Seeing Pink: The Eco-Art of Simon Starling

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Abstract
The artist Simon Starling offers a critique of different aspects of the history of ecology. Ecology represents a fragmented discipline, which signifies different things depending on the situation and on who's talking. In his work, Starling expresses this multi-faced discipline as a series of different mediations between nature and culture.

In 2005 the British artist Simon Starling won the Turner Prize as a result of his ability to transform and reframe existing objects into sculptural installations. On the surface his work seems to be about material transformation and visual poetry. He also offers, however, a playful critique of different aspects of the crooked history of ecology. Starling's 'Shedboatshed' project may serve as an example. He dismantled, on site, an old wooden boatshed located on the upper reaches of the Rhine, and used it to build a copy of a traditional Weidling boat (Figure 1).

He then loaded it with what remained of the shed, manoeuvred it on the current downstream to Basel where, inside the Kunstmuseum, he dismantled the boat and reconfigured it as the original shed.

This idea of assembling all the necessities for a self-sufficient life on a boat, travelling to a new and foreign environment, and reassembling them there as a foundation for a new future, has its cultural history reaching back to the story of Noah. According to the Bible, Noah built an Ark on God's advice to save the believers, along with a pair of each animal on Earth, from the Great Flood. As strange as it may seem, this ancient myth has often appealed to ecologists wondering how to escape the environmental havoc of our age, while at the same time establish a new liveable habitat in a presumably better place. Back-to-nature as well as techno-enthusiastic ecologists have been intrigued by the story of Noah in their various attempts to establish new protected ecosystems that could survive the Great Flood of pollution that they believed would eventually wipe out life on Earth. In the 1960s, for example, ecologists came to work with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) on how to build closed self-sufficient ecosystems for astronauts in spaceships. The basic idea was to assemble all the necessary materials on Earth and send them in a ship up into space, where the astronauts were to reassemble a closed ecosystem colony on Mars or on the moon. They were to be fully detached, like a Noah's Ark, from the ill-treated ecosystem on Earth. These somewhat fantastic ideas were important to ecological methodology as the 'carrying capacity' concept
used for spaceships later were adopted by environmentalists in their understanding and management of Spaceship Earth (Anker 2005). In public debates, space colonies came to represent the rational, orderly and wisely managed contrast to the irrational, disorderly and ill-managed Earth. Human environmental and moral life was to be reordered according to the ideals of the astronaut’s living quarters in outer space through the use of bio-toilets, recirculation and solar cell energy. In the counterculture of the 1970s these ecological ideas were transformed into romantic ideals of living a self-sufficient life in modest sheds that one could assemble and reassemble on different locations without harming the natural surroundings. A group of artists and biologists in the United States who called themselves The New Alchemists, for example, sought to construct ‘Ocean Arks’ or boats built as closed ecological systems in which they could live if (or rather when) the Earth collapsed due to industrial pollution. The Ocean Ark was to them an icon of hope, possibly similar to Starling’s ‘Shedboatshed’ project.

The history of artists’ and designers’ use – some would say abuse – of the cause of ecology in their work is diverse and fragmented. In the case of Starling there is no unified programme of ecological art. Instead he uses a diverse set of historical traces in the history of ecological reasoning to engage the viewer in the disunity of ecological thinking. His different projects evoke both technologically inspired eco-utopian fantasies as well as romantic rejections of the same.

These tensions reflect the history of the subject itself, as scholars and laypeople alike have struggled to agree on the meaning of ecology since the word first appeared in 1866. Indeed, today, after more than one hundred years of debate and research, the science of nature’s household is more fragmented than ever. The professional biologist investigates bio-geographical innovations of plants, pre- and post-germination determinants in the
perennial herbs, and the impact of hemiparasitic plant litter on decomposition, to mention some of the topics in one of the later issues of the Journal of Ecology. To environmental philosophers, ecology may signify something very different, namely a worldview in which humans must take moral responsibility as co-partners of the household of nature. To environmentally concerned citizens, ecology may simply imply buying products made of recyclable plastic or something as mundane as a non-polluting shampoo. Ecology or environmentalism clearly means very different things to different people.

The disunity of the field of ecology has in Starling's art become a diverse set of projects inspired by various old and new ecological worldviews. Take his photo 'The Pink Museum' from 2001 (Figure 2).

