

SIMON STARLING

recombinations



Simon Starling can be understood as a more focused version of Tobias Rehberger. Which is to say his strategy is more pronounced and sheds light on Rehberger's less coherent oeuvre (understanding that coherence is not a requirement within the bounds of the postmodern aesthetic). One of the strategies employed by Starling is to transmute the substance of one designer object into another. For example creating a simulacral version of Poul Henningsen's classic 1957 *Artichoke Lamp* out of petal-shaped strips of metal cut from a Daihatsu Jet Van which is left somewhat untidily patched up. What is remarkable is that this cobbled together design classic retains a significant element of beauty, which cannot be said for the Daihatsu van.

In another incarnation *Waratah (Artichoke, Kogle, Zapfen, Pomme de Pin)*, 2001, for the Sydney Opera House Starling used his upside-down version of Henningsen's Artichoke Lamp as an analogue of the waratah which is the floral emblem of New South Wales. In particular the work plays on the Australian designer Lucien Henry's unrealized design for an ornamental lamp, entitled the Waratah Electrolier. The diagram below indicates that Henry's 1915 design was utterly unconcerned with the design revolution taking place in





Europe in the early twentieth century. It is also evident that Starling is making an allusion to the petal like structure of the Sydney Opera House. The latter was based on the segments cut out from an orange but these shapes can also be understood as a waratah with its petals turned 180 degrees.

Starling's work seems more powerful than Rehberger's due to its mathematical like exploration of the mechanics of analogic and metaphor. I say mathematical-like because the point of mathematics is to identify pattern in phenomena. The fact that pattern exists is proof that the universe is not simply entropic or random but is instead an infinitely complex symphony of structure (symphonies within symphonies within symphonies).

One can also relate Starling's work with music which, like mathematics, is based on the interminable play of pattern. Starling has spoken of his work as involving 'interconnecting the previously unconnected' REF!! and this strategy is particularly apparent in *Inverted Retrograde Theme*. In this work he creates a connection between sculptural processes and the structure of Arnold Schönberg's twelve-tone music. The Secession commentary on this installation notes that:

Aspects of mirroring, inversion and translocation, which are characteristic for twelve-tone music, are transferred to the installation to spark a new, contemporary view of modernism and its inherent visionary potential.¹⁰

The deconstructive-reconstructive process of twelve tone music is recapitulated in Starling's dismantling of a grand piano and reconstructing it in an inverted state. This entailed



Simon Starling, *Flaga 1972-2000*, 2002



creating a mould of the piano's cast-iron frame that was used to produce negative castings in a manner reminiscent of Rachel Whitread's negative sculptural castings of domestic objects and spaces. The two halves of the casting box was exhibited along with the inverted piano frame. Starling also created an inverted sound board and piano body.¹¹

The idea of taking things apart and joining them up either physically and/or conceptually runs through Starling's oeuvre to the extent that he can be understood as a process-oriented artist. The meaning of a cultural object lies not simply in its physical appearance but in the contexts to which it is related—each of which provide the object with different significance. If one accepts that context is the provider of meaning then meaning can multiply according to the number of contexts to which the object is related. This is a typical aesthetic strategy that can be described as metaphorical, allegorical or mythical.

Instead of taking the fluorescent lighting in the Secession gallery for granted. Starling incorporated it into his work as a visual-kinetic accompaniment that brings the dismembered and inverted piano back into time based symbolic expression. Starling had the gallery rearrange its fluorescent lighting so that there were twelve rows each made up of seven tubes (the seven notes of the diatonic scale ABCDEFG). Starling had these lowered from the ceiling so that they hang over the tables upon which the piano parts are displayed. Starling used time switches to transpose a simple Schönbergian twelve-tone composition into a rhythmic sequence of lights flickering on and off.

In Simon Starling's film *Short Story, Brief History* a nar-



rative unfolds in which a silver fork is transformed into its natural material and then metamorphoses into another form of artifice. Truth and fiction mingle easily through the mediating device of the camera lens. The absurd protraction of Starling's production process, and its subsequent notation, ideally paves the way for a fuller consideration of the social and cultural matrices in which these objects are embedded than they might ordinarily receive. In this instance he used petal-shaped strips of metal cut from a Daihatsu Jet Van to construct his own version of Poul Henningsen's classic 1957 *Artichoke Lamp*.

It is a characteristic of Simon Starling's work to transform or reconstruct significant objects, or transfer them into different contexts. In this way he poses a question as to the original intention and condition. Starling turns sculpture inside out. Like Rachel Whiteread he displays negative space, but he goes further by exhibiting formers, jigs and moulds as sculptures in themselves.

