



Project Gallery: Simon Starling
April 24–September 14, 2014

Simon Starling
b. 1967, Epsom, England; lives in Copenhagen

Inverted Retrograde Theme, USA (House for a Songbird) (1:5 scale models of No. 2 and No. 4 Calle Victoria, Villa Contessa, Bayamón, Puerto Rico designed in 1964 by Simon Schmiderer for the International Basic Economy Housing Corporation, USA, installed upside down to act as cages for songbirds), 2002
Wood, iron, mahogany, and soundtrack of songbirds
Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Debra and Dennis Scholl





Project Gallery

Simon Starling

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Inverted Retrograde Theme, USA (House for a Songbird) (1:5 scale models of No. 2 and No. 4 Calle Victoria, Villa Contessa, Bayamón, Puerto Rico designed in 1964 by Simon Schmiderer for the International Basic Economy Housing Corporation, USA, installed upside down to act as cages for songbirds)

Inverted Retrograde Theme, USA (House for a Songbird) (1:5 scale models of No.2 and No.4 Calle Victoria, Villa Contessa, Bayamón, Puerto Rico designed in 1964 by Simon Schmiderer for International Basic Economy Housing Corporation, USA, installed upside down to act as cages for songbirds) (2002), is a large-scale installation by British artist Simon Starling that references experimental music theory, modernist architecture, and social issues in the Caribbean. Birdsong can be heard emanating from inside two small houses, turned upside down to resemble birdcages – tiny replicas of a housing project in Bayamón, Puerto Rico. The houses sit atop branches of tropical hardwood, which stand on the gallery floor and pin the structures against the ceiling. A humble materiality distinguishes the work, which centers its attention on two elements of the original buildings: simple structural design and decorative iron gates. *Inverted Retrograde Theme, USA (House for a Songbird)* focuses on these clashing architectural elements, which evidence how utopian modern architecture was introduced—and adapted—in Puerto Rico’s tropical landscape.

With subtle irony, Starling often draws from social experiences and current events, creating works that allude to the narratives left behind by modernism. In 2001, he investigated the musical theories of the 20th-century Austrian composer and painter Arnold Schoenberg, whose inventions revolutionized music by creating a simpler way of composing classical harmonies. Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique is a musical method that uses only twelve related notes of the octave. For *Inverted Retrograde Theme* (2001), a site-specific installation built for the contemporary art center Secession in Vienna, Starling used fluorescent lights to create a visual score of the twelve-note system on the gallery’s ceiling and dismantled two 19th-century grand pianos, using the pieces as sculptural components. The artist explored Schoenberg’s pioneering

ideals to make associations between the composer’s theories and the architecture of the exhibition space. It was during this project that Starling first became aware of the architecture built in Puerto Rico by Simon Schmiderer, whose modernist constructions were also inspired by Schoenberg’s compositions.¹

Austrian-born Schmiderer, like other mid-century modernist architects, was deeply influenced by the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s iconic Barcelona Pavilion, which successfully promoted the use of perpendicular lines and blurred boundaries between interior and exterior spaces. Schmiderer designed a series of houses in the 1960s as part of a development project in Bayamón, a town experiencing rapid urbanization during this period.² The International Basic Economy Corporation, a postwar organization founded by Nelson A. Rockefeller in 1947 to encourage economic development in emerging economies, financed the development, which was named Villa Contessa. Schmiderer, like Schoenberg, was interested in reduced forms. For his housing project, he developed an open and grid-like floor plan made from concrete building blocks, emphasizing doorways and windows but without doors or windowpanes, integrating the tropical landscape with the rectilinear houses. Ironically, in the ensuing decade increased population growth and the emerging drug trade corroded safety and public space. By the 1970s, inhabitants of the development began adding elaborate and striking barriers to the open areas of Schmiderer’s original designs. Borrowed from Spanish colonial architecture, the wrought iron structures enclosed the by then vulnerable buildings, producing a dramatic visual contrast between the simple, rectangular doorways and windows, and their individually designed baroque gates – a feature that Starling reinterprets through the form of a cage.



