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It-Narratives for the Twenty-First Century

Metallic Flux and the Spoliations of Contemporary Art

In late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature, the genre known as the "it-narrative," or "novel of circulation," followed a single object's journey between contexts.[1] The protagonists ranged from waistcoats to stagecoaches, with several it-narratives centering upon a metal coin, as in Helenus Scott's *The Adventures of a Rupee* (1782). Scott writes, in the voice of the eponymous object: "They apply the strongest force of fire to my body, till every part of my substance assumes a liquid state. I am next poured into a mould, which gave me the roundness and character I still retain. After I had undergone these changes, they called me RUPEE."[2] Coins proved to be able-bodied narratological vessels not least because of their role in exchange but also, I would argue, because they embodied the shape-shifting, castable property of many types of metal, moving between solid and liquid states.

Indeed, metal—and its material and symbolic shifts—is a site through which to think about particular linkages across disparate locations as well as, more generally, about the material bases of circulation, exchange, and value creation under capitalism. As Karl Marx wrote in *Capital*: "In order, therefore, that a commodity may in practice operate effectively as exchange-value, it must divest itself of its natural physical body and become transformed from merely imaginary into real gold" in an "act of transubstantiation."[3] Metals such as zinc, aluminum, and copper and alloys such as bronze and brass innately possess this quality of "transmutation,"[4] as when Marx, bringing to mind the it-narrative genre, writes that "the only difference, therefore, between coin and bullion lies in their physical configuration, and gold can at any time pass from one form to the other. For a coin, the road from the mint is also the path to the melting pot."[5]

If it-narratives, and more recently "thing theory,"[6] have been terms for understanding this phenomenon in literature, art history has frequently framed such mobile and contingent relationships between objects and their political, cultural, and historical recontextualization as *spolia*, which Dale Kinney defines as "materials or artifacts in reuse."[7] While originally specifying fragments of ancient Rome incorporated into later objects and buildings, *spolia* now denotes, per Kinney, "any artifact incorporated into a setting culturally or chronologically different from that of its creation."[8] Accordingly, Richard Brilliant reminds us, much

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cultural property might be considered *spolia* when he writes that "museums are filled with the *disiecta membra* of other cultures, often torn from their original contexts."[9]

But whereas much spoliation deploys the legibility of the reused element to mobilize and appropriate its symbolic value, the melting down and reformation of metal presents somewhat unique ambiguities, as there is no recognizable formal trace of the object from which the material has been derived. Ittai Weinryb's study of "the bronze object" during the Middle Ages in Italy explores this peculiarity of metallic flux, analyzing how the same substrate morphed between sculpture, musical instrument, and weapon. Weinryb writes: "The biography of the bronze object is therefore embedded in the material rather than in the form. In the intrinsic particles of the bronze object lies what we might term its hereditary code, for the material from which it is composed may in the past have formed and in the future form the body of another object."[10] Therein lies the compensatory value of it-narratives for objects made from materials that can be utterly transformed between states of matter, telling the story of the apparently self-evident yet ultimately elusive thing.

This essay pursues the it-narrative as a means of understanding the ways in which contemporary artists explore both the transmutational properties of metal—embodied in practices of spoliation—and the various forms of making that contribute to this material metamorphosis. Focusing on projects by Simon Starling, Pedro Reyes, and Hiwa K, artists interested in tying contemporary concerns to a longer history of extraction, mobility, trade, and violence, I argue that this history both speaks, and remains mute, through metal. Their work asserts the persistence of both materiality and artisanal modes of making amid a fantasy of dematerialization dominated by digital forms of circulation and fungibility. Processes of making, both those of the artist but just as often those of artisans employed by the artist to complete the task-at-hand, are conceptually essential to the work and obscured by the state-shifts to which metal is subjected, casting ambiguity on the relationship between the particular "it" and the narratives it invisibly embodies. Complicating the history of the ready-made, these artists raise questions concerning the degree to which objects both do and do not testify to the variably intellectual and artisanal labor that have shaped and reshaped them.

