressed gently; the movie's politics have a kind of tidal flow that urges you on with sneaky force.

Starting from here, it was possible to follow a concern with antiquated representation technologies throughout the exhibition, for example in an appealing suite of brain-teasing prints. A block of limestone bearing the impression of a

150-million-year-old fossilized leaf was replicated, in the 19th century, on a similarly ancient block of limestone to create a lithograph; Starling's own lithographs ("Archaeoptryx lithographica," 2008) derive from photographs of the earlier print: history carved in stone, over and over. Less satisfying are the works illustrating a connection Starling has pursued between Henry Moore, museum namesake Joseph Hirshhorn and Hiroshima (uranium comes into it). The web of relationships was laid out in a timeline near the gallery's entrance, and expressed in an imposing 2009 mobile. Suggesting Calder crossed with Bruce Nauman, the sculpture involves half-size replicas of three Moore bronzes. A greatly enlarged photo of the sky above—and top portions of—the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, where a survey of Starling's work opens in 2011, spanned one big wall.

The long list of artists playing history as a Google game, in which everything is a click away from something else, includes, among those lately seen in New York, Matthew Ritchie, Mark Leckey, Terence Koh, Matthew Buckingham and the Bruce High Quality Foundation. Starling is very good at this sport, and best—like his peers—when he makes it seem to matter.

—Nancy Princenthal



skiff with the dismantled wood, loaded it with the remaining material and, assisted by a boatman, navigated downstream to Basel, where he reconstructed the now-scarred shed for an exhibition at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst. The lively work shown at the Kadist Foundation, *Autoxylopyrocycloboros* (2006), is also boat-based. A 7-minute-long projection of 38 images documents a three-hour-plus voyage taken by Starling and a boiler man in a 22-foot-long steamboat on the photogenic waters of Scotland's Loch Long, which joins the Firth of Clyde. Starling generally steers while his mate saws up the craft and feeds the wood into the firebox; both men wear life preservers. As the sides of the hull get consumed, the boiler becomes increasingly visible; when the sawing reaches the waterline, the vessel swamps and vanishes. The last slides show floating remnants. Like a similar project undertaken by Michael Sailstorfer with Jürgen Heinert in 2002, in which the wooden clapboard of a rural cabin in Germany was fed into its own fireplace, *Autoxylopyrocycloboros* is the stuff of Tom and Jerry cartoons, Friz Freleng's narratives for the Pink Panther and myriad sawing-the-limb-on-which-one-sits tales. We laugh at the catastrophe wrought by the two men's industry. The images are sweet and fully satisfying.

And there are submerged narratives. The rhythmic portman-teau title says it all: the staccato cycle of wood-fired generation and destruction is a quixotic enactment of the Ouroboros, the snake swallowing its own tail. James Watt was born by the Firth of Clyde and worked in Glasgow, and his improvements to steam engines ushered in the industrial revolution; further developed, such engines powered the locomotives and ships whose building underwrote Glasgow's economy. England's nuclear-missile-armed Trident submarines, propelled by steam turbines linked to nuclear reactors, navigate Loch Long. Starling is attentive to such details and lets us know, in an accompanying text, that the old vessel he purchased had been converted from steam to diesel power, had sunk, and then been re-floated and rechristened *Dignity* by a local craftsman. The artist reinstalled a steam engine akin to the boat's

original. This construction-destruction story mirrors the carbon-neutral cycle of the project's journey, which sends the vehicle up in smoke.

FOR "THEREHERETHENTHERE," Starling configured MAC/VAL's cavernous, 13,000-square-foot rectangular gallery as a subtle grid within which he showed nine works, most of them recent. Four equally spaced rows of single-tube fluorescent fixtures, wired end to end, were hung halfway down from the high ceiling, parallel to the room's long sides. In the front part of the gallery, three freestanding walls stood perpendicular to the lights and demarcated four equal and open areas; the rest of the room was left unobstructed. The wall-to-wall lines of lights tied the five spaces together. Seven pieces were installed in the front section, and as the viewer wound around them, the rest of the gallery opened out like a vista. There Starling placed the two pieces that conjure physical travel.

