



Simon Starling
Prouvé (Road Test), 2012
Test drive on May 18 2012, Dobersberg, Austria















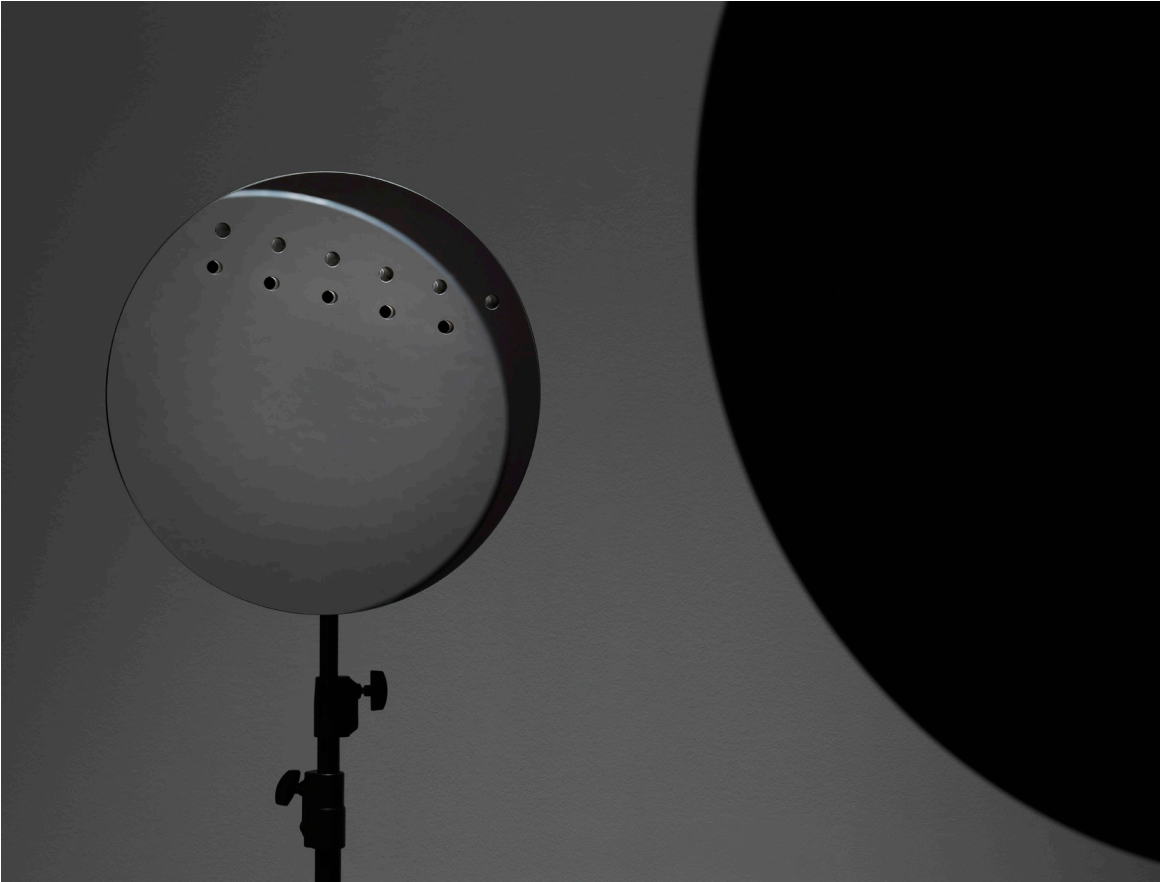


Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary

**Simon Starling / Superflex
Reprototypes, Triangulations and Road Tests**

Contents

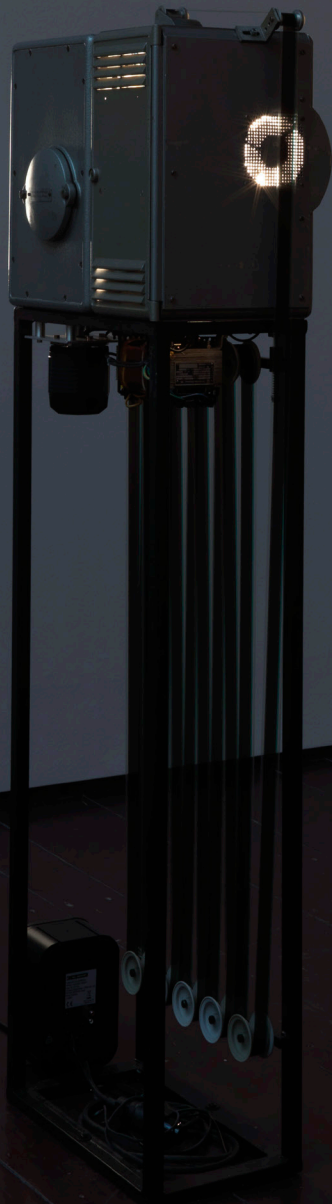
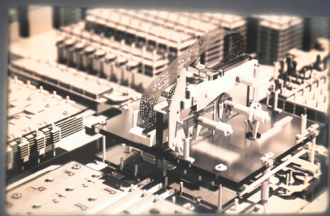
	Page
On Making Ready	
Robin Mackay	15
Countercurrents: Modernism Interpellated	
Esther da Costa Meyer	33
Coercing Architecture: The Strange Stories of <i>Three Birds, Seven Stories, Interpolation and Bifurcations</i>	
Venugopal Maddipati	49
The Spectacle of Science: A Visual History of Venus Transit Observation	
Birgit Schneider	79
The Parallax Men	
Eva Wilson and Daniela Zyman	98
To the Cow Still Tends, on the Cow Depends, All, All... A Rough Guide to a Bovine History of Art and Culture	
Mirjam Schaub	113
Finding Ritta and Hektor (Diary of a Trip to Kitzbühel)	
Superflex	123
List of Works	137
Contributors	139