I begin with a number of projects by Starling, analyzing their materiality (and their material flux, in particular) in relation to the notion of flow in the digital era. Relevant here is the dynamic between the "finished product" and the obscurity produced by a global division of labor that alienates the consumer from the sites and particulars of making. I then turn to a specific work by Pedro Reyes and claim that his retooling of found objects is a political shift premised on a material one. Remaking models the subversive uses to which a thing can be put, autonomous from the intentions of its original designers and manufacturers. I dwell most extensively on a project by Hiwa K that suggests the conversion of matter's geopolitical (and transreligious) import. The works of these artists converge around what Hiwa K calls a "reverse archaeology," positing a nonlinear understanding of the object in relation to making. The transformed object, presented as art, is in fact possessed of a mutability that belies its inert appearance, and these artists indicate that this has much to tell us about making in the twenty-first century.

1. With and against Flow: Simon Starling's Loops

In the mid-1990s, Simon Starling began incorporating, disassembling, reassembling, and mimicking extant objects, characterizing these new things not as Duchampian ready-mades but as "work, made-ready." In an interview with Francesco Manacorda, Starling characterized his work's preoccupation with metamorphosis: "Often it's been a very material shift. Perhaps the form is retained, but the constituent material of that form is changed, or alternatively the materials are morphed into new forms."[11] In the extensive writing about Starling's works, primarily penned by curators and critics, metal is rarely emphasized, despite its recurrence as the most frequent medium of the artist's investigations. Here I will foreground works in which metal is the material transformed in a variety of ways.

With *Work, Made-Ready, Kunsthalle Bern* (1997), Starling constructed a Marin "Sausalito" bicycle "remade using the metal from a Charles Eames 'Aluminium Group' chair" and an Eames "Aluminum Group" chair using the Sausalito's metal (fig. 1).[12] Starling has described the work as one that "inverts the notion of the ready made [sic] in a simple but labour-intensive act of transmutation . . . . What resulted were two handcrafted, degraded, mutations of their former manufactured selves."[13] One would be hard-pressed to deem them as counterfeit and yet their transformation into each other is the (invisible) crux of the work. Presented within a single eye line, the bike leaning against a white pedestal and the chair resting atop another, the two objects bear a covert relationship to one another and to their own constituent making. In a recent email, Starling recalled that "that piece was made very much by-hand . . . . In large part the work was carried out by me at the Glasgow Sculpture Studios. . . . I just remember that being this wonderful moment when you had almost nothing—a set of empty sandcasting moulds and a couple of pots of molten metal."[14] The artist was also careful to mention that "[t]wo stages of the process were outsourced—the casting of the tubular aluminum (which was done by an industrial foundry outside Glasgow called Archibald Youngs) and the welding up of the frame," a task for which he "found a local fabricator to help."[15] Here, an expenditure of labor, both Starling's and those of the people he contracted, exceeds that of the ready-made, in which something previously manufactured is put on display and the artist's artisanal labor is reduced to zero.

Excess proved elliptical in subsequent projects such as *Quicksilver, Dryfit, Museumbrug* (1999), in which Starling embarked on a boat trip in the former Dutch colony of Suriname, where he collected solar energy that in turn powered an aluminum boat through Amsterdam's canals. Next, he cut the second boat in half, using its aluminum to create a replica of a lump of ore he had found in Suriname. Following a similar logic, in *Work Made-Ready, Les Baux de Provence (Mountain Bike)* (2001), Starling, on a bicycle trip from England, visited a mine in France from which he obtained bauxite, the raw material of aluminum, which he in turn deployed to replicate the bicycle on which he had ridden. Numerous other works by the artist concern and are made of metal; here I have emphasized a few in which material transformation is key.

1 Simon Starling, *Work Made-Ready, Kunsthalle Bern*, 1997. Bicycle, chair, two pedestals, dimensions variable. Installation view from *Concrete Light* at Limerick City Gallery of Art

The relationship between Starling's metal objects, on the one hand, and the processes of making and remaking that constitute them, on the other, are conveyed by an "it-narrative" that lets the object speak, with the artist at least rhetorically occupying the role not of creator but of interpreter. As Daniel Birnbaum writes: "Altered or taken out of context, they lose their muteness, and elaborate yarns spin from them."[16] Here, Starling's notion of "telltale sculptures" proves important. As the artist explained in an interview with Christiane Rekade, "'Sculptures,' because they generally only become talkative for me once they have been through some kind of transformative process, have taken a journey of some kind, have been displaced or transmuted—things that contain the sound of their own making—that talk about their roots or what have you. The objects become talkative when they are co-opted into a sculptural practice—when the ready-made gets remade or augmented."[17] This conjures the idea of objects as not only animate and agential but also as providers of testimony, or narratives conveyed by an "it."

