

III

SIMON STARLING – *SHEDBOATSHED*

Clear? Ha! Why a four-year-old child could understand this! Run out and find me a four-year-old child . . .

– Groucho Marx¹

SAILHOUSE

I caught a train to Copenhagen to see the artist Simon Starling. I wanted to talk to him about his Turner Prize-winning installation, *Shedboatshed* (*Mobile Architecture No. 2*) – a work described, a little erroneously, on his gallery's website as a 'Wooden shed, 390 × 600 × 340 cm, 2005'.

Yes, *now*, I want to say; *now* it's a shed of the proportions you suggest, *at the moment*. The brilliance of *Shedboatshed* is that it is an evolving roving work – the sort of work land artist David Nash might describe as 'becoming'. It is currently a shed . . . again. But it was once a boat. Shed is the bread of its sandwich life, the middle is filled with travel, rivers and derring-do. It is a shed with stories to tell. A shed that's been on a great adventure. Its timbers dream of the river.

In the run-up to my trip I began to see the world in sandwich terms. Days became sleepwakesleeps, my cat was a napeatnap, this book a teawritetea.

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An hour out of Hamburg, I travelled on a trainboattrain when we rolled on to the rail-ferry which links Puttgarden and Rødby, crossing the Vogelfluglinie or Fugleflugtslinjen – the *bird flight line*, a wonderful compound name which alludes to both the 'as the crow flies' course of the ferry and the transport corridor's importance to birds migrating between Central Europe and the Scandinavian Arctic.

I was not flying as a crow. I'd taken the train to experience the distance and landscape between London and Copenhagen, stopping off in Brussels where I made friends with the owner of a record shop who introduced me to sour beer as gravy; Köln, where between connections I saw an unsettling Gerhard Richter exhibition at Museum Ludwig in the twin spire shadows of the high gothic cathedral; and Hamburg, where I got confused and ended up in a Tesla showroom being shown electric cars by somebody who for some reason thought I was solvent and able to drive.* Then I was back on another train with a winningly square flat face and rolling north to the ferry where, near dusk, we clacked on to the car deck, snug beside lorries. Upstairs in the observation lounge I saw that the first thing seasoned Fugleflugtslinjeners do is form a snaking queue around the closed canteen. This seemed quite a passive-aggressive display until the moment the ferry, with a hoot, left the slip and, as one, the shutters shot open and a school-dinner supper was served. The system, the shutters, the singing men on the next table over: all were clearly very well oiled.

* Tesla: famous exponents of the carcarcar – driverless cars which take people out of the equation.

I bought a coffee and sat back down amongst the diners, all of us gazing at the dark waters and red outlined horizons whilst the ship trembled beneath us. Eventually the windows welled into mirrors and the formica diner fanned out either side like wings spreading into the night.

All that way on rails and water to see a man about a shed. It might sound like a shaggy dog story but it was actually something of a pilgrimage. *Shedboatshed* is an artwork which I like lot. I liked it the moment I saw it as a shed at Tate Britain and took an even greater pleasure in it once I'd learnt its backstory. But even at face-value it has an excellent face: a porch-mouth of cubicles, four little chalets, above which a single paddle is fixed. The roof is angled like a jaunty hat with a fringe of corrugated iron. The boards of its face are wide, old boards from big trees. It's mostly creosoted but some planks seem to have missed the brush. Some are mellow chestnut, others tangerine, some new wood and some leath-ered grey. In pictures it looks soft, like a shed which has been worked quite hard and had its corners knocked off in the process, but in person a lot of it was quite knotty, gnarly-grained, a mix of silky and splintered wood – an expedient assemblage. And once that mongrel aspect is noted the chalet-mouth seems to take on a panting aspect and, with that, the shed reveals itself as rather canine.

