

SIMON STARLING: IN SPECULUM

18 JULY – 21 SEPTEMBER 2013

COMMISSIONING CURATOR: MAX DELANY

COORDINATING CURATOR: PATRICE SHARKEY

Simon Starling: In Speculum is a joint project by Monash University Museum of Art, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, and City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi. With special thanks to Museum Victoria.

This education kit has been developed for secondary teachers and students of Visual Arts. It offers a range of starting points to consider in response to the exhibition *Simon Starling: In Speculum*.

In addition to the learning activities, the resource includes:

- An introduction to the exhibition
- An introduction to exhibited artworks

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. Look carefully at the series of photographs *In Speculum (Great Melbourne Telescope)* 2013 and describe how your eye travels both within individual images and across the series. Analyse how at least two formal elements and principles have been applied throughout the body of work.

2. In the installation at MUMA the film *In Speculum (Studio Edit)* 2013 is projected through the centre of the speculum mirror. This artefact was originally a component of the Great Melbourne Telescope and is currently on loan from Museum Victoria.

- Research the history of the Great Melbourne Telescope and the speculum mirror that inspired Simon Starling to produce new work for the exhibition at MUMA.
- Discuss how the speculum mirror is an integral part of the artwork.
- How do you think the artwork might be installed in a different context without the speculum mirror?

3. *In Speculum (Studio Edit)* 2013 is described as existing somewhere between a film and a performance. Spend some time viewing the film and observe the way that the moving image comes in and out of focus over time.

- Discuss the collaborative process Simon Starling undertook to produce this artwork.
- Speculate on the meanings and messages communicated through the artwork.

4. *Black Drop* 2012 tells a story about the history of scientific endeavour in relation to the transit of Venus, and examines the relationship between astronomy, photography and moving image technology.

- Why do you think Simon Starling has included shots of the editing process along with still and moving images about the transit of Venus from a range of historical and contemporary sources?
- What is implied by juxtaposing footage from various sources?

5. In the artwork *Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima)/ Ushiwaka's Masks (Atom Piece/Nuclear Energy)* 2012 two handmade wooden masks are positioned to face each other. When he was developing this artwork Simon Starling was fascinated by how a sculpture can 'reinvent itself' according to the context where it is presented. This artwork reflects Simon Starling's ongoing interest in the dual meaning of two almost identical sculptures which were produced by the British artist Henry Moore during the Cold War period:

- *Nuclear Energy* 1964-5: A large work commissioned by the University of Chicago as a monument to mark the birthplace of the nuclear age; and

- *Atom Piece* 1964-5: A small maquette purchased by Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art.

- Using *Nuclear Energy* and *Atom Piece* as examples, discuss how the context in which an artwork is shown can influence and/or alter the meaning and significance of the artwork.

- The term 'site-specific art' was coined in the 1970s, a decade after Henry Moore developed the two artworks that inspired Simon Starling to produce *Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima)/ Ushiwaka's Masks (Atom Piece/Nuclear Energy)* 2012. Research site-specific art and select two examples of site-specific artwork to write about. How have the context, materials and techniques been considered in each of the selected artworks?

- Simon Starling collaborated with a master mask maker from Japan to create the two masks on display. Research the Noh theatre tradition and the techniques and processes used to make Noh masks.

6. The installation *Le Jardin Suspendu* 1998, incorporates a model plane, various studio materials and a large back-lit photograph of the Heide garden.

- Why do you think Simon Starling chose to display the materials left over from the process of making the model plane as part of the final artwork?
- What role does the photograph of Heide have in this artwork? Consider how this image relates to the ideas being explored in the rest of the work.
- Simon Starling travelled to Ecuador to source the balsa tree for this artwork. Speculate on the reasons why he may have done this rather than purchasing the materials locally.

7. Read the accompanying introduction to *Three White Desks* 2008-9.

- How essential is this narrative to the viewer's understanding of the artwork? Discuss.
- American artist Sol LeWitt described conceptual art as 'art where the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair'. Consider Le Witt's description in relation to *Three White Desks*.