Starling has addressed the dynamic between his particular, often idiosyncratic modes of making and an era increasingly characterized by overseas outsourcing and invisible labor:

> I'm really interested in what it means to make something in a culture in which our connections with making and manufacture are increasingly distant—we have become estranged from the things we use every day. In part what the work attempts to do is unpack processes of production either by creating a self-imposed set of restrictions or limitations or simply by tracking materials or manufacture back to their roots—countering the disconnection between an object and its making.[18]

His work thus both mirrors and corrects what Marx understood as the "phantasmal" relationship between a commodity and its constituent labor; projects like *Work Made-Ready, Les Baux de Provence (Mountain Bike)* more specifically take us back to the site of extraction; in *Quicksilver, Dryfit, Museumbrug*, colony and metropole are linked in a chain of material continuity and flux through the medium of aluminum. His work asks questions about making in the twenty-first century.

To some degree, the shape-shifting and apparently smooth shifts between states of matter—when metal objects become other metal objects—in Starling's oeuvre suggests a seamless world marked by the globalization of what Manuel Castells termed "flows." This type of globalization also characterizes what Zygmunt Bauman deemed a "liquid modernity"; it manifests aesthetically in the putatively friction-free morphing of digital imagery and in a rhetoric of dematerialized virtuality that are the hallmarks of the turn of the twenty-first century, when Starling embarked on these projects.[19] Consider, for instance, claims made at this time by anthropologists and sociologists that objects are "infinitely malleable to the shifting and contested meanings constructed *for them* through human agency."[20] This fits with a certain postmodern logic that imagines meaning is endlessly fluid and, I might add, endlessly metallic. While on the one hand Starling's work resists this narrative of seamless, virtualizing globalization, instead emphasizing materiality and making, often expending an excess of labor to produce something that might have been presented ready-made, he does seem to engage with the idea that anything can be anything else. The mutability and fungibility of metal present particular tensions, as material qualities that seem paradoxically to parallel digital plasticity.

In *One Ton II* (2005), five platinum prints, the number of prints that can be made with a single ton of ore, capture the photographic image of a South African mine, located in Potgietersrus and belonging to the company Anglo Platinum (fig. 2).[21] As Mark Godfrey puts it: "The photographs were thus 'of the mine' in two ways: they depicted the mine, and were actually made from material that could have been sourced there."[22] Within an early twenty-first-century techno-social context, Starling's exploration of the geopolitical, material, and labor relations undergirding photographic practice in the nineteenth century, when platinum prints were most common, was a means of regrounding photography as a materialist practice, in the midst of digitality's dematerializing rhetoric. Speaking of the five prints comprising this work, Starling said: "They're photographs, but they're very much sculptures too."[23] As with the two transmuted metal objects comprising *Work, Made-Ready, Kunsthalle Bern*, *One Ton II* required artisanal collaboration, in this case with 31 Studio in England, with whom Starling "was able to calculate the number and size of prints that [he] could produce with one-tons worth of ore."[24] And, as the artist recently noted: "I also remember the kind of shanty town next to the mine that was apparently the rehoused villagers that once occupied the land where the mine now sits."[25] In absenting both miners and displaced residents, in compressing process to image, the prints comprising *One Ton II* are the most efficient form of poetic economy. What is rendered invisible is as important as what appears.

2 Simon Starling, *One Ton II*, 2005

Here we can consider what Starling's it-narratives include and what they omit. They telegraph us from the mine to the print, which we usually encounter far from South Africa. They wordlessly compress "content" with "material." They *crystallize* (a term that, perhaps not incidentally, connects metal's solidification—metal is itself possessed of a crystalline structure—and Marx's writing on money, exchange, and circulation) while also spinning out from the object's apparent autonomy. Some details are included and some are left out, in some ways replicating the phantasmatic relation of labor to the disingenuous self-evidence of the commodity. Like the commodities they analyze, these works of art challenge those who encounter them to puzzle over how they came to be.