Dogs like a river. They like to stand above water and look down past their front paws, examining the rippling ribbons of sun or brown silty shallows. I've seen them. Sometimes they jump in with abandon and sometimes they lower themselves with minute care. *Shedboatshed* looks like the sort of dog-shed which, having yolloped in a river, has just hauled its joyfully quivering back-end out, spira-shaken itself dry

and is now having a rest, panting at the scene with more than half a mind to lunge in again – launch itself off the bank as Simon Starling launched it on a trip down the Rhine in 2005 in the temporary form of a boat.

In short, a shed of agency; a transportive space of imagination. As children build dens which are infinitely more than the sum of their parts, so *Shedboatshed* is both infinitely more and *exactly* the sum of its parts; nothing added or taken away. Somewhere beside the Rhine there's a flat piece of ground, the spot where Starling discovered the shed, saw its potential, beheld its charismatic raw material and, shortly afterwards, set about rebuilding it as a flat bottomed weidling punt.* Shortly after *that* he poled it several miles down the river to a Basel gallery where he returned it to its original form.

I've always been drawn to simple structures – garden sheds, hay barns, line-side shelters glimpsed from passing trains. As a child, every door in a whitewashed wall held the promise of a secret garden, every cupboard was a possible gateway to Narnia, every cellar stair or crypt a portal to the underworld. A great many stories I loved involved passing through doors with unexpected worlds the other side. Each week Mr Benn would walk along Festive Road in his black suit and bowler hat to try on a new costume at his local

* A weidling is a flat-bottomed boat – a type of flat-bottomed punt that can be tracked back to Celtic boats built more than 2,000 years ago. The weidling is traditionally constructed from solid wood, although today some boats are also made from plywood, plastic or aluminium. It is usually around 9 or 10 metres (30 or 33ft) in length. In the Middle Ages, the weidling was used for river transportation and fishing. Today, the boat is primarily used in Switzerland, on the Rhine and its tributaries. It is used as a leisure and pleasure craft, and as a passenger ferry. The sport of Wasserfahren in Switzerland is conducted almost exclusively with weidlings.

fancy dress shop. He chose an outfit with the help of the owner – a befezed man with a sphinxy smile – before dressing up and walking out of the changing room door and into an adventure. The Batcave was accessed down the Batpoles which were situated behind a perfectly ordinary-looking sliding bookcase. The TARDIS is a spacecraft and time machine, bigger on the inside and disguised as a police box.

My closest encounter with a TARDIS occurred as a child in the dunes above Porthcurno beach. We were on a family holiday to Cornwall, perhaps we'd gone to see the Minack Theatre or Land's End; either way, whilst exploring the sand and marram grass I found a small concrete hut emitting the kind of wavering singsong sound of a radio set between stations. The walls inside were lined with apparatus akin to elderly gas meters plumbed in to wires and hoses emerging from the oxblood floor. A brief notice informed me that this, the Porthcurno Telegraphy Station, had once been the landing point for a web of intercontinental submarine cables. A map showed massed lines eeling out from the cove below. The original network had long been retired, their current of morse and voices cut off, but the wires did not fall silent. They began to sing. Today they broadcast the sound of sun-flares and lightning around the world; electromagnetic music bubbling up from the bottom of the sea. The siren which had drawn me into the hut had been a mix of deep tectonic tunes, elemental airs and the cosmic songs of stars.

I think of Porthcurno and Hvítárnes sæluhús as kindred transmitters.

The first time I walked into Simon's studio, I felt that here was a workshop where new outposts and adventures might

be created – a long light room a little like a drawing office with desks at one end and a big table at the other. Hidden in a courtyard behind a high blond-brick tenement, a low-key inner-city ideas factory from which stories and artworks might be loosed into the world. The first works I saw were two silver photographic prints pinned to the back wall. They were of a canoe on a beach, no people. Just the canoe, the beach and the horizon, below which water, above which sky. Some clouds. Odd marbled mounds on the beach to the right of the canoe gave a clue to the canoe's location: the salt shores of the Dead Sea.

Such was the crisp clarity of the prints that the grains of the beach seemed to stand proud like the flaking foil of an antique mirror and the boat appeared to float, levitating hard ellipse, scalpel-prowed.