8. When Simon Starling visited Melbourne in 2013, he described *Wilhelm Noack oHG* 2006 as 'one of my most resolved artworks'.

- Simon Starling's grandfather was an architect and architecture has been a major influence on his artistic practice throughout his career. In *Wilhelm Noack oHG* a spiralling staircase designed by mid-twentieth century Italian architect Carlo Mollino inspired the form. Research the architecture of Carlo Mollino and speculate on why Simon Starling may be interested in his aesthetic.

- Discuss how Simon Starling has used formal elements within this artwork.

- Spend some time looking at this artwork carefully and reflect upon how the subject matter of the artwork relates to the means of production.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

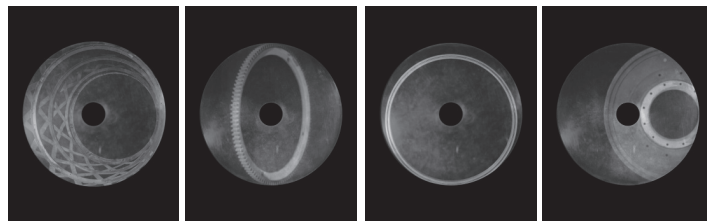
Marked by epic journeys and explorative narratives, Simon Starling's work investigates the social, cultural and material implications of object-making. His ongoing excavation and transformation of the material world takes the form of associational assemblages that incorporate film, photography and sculptural forms, revealing rich, unexpected and complex histories.

Simon Starling: In Speculum brings together a major new commission and key works from the artist's oeuvre that focus particularly on the site of the studio and workshop, and relationships between art, technology, history and modernity. These aspects of Starling's research-based practice reflect the form and process of manufacture in both structure and concept.

Much of my work in the last 15 years has attempted to investigate what it means to make things. My art practice interrogates processes of production by focusing on issues such as the sourcing of raw materials, the complex geography of contemporary production, the socio/political implications of both global and local manufacture (the outsourcing of labour), the role of handwork and craft in contemporary production, etc. The resulting works often foreground process over product – just as it's often the journey and not the destination that takes centre stage. This has led to the development of an artistic language in which the display of processes is an integral part – the workshop, the factory, the foundry, the print shop, the photographic darkroom, are all production sites that have been put on display in the work. Each of these sites and the processes they facilitate offers a set of 'tools' for the investigation of both the self reflexive making of an object/artwork and the broader historical and political narratives that might surround those processes.

– Simon Starling, 2013

AN INTRODUCTION TO EXHIBITED ARTWORKS



In Speculum (Great Melbourne Telescope) 2013
four laser exposed silver gelatin prints
each: 49.5 x 49.5 cm (unframed)

Courtesy of the artist and The Modern Institute / Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow

In Speculum (Studio Edit) exists somewhere between a film and a performance. Realised in collaboration with the Swedish artist and cinematographer Maria von Hausswolff, and using a precision-made concave telescope mirror in partnership with a telephoto camera lens, the work was produced in an improvised film-shoot. This took the form of a duel, or a game of cat and mouse, as Starling manipulated the telescope mirror and von Hausswolff operated the camera. While the mirror was swung from side to side in pulsing movements, tracking the space between itself and the facing camera, the camera operator attempted to respond to these unpredictable movements by pulling focus to hold the passing imagery momentarily sharp.

The artist's studio is at the heart of the work, however here the studio exists as a disorientating and impossibly layered hall of mirrors – a decentered, spectral space. In the resulting 'real-time' edit, which is as long as a single roll of 35mm black and white film, the pulsing movements of the telescope mirror drag the wide variety of images found in the studio into view. *In Speculum (Studio Edit)*'s cinematically impressionistic approach conflates a diverse constellation of historical and contemporary photographic images, diagrams, models and technical drawings, resonant to the exhibition as a whole, as well as to the particular staging of the film at MUMA.