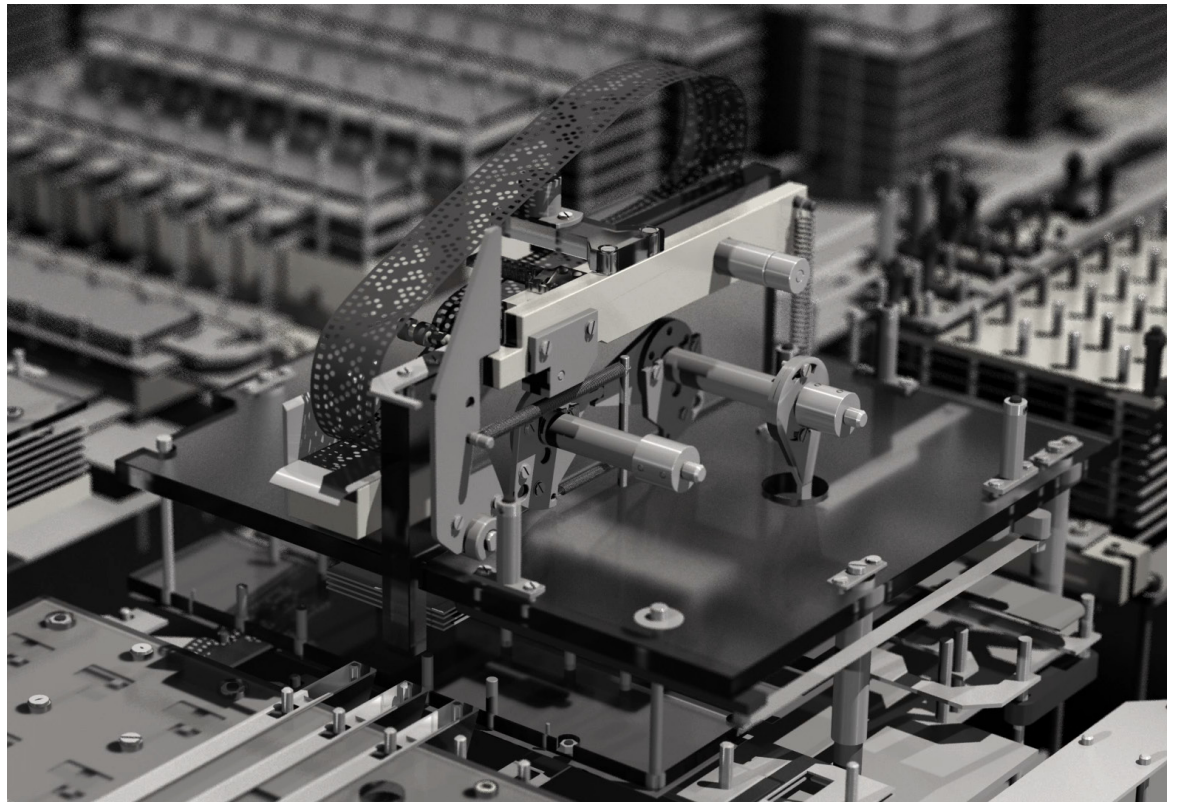


Simon Starling

D1 - Z1 (22,686,575:1), 2009







The Parallax Men[•] Eva Wilson and Daniela Zyman

Collapsing

Simon Starling's preferred methodological approach—as exemplified by the works in “Reprototypes, Triangulations, and Road Tests”—is the collapsing and complicating of events, inventions, objects, and narrations that do not belong to the same time period, geographic realm, or discipline, thereby undermining solidified authoritative principles. Collapsing, in this case, designates the superimposition of multiplicities that do not fully synthesize or synchronize into coherent unities but maintain their fractalized structure. This is of particular importance as Starling thereby allows the various threads and chronological sediments of a complex story or the individual elements of a multipart installation to unfold and to coexist as interrelated singularities.