It was the opposite sort of craft to *Shedboatshed*, all sharp lines, hard edges and efficiency. Simon, turning to greet me, tall, slightly shaggy, smiling, bearded, glasses, seemed to have more in common with weathered wood than alkali metals, although the V of his cardigan was neat and his shirt underneath was ironed.

He looked academic. He offered coffee. His voice was speedy but precise; driven by ideas rather than angst; gently amused – he reminded me of a letterpress printer I know. His voice had the song of a Heidelberg in it.

'You put it through a transformation and it comes out the other side and it's the same thing that you started with but it's in a different place. There's a certain economy to that, I suppose,' he told me a few minutes later when we were settled with our drinks at the table in the sun. He wasn't talking about *Shedboatshed* but rather the magnesium canoe

on the wall – a work named *Rift Valley Crossing* which he described as ‘a kind of walking on water; turning the road into a vehicle’.

The canoe was made of magnesium extracted from Dead Sea water, ‘the most concentrated source of magnesium in the world’. Simon described the project to me as ‘another super simple idea’, that of taking some sea water, making some metal, casting a boat, and then paddling across the sea in a boat made from its water – something from nothing. Alchemy. ‘But then, in doing that, you begin to think, “Ah, the Dead Sea is in Israel, and it’s in Jordan, and the West Bank . . .” so the project grows.’†

The simply plotted projects that he makes are very open to interpretation, he tells me, but ‘leave no trace’ is an idea that runs through a lot of his work; the transformation of materials from one state to another then back again, or not.

The artist’s statement for *Rift Valley Crossing* states that ‘circular journeys both real and metaphorical form a large part of Simon Starling’s work’ whilst he describes them as ‘the physical manifestation of a thought process’.

His art as a vehicle for stories, I suggested, and he agrees, pointing to the urge to travel and the desire to tell stories as being the two driving motivations behind a great deal of his work.

* *Project for a Rift Valley Crossing*, Simon Starling, 2015. Artwork details: 53 × 474 × 85cm. Material description: Canoe cast in Dead Sea magnesium, two paddles, two canvas seats, Dead Sea water, tanks, wooden welding jig, two silver gelatin prints.

† After exhibiting the canoe in Nottingham in 2016, Simon returned it to source and paddled the tricky, potentially treacherous crossing from Israel to Jordan.

‘In a way I’m taking objects on journeys, putting them through something. At times it’s almost like a prototyping process or crash-testing – like when you take a chair and put it into a machine which pummels it for a week. The work may be made in a studio but, for me, it only gets interesting when it gets out in the world; when it’s being tested. Out there, in the world, it accrues narratives.’ I often talk about detours, where you start somewhere and somehow end up back where you began but you only get there by making a ridiculous circuitous journey and *Shedboatshed* is a very good example of that; we start with a shed and end with a shed, but we’ve basically gone ten, twelve kilometres downstream from one location to another; from a riverbank to a museum, and in doing that the object has accrued this new story, this new history which is now readable in its structure, you know?’

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The week before I travelled to Copenhagen, I went to see Roald Dahl’s writing hut in Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire. Dahl moved to the village in 1954 and had a shed built in his garden after a visit to see Dylan Thomas’s boathouse and ‘word-splashed hut’ in Laugharne. A space away from

* ‘Eighteen months ago, British artist Simon Starling dropped a replica of a sculpture by Henry Moore into Lake Ontario. This weekend, visitors to the Power Plant gallery in Toronto will see the result as part of a retrospective of work by Turner Prize-winner Starling . . . The work he’s created in *Infestation Piece (Musselled Moore)* is partly the story of a Henry Moore sculpture, but also the story of the zebra mussel, an invasive species that will cover any object that sits long enough in Great Lakes water.’ – ‘British artist pulls sculpture from bottom of Lake Ontario’, CBC Arts News, 29 February 2008.

children seemed to be the driving idea – a ‘work-hole’ to bunker down and write.