Both monumental and childlike, *Rockraft* (2008) consists of two white plywood platforms, each 10 feet square and 20 inches high. One is weathered and has non-skid paint on its top; strapped to its center is a sizable quarried limestone block, a visibly used nylon sling pinned under it. A skinny 12-foot wooden pole stands close to the rock; topped with a radar reflector and a yellow-and-blue striped signal flag indicating "failed engine" or "out of control," it ironically affirms the craft's former seaworthiness, though it's hard to imagine raft and rock bobbing merrily along. The second, pristine platform, placed about 75 feet away, carries a single, centered block. Fairly quickly, one realizes that this block is a near-perfect double of the first one, down to the drill holes from the quarry and assorted scrapes. The eye travels back and forth between the original raft, with its allure of boyish single-mindedness and efficiency, and the minimalist doppelgänger.

Starling's uncharacteristically direct accompanying text tells us that a platform was built to float the one-ton, locally-sourced stone 12 miles upriver from Avonmouth to the heart of Bristol, riding one of the world's larger tides on an especially powerful day. The stone was then unloaded, scanned and reproduced by a computer-guided milling machine, and the cloned block placed on a platform visually identical to, but structurally different from, the original. The platform's proven ability to float, the rock's weightiness, the vast space the work commandeered and the absurd duplication form a strange and buoyant ensemble.

*D1-Z1 [22,686,575:1]* (2009) features a modified, mid-20th-century

Above, *Autoxylopyrocycloboros*, 2006, color transparencies, medium-format slide projector, vitrines, steel trestles.

Right, exterior view of the Parc Saint Léger, Centre d'art contemporain, showing an altered and enlarged reproduction of an early 20th-century photograph, 2009. Photo Aurélien Mole. Courtesy Parc Saint Léger, Pougues-les-Eaux, France.

**IN AUTOXYLOPYROCYCLOBOROS, STARLING GENERALLY STEERS THE STEAMBOAT WHILE HIS MATE SAWS IT UP AND FEEDS THE WOOD INTO ITS FIREBOX. WHEN THE SAWING REACHES THE WATERLINE, THE VESSEL SWAMPS.**

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Dresden D1 35-mm film projector set atop a looping apparatus. Positioned close to one of the freestanding walls and running continuously, it threw a small black-and-white image; the film's down-up, down-up course was fully visible beneath the projector. The 30-second-long loop shows a complex bit of machinery in action. In the center of the image is a jerkily advancing piece of film, 35 millimeters wide as shown: life size. The shallow depth of field—the image is blurry at the top—suggests a tight close-up of a physical object, though the machinery appears weirdly immaterial. Near the work one heard an even mix of the projector's hum and the soundtrack's clinkety-clack, the sound balance changing as one moved.

Watching machines work is hypnotic, but there is also a formalist kind of wit in a projected film of a piece of film moving through a machine; this sort of reflexivity is a hallmark of Starling's work. The Z1 of the title was a room-sized machine—arguably the first computer—built by Konrad Zuse in his parents' Berlin apartment between 1936 and 1938. Allied bombings destroyed the apartment building and the machine with it, but Zuse and assistants reconstructed the Z1 in the late '80s. To enter data, Zuse punched holes in 35-mm film stock, which he fed through the computer to be read. Starling used complex software to make a black-

and-white animation that was transferred to color film, which accounts for the movie's peculiar tint. Starling's *D1—Z1* celebrates Zuse's wily, against-the-odds inventiveness; it also has a rich, subtle period-piece humor, playing with nostalgia for a time when machines had material substance against today's etherized and miniaturized technology.