2. Retooling: Pedro Reyes's *Palas por pistolas*

Pedro Reyes is an artist whose works are wildly diverse in their mediums, methodologies, and logics. Here I focus on a particular project in which metallic transformation functions as a key rubric for a twenty-first-century it-narrative. *Palas por pistolas* (Shovels for Guns, 2007) began as a commission from the Botanical Garden of Culiacán, Sinaloa, and was conceived amid the intensifying violence characterizing Mexico's Calderón presidency. A television ad campaign broadcast in Culiacán prompted the donation of 1,527 guns in exchange for household goods, including domestic appliances.[26] The weapons were collected by the Secretaría de Defensa, who "publicly crushed" them "with a steamroller," thus exposing the guns to a kind of karmic violence. The steel was then transported to a foundry, where it was melted down and then molded by a hardware factory into 1,527 shovels that would be used to plant the same number of trees (fig. 3).[27]

Each stage of the process involved Reyes's collaboration with a distinct group of makers (and unmakers) whose expertise, equipment, and know-how were instrumental. These steps were documented in five videos that, in an exhibition context, complement the display of a select number of shovels, filling in the gaps obscured by the objects' opacity regarding their own narratives. We see the solicited-for guns in the television ads, rendered useless by the military police, shipped off in boxes, turned liquid and glowing when exposed to extreme heat, flattened into sheets, cut into shapes, exposed to heat again so as to be molded, emerging as what we would recognize as shovel blades, and finally used—in their new status as tools—by a group of young people to plant trees. Whereas Starling elides stages of the process, Reyes includes supplemental material to fill in these holes.

We can understand Reyes's work as an intervention, even prior to the liquefaction and functional retooling of the guns, as a removal of weapons from circulation within the transnational arms trade.[28] The artist coagulates—*crystallizes*—circulation into (temporarily immobile) things that become objects of our often underinformed apprehension; as such, they become what Igor Kopytoff called "terminal commodities."[29] Nevertheless, they are not rendered useless, as in the conventional understanding of the Duchampian ready-made, but rather given new use values.[30] As such we might consider them, with notable differences, in relation to Starling's inversion of Duchamp's ready-mades into works "made-ready." Whereas Duchamp took functional objects out of the realm of their conventional use, Reyes produces functional objects, rather than pure objects of contemplation. More specifically, the logic of *Palas por pistolas* may be interpreted as wordplay on Duchamp's ready-made, using a found snow shovel, *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915). In the work by Reyes, the (fire)arms are broken as a prelude to the fabrication of shovels, which are themselves not an endpoint but a tool for yet other ends.

When displayed hanging from the wall of an art institution, Reyes's shovels do recall the ready-made, though they were far from merely found objects; rather, these newly fabricated tools both did and did not bear the trace of their former lives as guns. To some degree,

3 Pedro Reyes, *Palas por Pistolas*, 2007–Present. 1,527 guns melted into steel to fabricate 1,527 shovels, to plant 1,527 trees. Installation view at Biennale de Lyon, 2009

this material relationship to the "hereditary code" (Weinryb)[31] of transformed metal recalls Starling's *One Ton II*—in which the photograph imaged the site of its own substrate's mining—or his earlier remaking of one object into another, as in his works "made-ready." The particular material shifts structuring *Palas por pistolas* could be understood as a literalization of Reyes's aim with his practice, which, as articulated in an interview with Robin Greeley, was to "transform matter into a new shape," seeking to recalibrate "the interaction between the individual psyche and material reality. As the material changes, there is a parallel psychological change that has both symbolic and real effects."[32]

Consider *Palas por pistolas* in light of Kinney's characterization of *spolia* as "survivors of violence, about which they might be mute (if they bear no visible signs of it) or eloquent. The burden of testimony rests largely with the spoliated object, if it survives to bear witness."[33] Here we might recall Starling's claim, in the interview with Rekade, that objects "generally only become talkative for me once they have been through some kind of transformative process" and consider that such a "transformative process" may tend to render objects (and their constituent histories and cultural formations) "mute" as often as "talkative," not least when appropriated through violence.[34] The question of whether Reyes's shovels "speak" to the history of violence in which they were entangled in their former lives as guns is an open

one. Indeed, Reyes's appropriation may be understood as inverse to that of conquest and war in which things generally become *spolia* (the etymological link to the English "spoils"). It is notable that Reyes's particular act of transmutation—his resemanticization of steel—is not an act of violence but one of peacemaking or *making* peace. Such a practice has a history dating back to antiquity, when bronze weapons were melted down and recast as symbols of pacification. If Reyes's work may be seen as based in a will to "transform matter into a new shape," with this material shift modeling a concomitant "psychological change," then the stories these objects tell may be altogether different than their previous histories. They present a new it-narrative *fabricated* by the artist.