For instance, in Starling's *Exposition* (2004), the reconstruction or appropriation of a glass partition designed by Lilly Reich for the seminal Barcelona International Exposition in 1929 coexists with the construction of a fully functional portable fuel cell.^{••} This acts as a catalyst between hydrogen and oxygen to produce an electrical current, which in turn is used to illuminate three identical contemporary platinum prints made from a photograph taken of the German engineering exhibit (possibly at the opening of the exposition on May 19, 1929, and featuring King Alfonso XIII of Spain). Here, as elsewhere, Starling operates with multiple transgressions: he uses elements of design, science, and photography as well as the precious metal platinum, thus transgressing disciplines and rendering the title of the work—*Exposition*—polyvalent in its reference to Expo 1929, the exposure of the images to the light, and the chemical processes at the heart of this illumination. Simultaneously, he transgresses the authoritative principle of historic linearity, presenting a serial repetition of an identical photographic moment of exposure while offering a translucent division in the form of the elegant glass wall between the generative and possibly revolutionary technology of the platinum power cell and its historical predecessor, the steam

- The title references the seminal 1974 American thriller *The Parallax View*, directed by Alan J. Pakula and starring Warren Beatty. The story concerns a reporter's dangerous investigation of an obscure organization, the Parallax Corporation. It also alludes to the book of the same title by Slavoj Žižek and the first proposed title for this exhibition, “In parallax,” deemed to sound too much like the name of a laxative, which, in turn, is one of Žižek's favored topics.
- Reich's elegant glass partition exists in various renderings, e.g., for the Barcelona International Exposition in 1929, the “German People—German Work” exhibition in Berlin in 1934, and the Imperial Exposition of the German Textile and Garment Industry in 1937, also in Berlin. See Matilda McQuaid, *Lilly Reich: Designer and Architect* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 35.

engine, visible in the form of four model locomotives lifted by a model crane in the photograph. Where Reich employed a strategy of “mediated unreferentiality” in her Barcelona designs—cutting off “all moorings with history, labor, capitalism, choosing to privilege the object over context and production process”[•]—Starling lays bare the inner workings of the cell, exposing the cables, networks, and nodal references.

Similarly, Starling conflates, short-circuits, and juxtaposes (at least) three different elements and inventions in the creation and display of a thirty-second animation for *D1–Z1 (22,686,575:1)* (2009). Depicting the inner workings of a punched-film reader developed in 1937 by the German engineer Konrad Zuse for the first freely programmable computer, the Z1, Starling uses contemporary animation technology with more than 22 million times the memory of its ancestor. The newly created digital material is then transferred onto 35 mm celluloid—the material Zuse used for his punched film—and displayed on a Dresden 1 (D1) projector, the first projector developed in 1951 in the German Democratic Republic by the Zeiss Ikon company. The celluloid loop transported through the machine functions as an ouroboros, a technological snake biting its own tail while projecting a simultaneously archaic and contemporary visual image of binary functions: punched holes, material and digital ones and zeroes, in black and white.

As argued by Robin Mackey in his essay for this publication, the object becomes “integrative,” “undisciplined,” and fractalized. This transgressive operation is not a simple artistic gesture but, as we would argue, a “contemporaneous confrontation.” Starling thus offers sedimented experiential protocols for perceiving (historic) artifacts as contemporary objects or constellations. To understand the appropriation and adaptation of historical elements as a historicizing undertaking would be a misunderstanding. The interest is less in uncovering history (or History) than in developing consequences or resonances within certain historical and contemporaneous nodes. In Starling’s practice, rethinking certain moments of the past thus often means a material restaging or reenactment, cutting through the divisions of disciplines, transgressing the authoritative notion of a succession of historical events in the act of collapsing, and a literal and material reprototyping of past inventions. The artist states: “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.”^{••}

Obsolescence

A recurring element in Starling’s work is the preoccupation with the obsolete, which often leads to the revitalization of the object or its resurrection out of obsolescence. The obsolete presupposes a natural life cycle of an object. It looks at

- Esther da Costa Meyer, “Cruel Metonymies: Lilly Reich’s Designs for the 1937 World’s Fair,” *New German Critique*, no. 76 (Winter 1999): 168.
- Simon Starling, *Cuttings*, ed. Philipp Kaiser (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2005), C10.

the object from the point of view of its quality as a commodity that circulates in the economy of goods and signs. Within that realm the object has a rather short and engineered life span, even if it can prolong its status as an iconic symbol. When an object falls into obsolescence, it is perhaps no longer “useful” and has achieved a certain finality, but at the same time and because of its discontinuance, it is liberated from a preconceived functionality or use value, bringing to light an inherent but previously undisclosed or inaccessible realm of impact. Starling’s interest in the obsolete lies in this double operation of identifying obsolete objects, techniques, or inventions and demonstrating that it is in light of the object’s disuse that we can unearth new forms of relevance. Illuminating the remains of past aesthetic and technological regimes and the signifiers of temporal latencies has the paradoxically obverse effect of identifying the ruminations of today’s polyvalent understanding of the object, the mechanics of modern efficiency, the possible spaces of future obsolescence. To perform this operation, Starling very willingly reconnects with the history of modernity and modern design.

