

“Simon Starling: Never the Same River (Possible Futures, Probable Pasts)”

CAMDEN ARTS CENTRE, LONDON
Martin Herbert



Mike Nelson, *A studio apparatus for Camden Arts Centre; an introductory structure: Introduction, a lexicon of phenomena and information association, futur-objectics, (in three sections), mysterious island*, or Temporary monument*, 1998, mixed media. Installation view, 2010. Photo: Andy Keate.

FOUR TIMES SINCE 2005, Camden Arts Centre has crossed its fingers and handed the curatorial reins to an artist. After Tacita Dean, Steven Claydon, and Paulina Olowaska, most recently it was Simon Starling's turn, and it was notable and apposite that this marked the first occasion when the neophyte curator's name surged above his or her chosen title, because “Never the Same River (Possible Futures, Probable Pasts)” —mounted almost exactly a decade after Starling's own solo show here—was especially consonant with its selector's artistic practice: that of resituating and reanimating objects that have already lived one life.

This was a different kind of exhibition from its predecessors—and their own likely inspiration, Richard Wentworth's brilliantly idiosyncratic omnium-gatherum “Thinking Aloud,” which toured to this venue in 1999—in another respect, too. Whereas Dean et al. plucked their selections from hither and yon, these thirty works by artists, designers, photographers, and architects had all been here before, with the exception of three new commissions making up the title's “Possible Futures.” Starling immersed himself in Camden's archives, chose works from a half century of shows (the contents themselves dating back as far as the late nineteenth century), and reinstalled them, we're told, “in the exact positions they [previously] occupied.” To traverse this spectral patchwork-*cum*-palimpsest was ostensibly to inhabit in microcosm the past fifty years all at once. And curating under these self-imposed constraints surely entailed a quietly audacious jigsaw-puzzling. It was a matter of both design and serendipity that Francis Bacon's searing *Figure Study II*, 1945–46, with its classically Baconian choreographing of screaming face, draped gray flesh, and obscurely ominous umbrella, spoke to Andrea Fisher's adjacent, near-abstract 1993 photograph of a burn victim from Hiroshima, given that the former artwork last occupied its spot in 1970 and the latter in 1993.

Starling credited the nonlinear notions of history in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges and George Kubler as inspirations, and indeed, his show's splintering of time's arrow implied possible alternative trajectories for images and objects, and the eras they synecdochically represent. Aside from making the inclusion of a Mike Nelson installation almost inevitable—alternative realities and Borges being cornerstones of his labyrinthine propositions—this point was ventriloquized in Matthew Buckingham's 16-mm film installation *False Future*, 2007, whose narrative revolves around a lost progenitor of cinema working five years ahead of the Lumière brothers. Elsewhere, an emphatic sense of the fundamental contingency that attends evaluating a historical moment through objects played off the Heraclitean idea behind the show's title: that the onward rush of water makes it impossible to step into the same river twice.

Previously on view at Camden in 1975, a platform brought together blueprints and promotional materials for Wells Coates's tautly modernist, early-1930s Isokon apartments in nearby Hampstead with a wooden reclining chair, a hat box, and a set of nesting tables designed for the project by Marcel Breuer. Opposite this ensemble was Keith Coventry's bronze cast, from 1994, of a sapling planted in 1983 in a park in an impoverished part of South London and vandalized a few years later to such an extent that it couldn't survive: a shorthand for failures in the utopian social planning that loomed large in twentieth-century dreaming. This coupling might, under other circumstances, merely have abridged a well-rehearsed lament. But here, with multiple pasts pressing on it—hanging in the air was the question of how Breuer's work would have registered in the 1930s and in 1975, as opposed to now, juxtaposed with a post-utopian work from 1994—it felt precipitous and situational, less a fixed entity than a layering of interacting temporalities.

Indeed, the exhibition was ghosted by a conception of objects in perpetual and articulate flux, of matter restlessly recomposing—not entropy, just change. The show thus mirrored the concerns of Starling's own art and its emphasis on transformation within specified boundaries: turning a wooden cabin into a working boat and back again, for instance, in *Shedboatshed (Mobile Architecture No 2)*, 2005. The new pieces made for the show similarly addressed how meaning is modulated according to our knowledge of an object's history. In *DeLorean Progress Report*, 2010, for example, Sean Lynch paired handmade replicas of hoods, doors, etc., from DeLorean DMC-12 cars with photographs of marine life, to be viewed with the information that after the American-owned manufacturer went bust, the iron casts that had been used to stamp out body parts were reused as anchors for a fish farm in Ireland.

In delving into Camden's archive and the wider past, “Never the Same River” seemed concerned not so much with arguing dogmatically for panhistorical connections as with a cheerfully amoral gaming with connotation, where a mixture of time, coincidence, and the curator's prestidigitations modulated how the dead speak. In this sense, Susan Hiller's slide projection with sound track *Magic Lantern*, 1987, effectively telescoped Starling's reflexive take on curating. This work consists of primary-colored circles overlapping on-screen, creating secondaries and tertiaries that suggest intersections between one world and another, as archival recordings play of Latvian parapsychologist Konstantin Raudive's “electronic voice phenomena”: rhythmic static or stray radio signals that are supposedly the speech of the deceased accessible in the electronic ether. Noises are heard—one is allegedly the voice of Vladimir Mayakovsky pronouncing his own surname. The tape plays again, and we apprehend the sound as doubled: as the unfixed artifact that it is, and the way someone wants us to hear it.

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