Rachel White, collections manager & archivist, kindly gave me a copy of a talk Dahl wrote about his hut and process. The original typewritten sheets are titled ‘For Children’ and dated 13/10/75. In it he describes his daily routine, beginning around 10 a.m.

So I go up to what everyone calls my ‘Wendy house’, which is simply a small brick shed up in our orchard, well away from the house. It is heated with an Aladdin paraffin stove and in the winter it gets perishing cold. So all through the winter I work in a sleeping bag. I step into the sleeping bag and pull it right up to my chest, then I sit down in an old leather armchair. Then I put my feet up on a trunk that is filled with wooden blocks to make it solid.

The trunk is wired to the legs of the chair so it won’t push away, he continues. Then he puts a roll of cardboard across his knees to support his writing board which is covered with green billiard cloth, ‘a nice restful colour’. The curtains in the hut are permanently drawn shut so he won’t become distracted and ‘sit staring out at the squirrels messing about on the apple trees outside’. Cows have been known to poke their heads in though the window and try to eat the curtain. Once one leant in and pulled it right off its rod – you can imagine the audiences’ smiles of delight at that detail.

He switches on a lamp and puts a yellow pad on the green board, then begins the ritual of his Dixon Ticonderoga pencils:

I use six pencils, the kind with rubbers on one end. I have these sent from America by the gross, I don’t know why except they are what I started with and it would worry me enormously to change the colour after 30 years. Now, because I am actually afraid to start work – most writers are – I employ a lot of delaying tactics. I reach for a clothes brush and brush the previous day’s rubber shavings off my board. Then I clean my glasses. Then I start sharpening the six pencils. This is a very lengthy affair. I have an electric sharpener, made in Japan and bought in California, and first I sharpen each of the six pencils in there. It makes a lovely whizzing noise when you put a pencil in the hole. But it doesn’t make the points nearly sharp enough for me.

So he sharpens each pencil again with his pocket knife, having first sharpened the pocket-knife on a little grindstone ‘to make it sharp enough to sharpen the pencils which the pencil-sharpener hasn’t sharpened properly’.

Having trimmed up six lead points with great care and concentration so that they’re ‘sharper than needles . . . so sharp, in fact, that the point always breaks off the moment I press it against the paper’, he’d place them in a toby jug on a table by his side and pour himself a cup of coffee from a thermos he’d brought down from the house. Then he’d light a cigarette ‘and look around for something else to do so that I won’t have to start writing. There is nothing else to do. The yellow pad with blue lines on it is watching me and waiting to be written upon. So I settle down and become quiet and at last begin to write the story.’

When Dahl died, the contents of the hut were left undisturbed for around twenty years. In 2011 the interior was

transferred to the museum and reconstructed in a new shed of the same dimensions as the original but with a glass wall instead of the end with the original yellow door. Everything is in there, down to the original scuffed linoleum. There is Dahl's chair, the peg boards, photographs, ashtrays full of his cigarette butts and ash.

Rachel was kind enough to open up the display shed for me and as soon as I stepped in I was surrounded by smells – coffee, tobacco smoke and Marlboro stubs, pencil shavings, feathers from the sleeping bag and stuffing from the writing chair. The smells tell of the work. I think of a line in Alice Oswald's *Dart*: 'he makes a den of himself – smells and small thoughts',² that's what went on here and that's why the family and museum were so keen to preserve and celebrate this hut – the manifestation of Roald Dahl's mind – his writing life condensed, his denspace.

There are the exposed squares of padding he cut out to better support his cronky frame – so beaten up in the Second World War when his fighter plane crashed into the Libyan desert. The table of totems and trinkets: a unique rock from Babylon, an opal from Australia – but the interesting thing about the chair, this cut-about expedient tool, is that it's become a recognisable character in its own right. It appears in Wes Anderson's stop-motion *Fantastic Mr Fox* film, there's a reproduction of it in the museum's activity area for children to sit in and write. The original chair sits at the centre of the museum – revered seat, cockpit, talisman. The modifications, smell, patina, they're all canon now.