The film is projected through the hole at the centre of the 1866 speculum mirror from the Great Melbourne Telescope. This 19th century wonder, one of the largest mirrors ever produced using speculum, a brittle but highly reflective metal alloy, was a key component in the Dublin-built telescope. Housed in the former Melbourne Observatory (now the site of the Royal Botanic Gardens), the Great Melbourne Telescope once surveyed distant nebulae in the skies of the southern hemisphere. A key inspiration for the making of *In Speculum (Studio Edit)* and the subject of much of its imagery, the telescope's mirror serves to both mask and, in turn, reflect the projected image. A contemporary film made in a studio in the northern hemisphere thus meets its ancestor in an optical, geographical and historical face-off.



In Speculum (Studio Edit) 2013
35 mm film transferred to HD
4:10 minutes

Courtesy of the artist and The Modern Institute / Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow

Great Melbourne Telescope Speculum Mirror 1866
speculum alloy
145.0 x 145.0 x 35.0 cm

On loan from Museum Victoria



Black Drop 2012
35 mm film transferred to HD
27:42 minutes

Produced in association with Modern Art, Oxford, and the Radcliffe Observatory, Oxford, the film *Black Drop* unfolds in a 35mm editing suite as an editor tries to bring structure and understanding to a varied array of material. He cuts footage shot on location in Hawaii and Tahiti on the occasion of the June 2012 transit of Venus, archival material, and footage of himself editing into a continuous reel. As the editor cuts and splices, a complex narrative unfolds.

The film tells the story of the relationship between astronomy, photography and the beginnings of moving image technology. In the 18th century, astronomers realised that by accurately measuring the duration of Venus' transit across the face of the sun they could calculate the size of the solar system. Predicated on the idea that the 2012 transit of Venus may be the last to be recorded on celluloid (the next transit will occur in 2117), *Black Drop* tracks the development of the French astronomer Jules Janssen's innovative photographic revolver – a device that was designed to counter human error in timing the crucial moments of Venus' contact with the edge of the sun.

The transit of Venus is an extremely rare astronomical event which occurs in pairs eight years apart, at intervals of over 100 years. Originally predicted by Johannes Kepler, and observed and recorded for the first time by the young English astronomer Jeremiah Horrocks in 1636, this event became the key to unlocking the architecture of the solar system. In what were the first internationally coordinated scientific endeavours, gigantic efforts were made in the 18th and 19th centuries to precisely document the transit from geographically remote locations across the globe. These recordings, which used nascent cinematographic techniques, allowed the first relatively accurate calculations to be made of the so-called 'astronomical unit' – the mean distance between the Earth and the sun.

Venus Mirrors (05/06/2012, Hawaii & Tahiti (Inverted)) was conceived in relation to the film *Black Drop*. *Venus Mirrors* describes the transit of Venus across the sun as it was witnessed in 2012 from two historically significant Pacific observation sites. For six hours on 5 and 6 June (depending on your location on Earth), it was possible to see a small black disc passing across the face of the sun. Small differences in the position of the planet can be observed when the viewer overlays the reflection of one mirror onto the other. These incremental differences, which result from the varying perspectives attained from geographically distant vantage points, once provided the basis for huge leaps forward in the understanding of the dimensions of our solar system.



Venus Mirrors (05.06.12, Hawaii & Tahiti (Inverted)) 2012
two drilled telescope mirrors, stands
each: 179.7 x 66.0 x 56.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York



Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima) 2010
16 mm film transferred to HD
25:54 minutes

Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima) / Ushiwaka's Masks (Atom Piece/Nuclear Energy) 2012

two handmade wooden masks, stands
masks: 26.0 x 16.5 cm and 25.0 x 17.5 cm
Mask maker: Yasuo Miichi, Osaka
Courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima) is a proposition for the performance of a play. It collapses Eboshi-ori, an ancient Japanese tale of a young noble boy, Ushiwaka, who disguises himself to escape his troubled past, onto the Cold War saga that evolved around Henry Moore's 1965 sculpture *Nuclear Energy*. Installed at the University of Chicago, *Nuclear Energy* marks the birthplace of both the nuclear age and the so-called 'Manhattan Project', Enrico Fermi's first self-sustained nuclear reaction. Each role in the original Japanese play is taken by members of a new cast, including James Bond, art historian and soviet spy Anthony Blunt, fast food entrepreneur Colonel Sanders, and uranium tycoon and art collector Joseph Hirshhorn. This cast was assembled via a web of connections that all lead back to Moore's monument.