The notion of obsolescence has had a fruitful and highly contentious reception and was a hotly debated topic in the field of modern architecture and in postmodernism’s reassessment of modernity in particular. Modernism’s faith in technology as a driving force of emancipation and its abstract development of space and form were attempts to assert universalism, permanent revolution, and timelessness. By evacuating personal style and expression, modern architecture could claim to transgress social, geographical, and local specificities. However, the double disavowal of a unified architectural object and of a unified agent started to break down this claim of a stable identity. Robert Venturi’s seminal *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* of 1966 draws from the most divergent examples of architecture to make the case for the “difficult whole” allowing for ambiguities and complexities. Without rejecting the achievements of modernism, Venturi and subsequent generations of critics have argued that modernism was not so much a break with history as a new understanding of history that was to unfold. It thus breaks with a symmetric reading of progress and decadence, invention and obsolescence.

It is perhaps interesting to note that the combined interest in space, form, experience, and emancipation as a “difficult whole” seems to recur in Starling’s rescue operations of modern (design) objects. *Prouvé (Road Test)* (2012) helps to illuminate this idea. Here the artist’s conceptual framework is the performative reenactment and testing of a design object from the 1950s. Starling describes his approach as “taking the aspirational nature of Jean Prouvé’s 1950’s roof structure, *Shed*—a wing-like design that owes as much to aviation and automobile engineering as it does to functionalism in architecture—and putting it to the test under somewhat absurd but nevertheless seemingly fitting circumstances.”*

Starling does not allow the modular element that was previously part of a roof structure of the Lycée Blaise Pascal in Orsay, built in 1956—to accept its place as an object

* Artist’s statement, 2012.

salvaged from obsolescence and elevated to the status of an icon that can then rest peacefully in the space of the museum as an archival item. It is instead—and in a much too literal sense—speed-tested on the back of a van and driven on a runway in order to unfold its aspirational, structural, and formal qualities. (At a speed exceeding 120 kilometers per hour, the test-driven Prouvé roof fragment and its carrier would allegedly take off from the ground.)

Taken for this purpose to a small airfield in Dobersberg, Austria, where it is accompanied by its paradigmatic big brother in the form of a 1950s Cessna taking off and landing, the Prouvé roof atop the van, will enter into a somewhat maverick race against an undefined record or toward an unknown goal. In Robert Enrico's film *Les aventuriers* (1967), the triangulation of the daredevils Manu and Roland (played by Alain Delon and Lino Ventura) around the inevitable girl, Laetitia (Joanna Shimkus), leads to a reckless but playful chase of earthbound and airborne motor vehicles and a foolhardy attempt to fly Manu's plane through the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Starling's placement of the truck with its obviously oversize mohawk exoskeleton as a cargo cult object within the exhibition space seems no less preposterous. Starling as the boyish adventurer or explorer (a role and calling that he regularly adopts, as in *Red Rivers (in Search of the Elusive Okapi)* (2009)) also calls into question the containment of his own practice within the defined space of the gallery or museum. The shed will end up in the space of the exhibition, but the excitement of its short liberation still seems palpable in the deceptive motionlessness of the newlywed hybrid machine.

Absurdity

The vaguely absurd testing process of *Prouvé (Road Test)* unravels a few compelling trajectories. For one, it can be seen as a functional or operational test widely used in the automotive or aviation industry to determine the properties of a material, object, or design under stress or extreme duress. As such, it tests the aerodynamics of the roof structure and its engineering. But then again, to what end? Why would an art collection endorse a risky operation that could eventually damage its precious holding?

This absurd act follows a long lineage of artistic endeavors employing tactics of the nonrational or nonlinear reasoning. They are often based on a willingly erroneous interpretation, a *malentendu*, or an absurdist constellation. For Henri Bergson, laughter acts as a corrective, asserting that which defies common sense but partakes nonetheless in a logical inevitability.

Prouvé (Road Test) follows a number of previous "reprototyping" operations that Starling has arranged, involving objects and artworks such as a *Butterfly* (or BKF) chair or sculptures by Henry Moore. These setups demonstrate an apparent irreverence or an iconoclastic *démarche* on the part of a younger artist toward the achievements of his predecessors. Submerging a replica of a Henry Moore sculpture to cultivate zebra mussels, for instance, can be deemed whimsical or absurd. Staging the objects as "reprototypes," Starling seemingly asserts the object's status as devoid of

history or symbolic value. However, if a *prototype* is defined as “an early sample or model built to test a concept or process or to act as a thing to be replicated or learned from,”[•] then it is evident that the intention of the *re-prototype* is not to cancel out history but quite the opposite, namely to tease out its relevance and vitality under a new set of circumstances, or “returning the object to a kind of innocent stage, taking an existing object and rethinking it again, as if for the first time.”^{••}

Thus, the absurd nature of the test in this case is not devoid of function but brings the object back into a web of urgencies that defines its contemporaneity and exigencies beyond its formal or museological attributes. The nonsensical violation of protocols—the protocols for handling museum objects, for instance—allows for a rediscovery of the object’s historic qualities but also its experiential and utopian aspirations, which transcend its time-bound and frozen nature. The risky nature of the road test, the experiment, whose outcome by definition cannot quite be predicted, lays bare the thin nerves underlying our habit of consuming musealized and fetishized objects through a thoroughly intellectualized incorporation of functionalist modernist ideals. It is a performative act or *mise-en-scène*, through which the object (the shed roof) parallels the balancing acts performed by its inventor. A widely told and retold story has it that Prouvé cultivated the habit of balancing on two legs of a chair while meditating on design issues, seeking to eliminate the forces of gravity—both of the chair and in his mind.^{•••}