I described the hut and chair to Simon, the holes, the angular high armrests, the Heath-Robinson heating system Dahl strung up above it on wires – an electric heater he

pulled forwards or pushed away with his walking stick. 'It sounds like some sort of invalid chair,' noted Simon, laughing. 'It's almost like he had to trap himself.'

I think that's spot on. This enormous man of six foot five, the proto-BFG, traps himself in a shed each morning, and straps himself into his cockpit to go to work. I don't think it was a particularly curated or romantic space during Dahl's lifetime. It was a spartan means to an end, a space away from the family home where he could write undisturbed. 'When I am up here I see only the paper I am writing on, and my mind is far away with Willy Wonka or James or Mr Fox or Danny or whatever else I am trying to cook up,' he once told an interviewer. 'The room itself is of no consequence. It is out of focus, a place for dreaming and floating and whistling in the wind, as soft and silent and murky as a womb . . .'

But such disavowals only added to the myth.

The pencil moves across the yellow pad, back and forth in a circle of lamplight. The cigarette trails in the ashtray. The writer huffs, he shifts his rump, scratches his temple and dives back in, cosy in his peach-stone cave born aloft by 500 seagulls; safe in his foxhole whilst, somewhere else, three crazed farmers dig and gnash their teeth; smiling to himself as the glass hut spins and drifts far out in space, Buckinghamshire light years away, the yellow door a million miles.

'I write the first sentence and I rub it out,' he wrote in his talk 'For Children'.

I write it again, and again, many times, trying to get it short and clear and clean and easily understood. The first page of any book or short story always takes me at least three

weeks to do, working four hours a day. I think that is because when you are writing and erasing so endlessly, you are also working out, though you don't know it, the whole of the rest of the story in your subconscious mind. So after the first draft is at last finished, then things go a little quicker. A book like *Charlie* or *James* with about 150 pages, will take roughly a year to write. It's a long business, and you have to be patient, and above all you have to stick at it.

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Whilst aboard my several trains to Copenhagen I'd reread some of the press written around the time that *Shedboatshed* won the Turner Prize. The general view of the critics seemed to be that this was difficult modern art – was it even art? – labyrinthine and postmodern; the sort of thing you'd need to read a book about before it made any sense. Yet it was also reported that the visiting public were quite taken with the work. Young people were approaching Starling between interviews to say how much they liked the work, asking if he'd sign their tickets.

The Tate website still carries a quote from Starling at the time:

Art for me is a free space to explore things. The things I do don't always come out looking like conventional works of art. But then I'm like any artist these days working in relation to a long history of art. I think the press is a long way behind understanding this or responding to art in a sympathetic way. I got a lovely poem from a lady in St Albans about sheds.³

Now, at a distance of twelve years, he describes the experience of 'the whole Turner Prize thing' as quite brutal. 'The guy from the newspaper, the *Daily Mail* or somewhere, going to B&Q and buying a garden shed and trying to build a boat out of it . . . I kind of loved it in a way but, for me, there was this complete disconnect from how I felt the public were enjoying and understanding the work and the way that the press portrayed it. They made out that it was super-difficult and convoluted and remote and, actually, from my experience people got it straight away.'

Was that because the public engaged and properly looked? I wonder. The press seemed to bypass the shed to focus on the shyster artist who'd had the nerve to present it as art; the shed was almost in the way of the story – *Contrary 'artist' puts shed in a gallery*. Nobody seemed to comment on the fact it was such an interesting, beautiful shed, they didn't look for the marks of its metamorphosis, ignoring the shed's patina and story in favour of their own hatchet jobs.

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I want to ask you about the shed, Simon.

'Okay. Good!'

It was originally on the Swiss border, is that right?