The film emerged as part of Starling's ongoing interest in and redeployment of Moore's work, which began in Toronto with the making of *Infestation Piece (Musselled Moore)* 2006-2008 – itself a Cold War drama involving rampant Russian molluscs invading the Great Lakes in the dying days of the Soviet Union. *Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima)* was specifically inspired by the chance discovery of a smaller version of *Nuclear Energy* that, somewhat bizarrely, ended up in the collection of the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art under a different name, *Atom Piece*.

Accompanying the film are two wooden masks carved by the film's central protagonist, the Osaka-based master mask maker Yasuo Miichi. Standing face to face, they present two sides of the same central character: the identity-swapping Ushiwaka and Moore's multifaceted sculpture with a double identity.



Three White Desks 2008-2009

A copy of a writing desk designed by Francis Bacon for Patrick White (circa 1932), built in Berlin, Germany, by the cabinetmaker Uwe Küttner with reference to a 30 megabyte scan of a vintage print from the National Library of Canberra, Australia.

A copy of a copy of a writing desk designed by Francis Bacon for Patrick White (circa 1932), built in Sydney, Australia, by the cabinetmaker Charmian Watts with reference to an 84 kilobyte jpeg made and transmitted with a mobile phone by Uwe Küttner in Berlin.

A copy of a copy of a copy of a writing desk designed by Francis Bacon for Patrick White (circa 1932), built in London, England, by the cabinetmaker George Gold with reference to a 100 kilobyte jpeg transmitted in an email by Charmian Watts in Sydney.

three wooden desks, three wooden crates, framed inkjet print
desks: 77.0 x 226.0 x 62.4 cm; 75.0 x 180.0 x 60.0 cm; 73.0 x 147.5 x 65.7 cm
crates: 88.0 x 247.3 x 69.8 cm; 85.0 x 201.3 x 72.0 cm; 82.0 x 160.6 x 81.8 cm
print: 89.5 x 64.9 cm (framed)
Rennie Collection, Vancouver

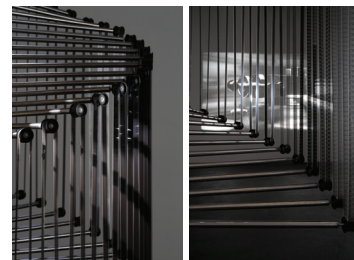
In 1928, inspired by the work of modernist designers such as Marcel Breuer, Eileen Gray, Le Corbusier and Robert Mallet-Stevens that he had seen during a year spent living in Berlin and Paris, the nineteen-year-old artist Francis Bacon set up a design studio at 17 Queensbury Mews West, London, where for a short time he produced elegant, modern furniture. Largely on account of his friendship with the older Australian-born artist Roy de Maistre, Bacon received a number of commissions for his furniture and interior designs. He redesigned the entire interior of the apartment of the contemporary art collector Gladys MacDermot (all of which was destroyed during the Second World War), designed a glass and steel dining table for Sydney Butler, daughter of the collector and patron Samuel Courtauld, and an elegant painted wooden writing desk for the Australian writer and de Maistre's lover, Patrick White. Before his return to Australia in 1947, White sold all of his furniture at auction; a move he regretted almost immediately. In the early 1950s he took a photograph of the desk to a joiner in Parramatta, Sydney, and commissioned a copy. However, White was never satisfied with the result, which was a watered-down, provisional take on Bacon's tough modernist styling – the elegant nickel-plated handles were replaced by humble knobs and the austere white leather desktop of the London-built original was substituted by a piece of linoleum.