Replication

The seeming irreverence toward regulations and legislative protocols (and the underlying power structures) is exemplified by the *homemade* replication of design objects that pervades Starling’s work and his collaboration with Superflex in the context of *Blackout* (2009). The replication of a signature work of art or design is both an appropriation of and an identification with an object or design and a challenge to the regulatory regimes that commodify and capitalize inventions. The reproduction of an object—its reverse engineering or do-it-yourself reconstruction—deconstructs (or fractalizes) the solidified status of the object. The 1942 blackout lamp designed by Poul Henningsen for the Tivoli amusement park served the purpose of illuminating the grounds of the park throughout and in spite of the expected air raids. Henningsen served as head architect for the amusement park between 1941 and 1949 and created three categories of lights: “light,

- Wikipedia, s.v. “Prototype,” last modified May 3, 2012, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prototype>.
- Starling, *Cuttings*, C5.
- See “Jean Prouvé,” *Collage* (*Vitra Magazine*), <http://www.vitra.com/en-gb/collage/design/catherine-prouvber-jean-prouv/>. In this sense and in light of the already cited strategy of the *malentendu*, Starling’s attempt is to prove Prouvé, following in the tracks of Yves Klein and many others, by attempting to emulate Prouvé’s *Obsession with Levitation*—in defiance, this time, of the museological gravity of the iconic.

lighting and illumination. Light to see with, lighting to create atmosphere, and illumination to put a little color into life.”•

In 2009, at the invitation of the Kunsthallen Brandts in Odense, which occupies a former factory building, Starling and Superflex set up a metal workshop for the (re-)production of more than seventy lamps over the three-month run of the exhibition. Violating copyright regulations and related concerns of authorship, the work displays the production process and the manual and cultural labor infused in the objects and released in the process of their production. In the act of redesigning and blueprinting the production process, the artists reveal the sum total and aggregation of heterogeneous elements and create a totally new process of circulation for the object and its history.

To *replicate* literally means to repeat but also to reply and to fold back. In the process of creating a double, the artists speak back to the original (which in turn speaks back to its new creators) and unfold that which is folded in its (in this case, literally) multilayered objecthood. Replication is thus a method of unsettling the paradoxical status of objectification in modernity. In its relation to conservation, mummification, and the simultaneous reanimation and activation of the object, it challenges long-standing power relations.

Narrativization

Starling’s objects and installations very often involve processes of (re-)production and the staging of performativity, but they also engage narrative elements, in which the objects and protagonists turn into *agents*. In their focus on peripheral or seemingly trivial attributes or contingent relationships, Starling’s stories or tales are highly imaginative and speculative, without being imaginary or capricious. They reveal or establish structural lines that allow us to follow processes of transformation and translocation and to overthrow descriptive conventions without ever sidestepping the methodological path laid out by the accurately researched materials. The protagonists of Starling’s narratives are *meaningful* figures who relate to one another outside of traditional, categorical norms or even verifiable facts. *Three Birds, Seven Stories, Interpolation and Bifurcations* (2007) exemplifies his *démarche* in great detail and complexity. As the title indicates, it is a work of interpolation that refers to a structural method of constructing or establishing new sets of parameters within a range of known values or facts. In Starling’s own words, the work “aims to chart the transference and translation of ideas and forms through time and space, from Berlin to India, from celluloid to bricks and mortar, from the virtual model to the stone replica, from the first to the seventh floor.”••

The story unfolds around the real-life figure of the maharaja of Indore and his commissioning of a new palace by the young modernist architect Eckart Muthesius in 1929 (at the time when Lilly Reich was setting up her Barcelona exhibit). This historically factual story doubles and is even

- See “Welcome to Tivoli” (brochure), [http://www.tivoli.dk/media\(1862,1033\)/Welcome_to_Tivoli.pdf](http://www.tivoli.dk/media(1862,1033)/Welcome_to_Tivoli.pdf).
- Artist’s statement, 2007.

preceded by its rendition in the form of two fictional films (which in turn had their own doubles), scripted by Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou in 1921: *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The India Tomb*. The former begins with an Indian yogi master “teleporting” himself into the home of an architect and persuading him to sail to India to work for the maharaja of Eschnapur.