We might also link Reyes's shovels to Dieter Roelstraete's formulation of "the way of the shovel," referring to contemporary art's archaeological imaginary.[35] Reyes's shovel, however, isn't intended to dig up an artifact but to plant a tree; if anything, the artifact has become the shovel. The tool that becomes an object (in the case of the archaeological find) has reversed its trajectory—an object (a weapon taken out of circulation and unloaded, a *Ding* in the Heideggerian sense of the broken hammer) has now become a tool. Rather than finding something old in the earth (unearthing), Reyes opens up the earth to plant something new. In this regard, his project looks to the future, rather than to the past, breaking away from the politically regressive esotericism of "antiquarian history" (Nietzsche) that many other contemporary artists engaged with history could be accused of propagating.[36] Liquefaction and the rendering of the source-object as unrecognizable raw material for new making appear unproblematic and even desirable. Remaking, through processes of metallic transformation, emerges as a means of creating change within a "ready-made" world. The shifting *states of matter* could be understood as a means of modeling change in the operations of *the state*.

In a somewhat later yet related work, *Disarm* (2012), Reyes collected guns in Mexico's Ciudad Juárez and had them reconfigured, rather than melted down, into musical instruments, premised on the notion that music is a social good. Suggesting a religious dimension to the project, Reyes said he "wanted to liberate these objects from their demons . . . as if some sort of exorcism is performed on them" when they are played as musical instruments.[37] *Disarm* thus is centered on a misuse[38] of the weapons, reprogramming them as tools for a distinct agenda. In this regard, the project chimes with Finbarr Barry Flood's call, in a text about *spolia*, to question the idea that an object's "identity is not only singular, but also fixed at a valorized moment of creation that represents the Ur-moment of a work."[39] Reyes's retooling provides an alternative model to such reification.

This too raises the question of the site of manufacture for the guns that Reyes's *Palas por pistolas* collects, a question that is answered by some of Starling's projects that return us to the mine. As Reyes noted in an email:

> The first problem with the interpretation of my work that I encountered is that being exhibited around the world this piece was interpreted specific to the context of Mexico. . . . Quite the opposite, I'm interested in showing that a lot of these weapons that are made in

> politically correct countries such as Germany, Sweden, France, Austria, Italy are distributed around the world and the blame only goes to whoever pulls the trigger. Never to the person who manufactures the weapons.[40]

Here Reyes clarifies the site of *making* as in need of elucidation, rendered central in a more recent series, begun in 2020, called *Return to Sender*. For this project, he orchestrated the creation of music boxes made from gun parts designed to play the work of famous composers hailing from the countries where the weapons had been initially manufactured, from Vivaldi to Mozart.[41] As such, these metal objects are global in their transformative fusion of intention, manufacture, use, and retooling.

3. The Conversion of Matter: Hiwa K's *The Bell Project*

Initially conceived in 2007, Hiwa K's *The Bell Project* was completed in 2015 as a contribution to *All the World's Futures*, that year's iteration of the Venice Biennale, curated by Okwui Enwezor. At the Biennale, a bronze bell was struck once an hour (fig. 4). For the reader, this bell might resonate with Reyes's *Disarm* project, in which guns were repurposed to produce a variety of percussive instruments. As detailed in the first of two videos, the raw materials (of a sort) for Hiwa K's bell were left behind in the wake of war and bombings in Iraq beginning with the Iran-Iraq War. While the scrapyard overseen by Nazhad includes the remains of military vehicles, rockets, bombs, and land mines, as Lawrence Abu Hamdan notes, "The only kind of weapon that is not present is a trace of Saddam Hussein's so-called weapons of mass destruction (WMDs),"[42] the unsubstantiated lynchpin of the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003. While Nazhad, a "Kurdish entrepreneur," usually sells off the scrap metal to countries such as Iran and China,[43] in the case of Hiwa K's bell the metal was melted down into ingots. The ingots were then melted down again at a bell foundry in Italy, inspired by histories of Italian bells being transformed into cannons, as Weinryb and other scholars have chronicled. But here this process was reversed. In *The Bell Project*, weapons mass-produced within an industrial paradigm were liquefied and reformed to produce a single object through artisanal methods predating the Industrial Revolution. Here, new use values accrued to objects, such as the land mines gathered by Nazhad, whose intended function had been "deactivated."[44]