In response to this story of nostalgia, longing and dispersal, Starling commissioned three cabinet makers in three cities relevant to the story to build replicas of the desk. A scan of a vintage black and white photograph of the original desk was first given to a Berlin-based cabinet maker; a city in which Bacon first came into contact with avant-garde design. On completion of the desk, it was photographed and the image sent to a cabinet maker in Sydney, the process repeated and an image returned to London where it was recreated a third time.



Wilhelm Noack oHG 2006

purpose-built loop machine; 35 mm film projector; 35 mm black and white film with sound
347.5 x 192.0 cm
4:00 minutes
Courtesy of Museum Folkwang, Essen



Wilhelm Noack oHG is a film made with and about a company of metal fabricators by the same name, whose work is very closely tied to the political and cultural history of Berlin throughout the last two centuries. *Wilhelm Noack oHG* had connections with the Bauhaus and international modernism, worked on projects for the Third Reich, and was heavily involved in the post-war boom in architecture and exhibition-making in West Berlin. Since the mid-1990s, it has been fabricating more and more for the resurgent art scene in the city.

The film was produced with a robust steel 35mm movie camera that was mounted and moved on a number of tools, trolleys and rollers found in the Noack workshops. The result is a bumping and grinding, rattling and vibrating rollercoaster ride through the workshops and company archives that are testament to over a century of metal fabrication. Looped on a stainless steel machine which was purpose-built in the Noack workshops, the film is carried up and around the projector in an elegant spiral.

Wilhelm Noack oHG investigates the interplay between still and moving images as it switches from archival photographs and drawings, to live-action sequences. Closely observed, the ribbons of looping celluloid at times themselves become animated by the flickering projected image on the wall beyond. Like ageing dance partners, the mechanical worlds of cinema and bespoke metal fabrication, both seemingly teetering on the edge of extinction, are re-animated in a swirling, symbiotic mechanical ballet in which processes of economic production appear inextricably linked to the creation of images and narratives.



Le Jardin Suspendu 1998

A 1: 6.5 scale model of a 1920s French 'Farman Mosquito', built using the wood from a balsa tree cut on the 13th May 1998 at Rodeo Grande, Baba, Ecuador, to fly in the grounds of Heide II, Melbourne, Australia, designed in 1965 by David McGlashan and Neil Everist

model plane; balsa tree, bags, tools, plans, steel, site-lights, transparency
138.0 x 117.0 x 37.0 cm; dimensions variable
Private Collection (on loan to the National Galleries of Scotland)

Le Jardin Suspendu was developed for an exhibition at the Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, formerly the home of the art patrons and collectors John and Sunday Reed. Their house, Heide II, built in 1968 in the international style by David McGlashan and Neil Everist, is an eloquent structure of limestone, glass and terrazzo. In the garden not far from the house is a large indigenous River Red Gum tree that still bears a large canoe-shaped scar, apparently inflicted on it by an ancient aboriginal boat builder who removed a section of the bark. This is one of the few trees that existed on the site prior to the construction of the house. The Reeds planted large quantities of European and American exotics, most notably the large Mexican oak that stands close to the house. Two years after Heide II was built, the Spanish explorer Vital Alsar journeyed from Ecuador to Australia by balsa-wood raft, landing at Mooloolaba, just north of Brisbane. His 8,600-mile voyage showed the possibility, if not the proof, of the cross-pollination of ideas, goods and people among the ancient cultures of the Pacific.

Paralleling the building of the aboriginal canoe, a modern structure was built from another kind of tree: an aeroplane for Heide. A radio-controlled 1: 6.5 scale model of a 1920s French 'Farman Mosquito', as featured in Le Corbusier's seminal book *Towards a New Architecture*, was built from the trunk of a balsa tree sourced on a journey to Baba in Ecuador, to fly high above Heide II.