Starling creates a further bifurcation (or is it an interpolation?) by introducing a building in the center of Turin, known locally as the “Fetta di Polenta,” built by the architect Alessandro Antonelli in 1854. This unbelievably ephemeral structure seems to defy common sense with its wedge-like floor plan, 4.35 meters wide on one end and just 57 centimeters wide on the other. Starling’s rendition of the Indian story in the form of several historical and contemporary photographs reimported into the European context of the Turin building is once again complicated (in the etymological sense of the fold) by the replica of one story of the “Fetta” built as a 1:1 model in Berlin, furnished with the same images, and thereby triangulating the three geographic locations in a Borromean knot. In turn, the visitor to the fourth location—the Augarten—is teleported to and fro, must meander in front of the work, conflate the imaginary, the real and the symbolic, establish self-ascertained connecting threads, and risk getting lost along the way (in geographical and temporal terms). Is the information that the air conditioning system was fitted by Heinz Riefenstahl, Leni’s brother, actually relevant? And if so, where does it take us? How can any one piece of architecture contain this incredible mess of contingencies? Starling’s method does not propose a *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, a logical causation of the stories that he interpolates. It rather acts as an aleph, a prismatic illumination of histories, Heidegger’s *Geschichte*, in the sense of sediments and layers.

... and Triangulation

The question of where Starling’s endeavors actually take us is most imminent in his work *Venus Mirrors (05/06/2012, Hawaii & Tahiti (Inverted))* (2012). The two parabolic mirrors, each 60 centimeters in diameter, face each other at eye level in the last and darkest room of the exhibition space. The reflection of these mirrors—uncannily real, due to the 100 percent reflective capacity of the specially manufactured glasses—is disrupted only by a line of circular holes leading across each mirror like strange footprints. The holes, perforating the otherwise pristine surface, indicate the passage of the planet Venus in front of the sun at each hour on the date indicated in the title, from two geographically disparate and clearly nominated locations: Hawaii and Tahiti on June 5, 2012.

The event referred to is the famous transit of Venus, one of the rarest known astronomical events, taking place in intervals of 8, 105.5, or 121.5 years. (After this year’s transit, the next one will occur in 2117, probably beyond any of our conceivable lifetimes.) The history of the *observation* of the transit of Venus has spanned much of the globe for the past nearly four hundred years. (The first known observation, in 1631, was recorded by Pierre Gassendi, a Parisian

amateur astronomer battling against the boredom of his amanuensis, tasked with noting the exact altitude of the sun during the transit, who, having become weary of waiting for this obscure obscuration, went AWOL from his designated observation post.) This history has also engaged an inconceivable span of cultural techniques, economic efforts, and media-historical developments.[•]

As in Zuse's Z1, the holes, the absences in the recording system, here become the carriers of information in a paradoxical twist of materialities. But what exactly takes place when Starling substitutes the blazing orb of the sun for a mirror and juxtaposes two of these reflective surfaces, parenthesizing the viewer in their midst? What—apart from the scientific intentions of determining the astronomical unit, the mean distance between Earth and the Sun, and thereby estimating the size of the entire known solar system, not a bad feat in itself—is the crux of this astronomic happening, at least in Starling's realm of interest?

The method applied here is the parallax, used to determine distances by measuring the displacement or apparent difference in an object's position when viewed along two different lines of sight (and thus involving the principle of triangulation). In this case, however, two of the defining positions are in themselves reflective and indicative therefore each of the other one, as well as of the intruding viewer. The overlay of the two paths of Venus can never be brought into accordance, their tracks always slightly awry, whatever standpoint the viewer tries to adopt. Accordingly, in the nineteenth century, part of the conundrum of the insistently indefinable celestial contacts of Venus and the sun (due to the bothersome "black drop effect," the bleeding of Venus's outline into the contours of the sun at the point of contact), which even the newest optical devices could not prevent, was the embarrassment of personal error. In time for the 1874 transit, the issue of a distorting subjective and individual affect entered the realm of scientific concern: "In the nineteenth century, astronomers, physiologists and experimental psychologists noticed that different individuals timed simultaneous phenomena differently. These small 'sensational differences,' sometimes referred to as personal equations, augmented considerably in astronomical measurements, in perceptions of movement, and in measurements of rapid phenomena, such as the speed of light."^{••}

The solution, it seemed, was simulation: the astronomers Charles Wolf and Charles André soon "claimed to have solved the 'black drop' mystery by using an apparatus that artificially reproduced transits of Venus. A few years earlier Wolf had designed a similar machine to measure the different times at which observers reacted to an artificial star crossing the wires of a meridian transit instrument. With it,

- For a detailed account of the history of Transit observations, see Birgit Schneider's essay in this volume and Eli Maor: *Venus in Transit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- Jimena Canales, "Sensational Differences: The Case of the Transit of Venus," *Cahiers François Viète*, no. 11–12 (2007): 15–40.

he obtained the observer's 'psychological time' by subtracting the 'real' time of contact from the total time."[•]

The real, the symbolic, and the imaginary once more need to be brought into concordance, in terms of the absolutely predictable clockwork of the solar system, but more importantly in regard to the "psychological time" of the unpredictable individual. An observation of the transit of Venus is possible only in its reflective, simulative rendering in the form of its mirror image. In this sense, it is not a parallax that Starling stages here but its lateral twin, a so-called *xallarap*, also an astronomical term, which refers to the gravitational bending of matter toward the observer, a subjective and relative destabilization of reality, contrary to the ideals of a depersonalized modernity.