Just as Reyes's shovels, when exhibited as art, are accompanied by videos expanding on the processes of gun collection, gun melting, recasting, and reforestation, so too does Hiwa K present, alongside the bell, two videos that provide insight into the processes and sites constitutive of the object's fabrication. The videos, evocative of the epic final sequence of Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev* (1966) in which a massive bell is founded, are supplementary and, as such, raise questions concerning the degree to which an object can testify, the degree to which objects are "mute" (Kinney) or "talkative" (Starling), the degree to which an it-narrative requires elaboration outside the object it claims as its protagonist. In Reyes's

4 Hiwa K, *The Bell Project,* 2007–15. War metal waste, wood, 179 × 220 × 150 cm. Installation view at 56th Venice Biennial, Arsenale, 2015

and Hiwa K's parallel decisions to accompany transformed metal objects with documentary videos, they seek to locate the sculptural within a process of collecting and making revealed by the cinematic. In assigning a narrative function to moving images, sculpture is essentialized as an abstraction from labor.

The first of the two videos for *The Bell Project* begins with a military airplane flying overhead, as a twelve-year-old who works with Nazhad says off camera: "I wish I could shoot it down with an RPG and collect the parts, melt them down, and then send them to where it came from in order for them to make another aeroplane." Later in the video, Nazhad narrates: "Weapons from most of the countries come here. They all come back to me." Nazhad credits his knowledge of metals to "experience"—what anthropologists might call tacit knowledge. He possesses a relationship to these objects and their material properties more akin to that of a designer than to those who use them as weapons of war. However, Nazhad's practice is not one of reverse engineering, but one of "deactivation" ("I deactivate them myself") and melting down. His approach recalls art-historical connoisseurship, as he quickly notes the origin of particular objects ("Italian," "German," etc.) (fig. 5). If to some extent shots of scrapyard workers stoking the cauldron—a solitary laboring male body working a forge whose smoke casts him in relief—recall images of heavy industry associated with early twentieth-century photography, then the production at Nazhad's yard is markedly postindustrial, though metal ingots may in turn reenter circuits of industry at a later stage of this particular narrative. *The*

5 Hiwa K, *Nazhad and The Bell Making*, 2007–15. Two channel video installation, SD & HD video, color, sound with English subtitles, videostill

Bell Project also raises the question of the relationship to preindustrial modes of making in its engagement with the bell foundry. What do we *make* from the ruins of war, Hiwa K's video seems to ask; his "finished" bell partially answers.

The metal remnants in the scrapyard appear as artifacts no longer of use. While "deactivated," they will attain new use value when sold off by Nazhad, attaining exchange value in the process ("the prices depend on their qualities") and new use value at a small scale when transformed into contemporary art, in the case of Hiwa K's bell. As such, they are readymades—found objects—of a kind, but in the process they are rendered utterly unrecognizable. The arid scrapyard presents a contrast to the molten, luminous ore into which various rusty, dusty objects are melted before being poured into ingot molds. The "cauldron" in which the objects are transmuted into ore is also metal ("German"), as are the ladles and kettles used around the yard. Eighteen minutes in and the twelve-year-old is twenty; time is fluid and fast. The first video shifts from dialogue at the scrapyard to wordless documentation of process.

The second video transports us to Crema, Italy, where we are introduced to another, if parallel, set of artisanal techniques. Bricks are assembled in a bell shape and then coated with clay by a new set of makers to form a mold; Nazhad is nowhere in sight. The video requires patience of its viewer, though of course, through editing, it substantially accelerates the process it documents. One worker in Crema unpacks the ingots ("This is the material from Nazhad"). Using the tin and copper collected and melted down into ingots at the

scrapyard, the bell-makers will create the bronze by remelting the ingots before solidifying the metal again into the form of the bell through a process of lost-wax casting. Speaking of the man from whom he learned his metalworking skills "whose ancestors worked for the military arsenal of Venice," another artisan recalls that "he taught me many things about the construction of cannons," suggesting a continuity between the medieval spoliations detailed by Weinryb—the transformations of bronze from bell to cannon—and the contemporary practices of bell-makers in Italy.