It points back to ecological thinking as this was understood at the famous Bauhaus school of design. The off-pink colour was by many of their designers regarded as the psychologically best background for experiencing art, as well as nature. The private terrace of the school's principal, Walter Gropius (1883–1969), was painted in this pink colour, for example. Sitting with a pink wall behind him would, he believed, prepare his mind to appreciate the natural scenery that surrounded his terrace. Gropius was much concerned about environmental problems. 'Overwhelmed by the miraculous potentialities of the machine, our human greed has interfered with the biological cycle of human companionship which keeps the life of a community healthy'; he once noted (1945: 15). What ought to be done, he argued, was to learn from nature's own design in the construction of new architecture. His colleague, László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), thought along the same lines. His chief source of inspiration was the Hungarian-born biologist
Raoul H. Francé (1874–1943). Though Francé is largely forgotten today, he was in the inter-war period a best-selling biologist and an outspoken defender of the theory that a certain vital psyche in living matter is a driving force in evolution. As one of the founders of soil ecology, he argued that the earth had a dynamic power that gave plants a psychic goal-oriented energy aiming at evolutionary harmony among living organisms. Humans could benefit from the earth’s vital powers, Francé argued, if they learned to copy nature’s inventions. The aim was to study nature’s workshop to generate principles, techniques and processes that could be applied to human technologies so that human society would live in harmony with nature. The structure of plants as well as their biotic communities should serve as models for architecture and design. One simply had to learn from nature’s workshop to find out what humans should do, he claimed in Die Pflanze als Erfinder (‘Plants as Inventors’) of 1920, a book Moholy-Nagy often assigned to his students. Art to Moholy-Nagy was a matter of transportation of natural forms and design into the media of human design. ‘Nature evolves ingenious forms, often technologically useful. Every bush, every tree, can instruct us in and reveal new uses, potential apparatus, and technological inventions without number’, he argued in his plea ‘to add to the politico-social a biological “bill of rights”’ for people to live in harmony with nature’s household (1947: 5).

Starling’s image of a plant with a pink background evokes this attempt by Bauhaus designers to make human relations with nature somewhat better with the help of ecological design principles. To the Bauhausler a plant should inspire responsible design with nature, enjoyed with a pink background.

Though not obvious to our contemporary eyes, images of huge dams were once celebrated as evidence of our society moving towards a better ecological future (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Christopher Williams, ‘Grande Dixence’, framed by Simon Starling (2005: 47).
The British ecologist Julian Huxley (1887–1975), for example, argued that the truly grand dams built by the Tennessee Valley Authority in the United States in the 1930s were eco-friendly (Huxley 1943). Ecological design to him was all about building in harmony with the flow of nature’s energy, and such large dams did allegedly precisely that. Together with the famous science fiction writer H. G. Wells (1866–1946), he came to promote architectural designs that reflected and utilized the movement of energy. The construction of dams would not only provide clean, inexpensive energy for the poor, but would also signify the sublime achievements of human reasoning and the applied sciences of engineering. Artists’ images along with tourist snapshots of grand dams became much worthy of display in the 1950s, before they went out of fashion with the counterculture’s opposition to constructing dams in the 1970s. In the spring of 2005, at the prestigious Museum of Contemporary Art in Basel, Starling re-launched old images of the Grande Dixence Dam in Switzerland as a source of reflection on – and perhaps even reconciliation with? – previously built grand dams.

An enduring optimism is perhaps also expressed in Starling’s construction of a fuel cell powered electric bicycle on which he crossed the Tabernas Desert in September 2004 (Figure 4). He collected and displayed a tiny container of water that became the remnants of the fuel, as a token of pride in the technological marvel of the bike’s machine. The project points towards the belief that creative use of design can solve environmental problems the world is suffering from. The most famous designer promoting this view was the architect and artist Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983), who looms large behind Starling’s bike construction. Confronted by revolutionary minded students of the 1960s, Fuller argued that the world needed a design revolution rather than a political

Figure 4: Simon Starling’s ‘Tabernas Desert Run’ (2005: B79).
revolution (1970: 110). Through a series of innovative designs, such as his Dymaxion Cars and Domes, he pointed towards a future in which human relationships with the Earth would be in harmony. As one of the most influential ecologically informed thinkers of the twentieth century, he came to inspire a renewed belief in human creativity as a remedy for the eco-crisis.

Buckminster Fuller was also the creator of the famous Air-Ocean World Map from 1943. This tremendously popular map was designed as a jigsaw puzzle of triangles that enabled laypeople to assemble the world according to their own political or geographical perspectives. This subjective and playful perspective on the world later became popular with the counterculture of the 1960s, many of whom saw the personal experience of a landscape as more important than ‘objective’ state-sanctioned cartography. The artist Richard Long (1945—), for one, displayed map-like records of his numerous walks to document his own experience of various landscapes around the world. Long’s art can be understood as a therapy against the alienation of cartography in comparison with personal experiences of a living ecology. Starling drove his Fiat from Italy to Poland and back in the same spirit as Long’s walks (Figure 5).

The Fiat project can be understood as a remedy against the alienation of mass production by offering a personal artistic reproduction of transnational manufacturing processes and transportation of goods and materials. The art of both Long and Starling represent subjective ecological experiences of landscapes and the auto industry respectively. Their emphasis on their own ecological perspective of the world points back to the thinking of Buckminster Fuller.

Figure 5: Simon Starling’s ‘Flaga’ (2002b: 15).
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Despite the claim to offer a unified view of the world, ecology is actually a fragmented discipline and mode of thinking, which signifies different things depending on the situation and on who’s talking. Starling has expressed these multi-faced ecologies as a series of different mediations between nature and culture. They offer the viewer multiple and engaging ways in which to connect (or disconnect) with the environment.

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