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Starling’s work highlights specific urban and global transformations experienced in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean during the mid-20th century. By the 1950s, the entire region was rapidly urbanizing, but few islands developed signature architectural styles. Similar to other island-nations, Puerto Rico’s culture is the product of a colonial history dominated by outside pressures.³ Architect and historian Jorge Rigau has argued that appropriations of mainstream ideas continue to characterize much of the building in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.⁴ Unlike Cuba, these countries did not experience the rise of a strong local and modern architectural discourse, and colonial Spanish architecture dominated their cities’ landscapes for most of their histories. Puerto Rico also reached some degree of political autonomy through reform rather than by independence or revolution. After the United States’ intervention in 1898, the island has remained under US control, and US architectural firms promoted the construction of buildings in a Spanish architectural style.⁵ With the rise of an autonomous local government and the establishment of the

Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in 1952, these constructions were considered by public officials to be a vehicle for progress and a strategy by which to emulate a suburban American lifestyle.

By turning his birdhouses upside down, Starling playfully reconsiders how modern ideals of progress traversed the complexities of Puerto Rico. This installation, recently acquired by the Pérez Art Museum Miami, describes how islanders resorted to regional strategies in order to live safely in the open-air buildings that had originally distinguished Schmiderer’s modern design. The birds in this work, at once trapped and protected by the structures, reference a contemporary population confined within the failed ideals of modernization.

Maria Elena Ortiz
Curatorial Assistant



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Biography

Simon Starling graduated from the Glasgow School of Art in 1992. He was the recipient of the Turner Prize in 2005, and has works in prestigious collections around the world. He has presented numerous critically acclaimed solo exhibitions, including *Simon Starling: Metamorphology*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2014); *Simon Starling: Recent History*, Tate St. Ives, England (2011); and *Simon Starling: The Nanjing Particles*, MASS MoCA, North Adams (2008–09). Select group exhibitions include the Yokohama Triennale (2014); *The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archeology*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2013–14); *A Place Out of History*, Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City (2010); *Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969–2009*, Barbican Art Centre, London (2009); *Capturing Time*, Kadist Art Foundation, Paris (2009); and *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, Tate Britain, London (2009). Starling lives and works in Copenhagen.



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¹ Simon Starling, e-mail message to author, February 7, 2014.

² The 1940s and 1950s in the Caribbean were marked by increased urban growth, as rural people migrated to city centers. Developers in Bayamón constructed fifty houses per day over the course of a decade. Robert Potter, “Urbanization and Development in the Caribbean,” *Geography* 80, no. 4 (October 1995): 334–41.

³ Jorge Rigau, “No Longer Islands: Dissemination of Architectural Ideas in the Hispanic Caribbean, 1890–1930,” *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 20 (1994): 237.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. Moreover, Spanish Colonial Revival architecture was a trend in the 1920s and 1930s that had important repercussions in Florida, resulting in such buildings as El Mirasol in Boca Raton, designed by Addison Mizner.

Cover Simon Starling, *Inverted Retrograde Theme, USA (House for a Songbird)*, 2002. Wood, iron, mahogany, and soundtrack of songbirds, 133 x 122 x 140 inches. Pérez Art Museum Miami. Gift, Debra and Dennis Scholl. Installation view: *Inverted Retrograde Theme, USA*, Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York, 2002. Photo: Erma Eastwick, courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan Gallery

3 Simon Schmiderer, Lomas Verde, San Juan, Puerto Rico, c. 1965. Image produced by Simon Starling

4 Simon Starling, *Inverted Retrograde Theme, USA (House for a Songbird)*, 2002 (detail). Wood, iron, mahogany, and soundtrack of songbirds, 133 x 122 x 140 inches. Pérez Art Museum Miami. Gift, Debra and Dennis Scholl. Installation view: *Inverted Retrograde Theme, USA*, Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York, 2002. Photo: Erma Eastwick, courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan Gallery

2 Simon Starling, *Inverted Retrograde Theme*, 2001. Installation, dimensions variable, courtesy of the artist. Installation view: *Simon Starling*, Secession, Vienna, 2001. Photo: Simon Starling