Flaga 1972-2000, 2002, is a relatively simple work of art within Starling's oeuvre but it clearly demonstrates some basic characteristics of his modus operandi and is therefore a good starting point. It began with Starling finding out (most probably from the mass media) that as part of the process of corporate globalisation and the incorporation of the former Soviet Bloc nations into Europe, Fiat had moved production facilities to Poland (Ehlers 2003). This information stimulated him to create a narrative sculpture based on an old model Fiat which he would transform into an automotive version of the Polish flag, which consists of red and white horizontal bands. The production of the work began when he pur-





chased a red Fiat 126 (manufactured in 1974) in Turin. He then drove the car to Warsaw where he bought a white version of the same model. The transformation took place when he grafted parts from the white car onto the original red one to create a rather sporty looking red and white version which he now exhibits bolted onto a wall (like a sculptural painting).

The most significant feature of *Flaga 1972-2000* that seems relevant to the general body of Starling's work and has resonance with several other artists being examined in this study lies in its narrative dimension. In Starling's case we are not considering 'narrative' in the classical, literary, sense. His is a more performative genre, a strange hybrid of sculpture, performance and theatre. Another feature lies in Starling's interaction with the everyday world. *Flaga* was not created in a studio, and not much of Starling's work is. Accordingly his approach to sculpture can be understood, in part, as elaborations on the themes of process art, site specificity and an artistic interaction with everyday life. And the heart of his particular elaboration lies in his incorporation of a narrative dimension into the process. What is most interesting about *Flaga* is that if one did not know the story behind the piece and saw it in a gallery bolted to a wall one would be singularly unimpressed. It would look like yet another addition to the ever-expanding catalogue of Readymades. The work acquires its interest-value from the story of how and why it was made. In terms of exhibition it demands an information panel that will tell the viewer the story, otherwise it loses most of its significance. But of course in the esoteric domain of fine art most galleries do not append an informa-



tion panel, depending on the fact that anyone who dismisses it as 'just another readymade' would be demonstrating their ignorance.

Blue, Red, Green, Yellow, Djungel, 2002, seems quite different from *Flaga* but there are resonances. 'Djungel' is Swedish for 'jungle' and refers to the botanical furnishing prints designed in the 1920s by Josef Frank, who spent most of his working career in Sweden. His print designs were based on jungle imagery found in childrens' books. So as in *Flaga* we have a geographical starting point that implies a different geographical location as there are no real jungles in Sweden. The jungle reference seems a little weak in this work and potentially politically incorrect as Starling makes use of a West Indian cedar tree, felled in New Grant, Trinidad, on 22 March 2002 [what is the significance of the date??!!]. Starling used sections cut from this tree to make printing blocks which he used to print Frankian motifs onto an enormous white curtain. The sculptural painting which results is in the form of the huge curtain, hung in an 'S' shape, spanning the entire width of the Dundee Contemporary Arts gallery. Behind the curtain Starling left the remains of the tree after the wood blocks had been cut out of it plus his long makeshift table on which the wood-block printing was performed.

The commentator cited at the beginning of this examination of Starling also observed that 'each object triggers a process of translocation, circular returns and violent leaps in time and space' but one wonders whether 'our perception of the meaning of objects is ruthlessly revised'. It is the word 'ruthless' that I would quarrel with. It implies rigour when there is a strong element of the absurd in Starling's work. Like Re-

hberger, Starling seems to work with a moderated version of the total absurdism evident in an artist such as Andreas Slo-minsky. In the instances of Starling's work outlined above the textuality of the object is expanded into its construction process, its geographic origin, the site of its exhibition and thence to connections with virtually any other object related to any of these ever-expanding contexts. Indeed, such inter-textual interconnections might lead to a state of contextual limitlessness that would make the closure of the meaning of any specific object virtually impossible. It is within this space of intertextual limitlessness that many of the artists examined here seem to work.

Certainly, Starling can be understood as opening up a semantic labyrinth via the expanded field of sculpture. Understood as sections cut out of a multidimensional narrative space his 'stories' may not have a definite beginning or end. *Djungle* for instance seems to be more a loose configuration of fragments than the story that accompanies *Flaga*. In this sense *Flaga* is easier to understand its fragments seem to hold together better than those that make up *Djungle*. Similarly *Inverted Retrograde Theme* is a more complex work, in terms of its sculptural formation at least, than *Flaga* but it seems to hold together better than the tenuously interconnected fragments that make up *Djungle*.

Site specificity, institutional critique and a self-reflexive approaches to the means of production (process over product) are all enduring salient features of contemporary avant-gardist art that form themes that Starling elaborates in his work. His process approach is deconstructive in the sense of exploring the object of enquiry in a manner that emphasizes



its internal forms and workings, its process of production and the systems and contexts to which it is interconnected. His focus is on the relationships between the outside and inside of the object, and assumptions that we make about such everyday objects as pianos or fluorescent lighting—which we generally usually take for granted.