Modernism and Its Doubles

Taking the methodological gestures of collapse, obsolescence, absurdity, reproduction, triangulation, and narrativization as starting points, we propose a fragmented and subjectively focused discussion of the notion of modernity—or multiple modernities—based on the coincidental encounters of figures, inventions, and apparatuses introduced by Starling and Superflex, all converging in the period from the 1930s to the 1950s and pivoting around the Janus-headed character of modernism. This speculative proposition finally draws on the contingent character of the exhibition venue itself, the Augarten studio, and the way the exhibition occupies and relates to the building, thus reactivating the story of its former occupant. Starling's approach to modernism, as we understand his oeuvre, is concerned less with the organized and historically finite view of modernity as a historical category. Modernity is actively obsolete, reproducible, collapsible, geographically extendable. Starling extrapolates and reanimates ever-new story lines and relationships from this historical body.

The space of the exhibition itself, as well as the objects found in situ, plays an important role in the formulation of most of Starling's projects. His works and the emphasis he places on the materiality of art activate the context and produce a kind of "surplus experience" that is drawn from the site and that adds contingent layers with each wandering and resituation. The mirroring of the roof of the Augarten space by the displaced and interiorized *Prouvé (Road Test)* and the obscuring of the large north-facing windows, producing a gradually amplified tunnel effect of increasing darkness, heighten the overall modus of spatialization. The space is no longer a backdrop but an active participant and agent in the exhibition.

However, the schism that is disclosed by the exhibition—in its subtle undertones at least—lies in the conflictual nature of the period of the 1930s to the 1950s and the various affiliations, political and ideological associations, and infiltrations that penetrate and are perpetuated in the political and social field even today. Whereas much of what has been described so far has focused on the aspirational nature of modernism and material contingencies, the meandering

• Ibid.

narrative threads crisscross and complicate the purified lineages. If we take a closer look at the biographies and entanglements of the various protagonists, this reading starts to unfold in more complex directions.

Lilly Reich, for example, as discussed by Esther da Costa Meyer,[•] was not only a seminal figure in the history of modernism but also had an active role as a designer for the Third Reich, conscripted into the military engineering group the Todt Organization after 1939. Konrad Zuse, whose invention of the first mechanical calculating machine in 1937 figures in Starling's *D1-Z1*, was active in the Third Reich, first in Department F of the Henschel aircraft factory, developing the Henschel Hs 294 guided air-to-sea missile, and later received funding from the Third Reich's Aerodynamic Research Institute for prototyping his Z2 and Z3 computers.^{••}

Henningsen, in contrast, designed his blackout lamps literally on the flip side, the dark side of this history, subversively evading air raids with his blackout lamps and thereby hiding in plain sight. However, the underlying motif of Tivoli's developer Georg Carstensen—"when the people are amusing themselves, they do not think about politics"^{•••}—proved to be cutting matters short. The entertainment that Tivoli offered its visitors, staging jazz music and inviting artists such as Louis Armstrong to perform, was one of the reasons that the Nazi occupiers saw it as a breeding ground for cultural resistance and instigated a major fire in 1944. And even before that, in 1935, Henningsen had faced controversy, when he made a film about Denmark that fused images of traditional farming and industry with a jazz sound track—it was heavily re-edited at the time and only later, in the 1960s, restored to its original director's cut—a blackout of sorts. The political relevance of entertainment or (for that matter) the politics of desire and production, as in Reich's shop window displays and industrial exhibitions, becomes visible in the dim glow of the fifty-one blackout lamps installed in the Augarten, offering the visitor a navigational grid through the otherwise unsteady and disruptive geometry of the slanting and tilting studio architecture.

Historical Homework

Finally, it is not until we explore and interpolate the controversial biography of Gustinus Ambrosi—the sculptor for whom the spaces that the foundation has adapted as its new exhibition venue were built—that the full extent of this dichotomy, or rather the interconnections between the aspirational and reactionary elements of this subplot, start to unravel. Ambrosi's at times latent and often immediate presence at the Augarten cannot be ignored. His museum—containing some sixty-four busts, statues, and portraits of politicians (including Benito Mussolini and the Austro-fascist dictator Engelbert Dolfuss), artists, architects,

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- Da Costa Meyer, "Cruel Metonymies," 161–89.
 - See Konrad Zuse, *Der Computer: Mein Lebenswerk* (1970; Berlin: Springer, 2010), esp. 49–66, dealing with his wartime experience.
 - Wikipedia, s.v. "Tivoli Gardens," last modified May 18, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tivoli_Gardens.

philosophers, businessmen, and allegorical figures—is adjacent to TBA21’s exhibition space.

The building—built between 1951 and 1957 by the architect Georg Lippert—was turned into a museum solely devoted to Ambrosi’s works in 1978, three years after his death. The Austrian state agreed to the substantial act of building the extensive compound in the Augarten after Ambrosi’s former state-financed studio in the Prater was destroyed by air raids and vandalized during ground battles in the last years of World War II. Between 2001 and 2011 the Austrian Gallery Belvedere exhibited contemporary art in the former studio building, confining Ambrosi’s sculptures to the original museum. In 2012, as TBA21 presents its first exhibition in these spaces, the foundation finds itself confronting the complex heritage of one of Austria’s forgotten (whether intentionally or not) state artists.