'Yes. Even when I found the shed it had a great history – a history as an object that had already been moved. It was originally a guard post on the Swiss border and then I guess it reached a point where it was getting a bit dilapidated so they replaced it and the boat club in Muttenz, Switzerland, the Wasserfahrverein Muttenz, who race weidlings on the

river, they heard of the shed and thought “we need a shed” so they put it on the back of a truck and moved it to the club. Bits of it had been rebuilt because they had gone rotten – so it was already something that had had a real life as an object; you could read it in the object. In a way I was just trying to add one more layer to that history by cutting it up in weird ways and making holes in it so it could be joined together . . . and when I exhibited the rebuilt shed I perhaps naïvely thought that people would be able to walk around and start to piece the boat back together in their minds – which some people did but the press seemed unable to make that leap, or *want* to make that leap.’

It sounds very straightforward.

‘Super-simple.’

You gave a shed that’s had many lives another life.

‘Yes.’

And then you returned it to the state you’d discovered it in.

‘And it’s so logical as well – you find a thing with a paddle on it so you use the paddle.’

I’m struck that you could have made your life so much harder. ‘I found this brick wall by the side of the river . . .’

‘I think if I showed *Shedboatshed* again now, if it went back to the Tate, I think the reception would be utterly different because works accrue history, they interact with the world and change. You know, this time it would be “Ah! The shed!”’

How do you feel about the work now?

‘Well, I mean, it’s an okay work but it’s certainly not the most interesting thing I’ve ever done. It was what I was doing . . . basically I got the call to be in the Turner Prize

when I was standing on the bank of the river, working on the project, and it was what was current and what I had to show so that’s what ended up there. I don’t know . . . yeah, it’s odd. But that’s the work that defines me now and . . . I like it. It has a simple, lyrical, elegant logic to it – because I’d so wanted to use the river. The river is so impressive in Basel, this huge, cold force that runs through the city, and everything about that city is defined by it. I think I’d been with Henriette, my wife, to see the beautiful Roskilde Viking museum for the first time just beforehand – the idea that the Vikings took their boats out of the water in the winter and turned them upside down, so suddenly you had a nice shelter . . . a simple building. In Basel I borrowed the curator’s bicycle and cycled along the river and found this shed. It was completely ridiculous. Completely ridiculous! I had half an idea of what I was looking for and there was this shed and it was a weird moment where the project just fell into place in a matter of seconds. I saw the shed and the paddle nailed to it, the paddle was for a weidling – and that was that. Then it was just a question of realising the potential of that found scenario – following its internal logic.’

How big was the weidling you built?

‘Ten metres long! A weidling’s like a gondola in a way, really big. And then we were back and forth. It was a ferry to transport the rest of the shed from one place to the other. When the Wasserfahrverein launch a new boat, they traditionally roast a suckling pig by the river and fire a cannon so they fired the cannon and then we launched the boat and barbecued. One of the guys who was on the installation crew at the museum turned out to have been

a youth champion weidling oarsman – he was completely into the idea.’

Did you build it on your own?

‘No, I worked with a guy named Haimo Ganz, who was an artist but had trained as a carpenter; like many Swiss people do. And then there was another artist – an art student, Christian Felber was his name. So we worked together on it. It was a wonderful process, the sailing club had a beautiful open shed where they keep boats in the winter and they gave us free rein so that became our workshop. So there were lots of boats on hand to measure.’

Did you have to add new material?

‘A few screws and we had rope in the joints and things like that, just to make it all watertight, but it worked a treat, actually. The best timber was in the roof and the floor. Because that was actually the most recent addition to the shed. A lot of the side material was rather ropey.’

And the people who owned it, the weidling club, they were happy for you to take the shed away?

Simon shook his head and laughed, still delighted and bemused at the memory. ‘Yes! The curator called them and said, “I’ve got this artist, he’s interested in your shed,” and they said, “Oh good! We’ve been trying to get rid of that for ages!” It was absolutely perfect.’



Shedboatshed (Mobile Architecture No. 2), Production Stills, 2005.
Photographs: Simon Starling; courtesy: the artist