Sometimes, Starling's ideas are more satisfying than the work they generate. At MAC/VAL, his current interest in Henry Moore (also manifest in work recently on view at Casey Kaplan in New York) was seen in *Silver Particle/Bronze (After Henry Moore)*, 2008. A smallish, black-and-white photo taken by Moore of his roughly 2-foot-long *Reclining Figure No. 4*—an image that makes the sculpture seem larger—hung on the wall, a circle cut out of its center. Nearby, a modestly scaled, biomorphic cast-bronze object finished with Moore's familiar yellow-brown translucent patina rested on a white wooden base. As in a photo-based project at Mass MoCA last year, a silver particle from the cutout circle was, Starling writes, "repeatedly scanned in an electron microscope to generate a 3D model which was then out-put at a hugely modified scale and cast in the same material as Moore's original reclining figure." Although he neatly parodies Moore's method of making small maquettes that assistants enlarged into imposing



**AN IMAGE OF THE BUILDING WAS REFLECTED ON EACH SPHERE'S SURFACE AS THOUGH ALL WERE EYES, AN EFFECT BOTH BEAUTIFUL AND UNSETTLING.**

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sculptures, Starling's own bronze casting suggests he doesn't have the older sculptor's subtle feeling for form, and we see and learn little of interest on this big-to-minuscule-to-medium-size journey.

POUGUES-LES-EAUX, where "THEREHERETHENTHERE" continued, was once a thriving spa town, and its Parc Saint Léger art center occupies a small, churchlike building that has a high central space flanked by two aisles. Decades ago, the structure housed a bottling works for water from a nearby spring. Starling developed a new piece for Pougues, titling it *La Source (demi-teinte)* [*The Spring (half tone)*], 2009, as well as showing three other works in the small second-floor spaces at either end of the building.

Starling led viewers into *La Source* by placing a roughly 6-by-8-foot enlargement of a small halftone reproduction of an early 20th-century photograph on the exterior wall to the left of the entrance doors. The picture shows the building's floor covered by neat rows of bottles, with workers in the background; a white circle, 2 feet in diameter, blanks out part of the image. Inside the building, Starling constructed a low boardwalk that ran the length of one of the narrow aisles. Viewers were instructed to remain on this walkway, which placed them within and slightly above the work. Ramps connected the boardwalk with staircases leading to two upper rooms.

Laid out on the gray concrete floor, *La Source* comprised 1,036 black hand-blown glass spheres of six distinct sizes (3, 6, 9, 12, 15 and 18 centimeters in diameter, or from roughly 1¼ to 7¼ inches). Each was set on a small rubber washer. Starling positioned the spheres at the vertices of a virtual orthogonal grid oriented diagonally to the boardwalk; the great majority were concentrated at one end of the space. In the rest of the room, the floor was mostly open, undermining one's perception of the grid; the balls in this area were like little points of darkness. A distorted image of the building was reflected on each sphere's surface, as though all were seeing eyes, an effect both beautiful and unsettling.

The abstract quality of this baroque installation made it hard to see what it represented: Starling had isolated a tiny detail from the disk he cut out of the water-bottling photo, enlarged it to the scale of the gallery and rendered each halftone ink dot with a corresponding-size sphere. Seen from the second-floor space at the gallery's far end, the arrangement produced an image that remained frustratingly unfixable, elegantly in tune with the site's long, rich and mostly lost history.

Poised on the brink of legibility, *La Source* was a chancy project, and as such indicative of Starling's approach at its best. Artists tend to forget about loving risk when recognition comes knocking. The connections Starling weaves in his works may seem arcane or forced, and some works are visually unconvincing. But it is courting failure that gives Starling's works vitality and, like his humor, takes us to unexpected places. ○

View of the installation *The Spring (half tone)*, 2009, wood and hand-blown glass. Photo Aurélien Mole. Courtesy Parc Saint Léger.

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"THEREHERETHENTHERE" was at Musée d'art contemporain du Val de Marne, Paris, and Parc Saint Léger, Pougues-les-Eaux, Sept. 18-Dec. 27, 2009. *Autoxylopyrocycloboros* was at the Kadist Foundation, Paris, Sept. 12-Nov. 8, 2009. A public sculpture by Simon Starling has been commissioned by the city of Lyon for 2010; a solo exhibition of his work will open at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art in 2011.

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