It is this close encounter that prompted us to research Ambrosi’s life and led to the uncovering of some previously unknown documents testifying to his direct relationship with Albert Speer, minister of armaments and war production for the Third Reich, which links him to the highest ranks of National Socialist power.[•] The archives in Berlin and Vienna testify to an extensive and regular correspondence between Ambrosi and his patrons under the authority of Speer. Two major commissions are clearly documented, as well as the regime’s ongoing protective interest in Ambrosi. Documents also attest to his former and equally intimate affiliations with the Dollfuss regime of the Ständestaat of 1934–38. Our research coincided with the preparation of the exhibition and fed into the project proposed and articulated by Superflex. In *Kuh* (2012), Superflex directs the visitor’s gaze toward a particular incident and narrative within the complex biography of Gustinus Ambrosi.

In 1942 Ambrosi received the commission for a monumental sculpture for the park of the planned New Reich Chancellery in Berlin. The commission asked for a *Maiden with Cow* as a counterpart to an existing sculpture by Louis Tuaillon depicting a *Youth with Bull*. Ambrosi set out immediately on his search for the ideal model—the cow, that is—and found her in the Tirolean mountains of Kitzbühel: “Königin” (Queen), as she was aptly named.

Kuh hints at the affectionate attachments of a man in the time of war and of great human suffering but also speaks to the complex nature of history and what remains of it as seen through the lens of time. We are invited to discover and enter a portal to a man’s personal and emotional life, to his mundane but inexhaustible aspirations, and to his desire to rescue a life directed toward (possibly) the most absurd being.

- An extensive and continuous correspondence between Ambrosi and the top echelon of the Nazi leadership between July 1938 (only a few months after the Anschluss) and March 1945 suggests the interpretation of Ambrosi as a key member of the Third Reich’s circle of favored artists, as do the finished architectural drawings by Hans Freese from 1940 for one of the four planned studios designated for him (in Berlin, Linz, Vienna, and Kitzbühel).

Why would Ambrosi, we ask ourselves, wish to save a cow in 1945, when his entire world was shattered? Why would he write to the architect Hans Freese in February or March 1945 requesting a monthly stipend of 1,000 Reichsmarks for his own subsidy and 300 Reichsmarks for the cow's upkeep, because in his own reasoning, "To slaughter this beautiful cattle would be nonsense, as such proportions are not easy to find again."[•]

Not the infamous *banality of evil* but the blindness and ignorance of Gustinus Ambrosi are reanimated by the *Kuh* project: perfect proportions versus the starvation of humans and the madness of total war. His ability to disidentify with the "real-life" circumstances surrounding him and his post-war denial of his role in Nazi art history permitted Ambrosi to create for himself a very comfortable existence even and immediately after 1945, supported financially by the Austrian state and emotionally by his followers and admirers. Just as in the case of Arno Breker and Ernst Thorak, to name two artists closely associated with Hitler's generous artistic program, overseen by Speer, Ambrosi's National Socialist past was very swiftly disregarded, ignored, downplayed, or systematically covered up. As he was an artist of the "classical tradition"—striving only for, in his own words, pureness, beauty, and the absolute—he continued to rail against the moderns in the most derogatory terms. He remained equally active and prolific while considering himself a victim of the Nazi era in hindsight. Ambrosi's newly amended biography reads as an exemplary story of an artist lost in self-aggrandizement, identifying with the figure of the untouchable genius or, to introduce a term associated with Nazi hagiography, the artist as an emissary of god (*der Gottgesandte*).

The real-life cow at Augarten thus serves as an entrance point into the *other* story, the story that remained in the dark for all these years. The revival of the cow—the heifer Ritta, to be precise, a descendant of Ambrosi's Königin from Tirol, accompanied by the male yearling Hektor—is a situationist act of animism, if you will, in which the animistic object (or being) embodies the spirits that extend beyond it but carries a significance and deeper meaning for the collective. The cow performs a double metamorphosis from flesh and blood to clay and stone and back to flesh and spirit.

At the outset the exhibition "Reprototypes, Triangulations, and Road Tests" did not seem to be a historical inquiry in particular. We had invited Simon Starling and Superflex based on a selection of works from the collection that pivot around questions of technology, innovation, and the history of science and modernism and out of our great respect for the artists. The complicated and antagonizing story of Gustinus Ambrosi was known in Austria as "one of those" narratives that would not raise any eyebrows in the third generation. But how "Reprototypes, Triangulations, and Road Tests" also became a thrilling investigation into history, with its full set of opaque characters, a hunt for traces and indices and speculations, is the story that we would like to unfold here through the prism of an exhibition.

• Ambrosi to Freese, undated (ca. March 1945), Bundesarchiv Berlin, BArch, R 3/3359.

**Simon Starling / Superflex
Reprototypes, Triangulations and Road Tests**

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