The two videos illuminate—render visible—the various, multisite labor constituent of the bell, narratives supplemental to this "it." The *work* that is perhaps least visible, in an inversion of the authorial logic that continues to govern property rights in the field of contemporary art, is Hiwa K's primarily intellectual labor as manager of the object's fabrication between Iraq and Italy, as well as what is presumably his choice of design for the bell's decoration (applied with cow's fat).[45] As Ben Fergusson notes: "In a final symbolic flourish, the bell's surface was adorned with a bas-relief depicting Mesopotamian artifacts that had either already been destroyed by Daesh in Iraq or were under threat of ruination."[46] If the videos are fairly meticulous in documenting the artisanal processes of fabrication at various stages, they are less transparent concerning the social interactions that established Hiwa K's connections with these artisans as well as the longer-term process, beginning officially in 2007, that preceded making in its most literal sense.

Like Starling's it-narratives, the videos accompanying Hiwa K's bell are looped; a visitor to an exhibition (I encountered *The Bell Project* in both New York and Tokyo subsequent to its presentation in Venice) will begin watching them at a random moment. The proportion of notoriously distracted visitors who watch them from beginning to end (or middle to middle, as the case may be) is uncertain. If Starling's *One Ton II* crystallizes the narrative, Hiwa K's videos present a fluid state in relation to the coagulated matter—the solidity—of his bell. The decision to create two discrete videos rather than a single, continuous one—the decision to isolate scrapyard from bell-makers—further decouples the bell from a linear narrative structure (my reference to the videos as "first" and "second" could be scrutinized for imposing this order), as opposed to a teleological progression from "raw" to "cooked," in Claude Lévi-Strauss's famous binary formulation. Of course, the weapons collected by Nazhad are far from "raw" materials.

Resonating with my interpretation of Reyes's shovels, according to Fergusson, Hiwa K "sees his work as a reverse archaeology: a digging upwards rather than a looking downwards from a dominant (Western) perspective."[47] The bell is buried by the artisans in Crema in an act embodying this metaphor of reverse archaeology; once it is underground, it is filled with molten ore to become its "final" form. The negative logic of bronze casting, too, materializes this logic of reversal.

Even more pointedly than Starling's and Reyes's works, Hiwa K's videos may be understood to adapt the age-old practice of spoliation for the twenty-first century, crafting a specific it-narrative of metal and its transformation across and between contexts. In the case of *The Bell Project*, the original meaning of *spolia* to refer to "'spoils' or anything 'stripped' from

someone or something" proves apposite.[48] Certainly, this etymology of *spolia* evokes the looting and destruction of Iraqi cultural heritage (as referenced by the bell's bas-relief) but strikes an ironic note when applied to the shrapnel and other detritus collected to make the bell. As with processes of cultural appropriation (broadly defined), syncretic and otherwise, symbolic power is transferred to the "new" object from the "old." It is not just precious material that attracts appropriation but also the symbolic power attributed to the "original" object that primes it for adaptation so as to bestow power on its new users and its new functions.[49] To treat shrapnel as "spoils" is to consecrate the remainder of warfare, to hallow that which has deconsecrated. In a text characterizing an ongoing project called *Raw Materiality*, whose inception coincided with that of *The Bell Project* in 2007, Hiwa K writes that the "metallurgic smelting process highlights the extent to which the geopolitical and internal realities of Iraq have been historically decided by external powers. Just as Nazhad uses raw materials to sell on, Iraq has long been seen as a 'raw material' for exploitation and upon which many other countries have become dependent."[50] Here petroleum is evoked but not explicitly mentioned. But as the artist notes, the weapons Nazhad collects, processes, and sells off are not local in their origins but rather "their materials and metals . . . read like a map of the various countries and forces that have staked an interest in Iraq."[51] This, too, is archaeology in reverse, wherein this material "from Iraq" is revealed to be foreign in origin, not unlike Reyes's *Return to Sender* series, which emphasizes the sites of weaponry's manufacture rather than the sites of bloodshed.

What did it signify to present (and hear) the bell in Venice in particular? For one thing, Venice was, beginning in the eighth century, a key site of trade between Christians and Muslims and, what's more, the Arsenale in particular, a venue for the Venice Biennale since the 1980s, was arguably "the largest industrial complex in Europe" by the sixteenth century, marked by the transfer of military discipline to the precise rationalization and exacting standards of industrial production.[52] The Arsenale as a place where weapons had been produced as far back as the fourteenth century proves resonant as a site for Hiwa K's material transformation. Recall the Crema bellmaker featured in the second video who traced his knowledge back to this very site.

At the Biennale, the bell was rung once an hour.[53] As with Reyes's *Disarm*, the sounding of objects intended for another purpose bears a dubious relationship to the intentions that triggered their initial manufacture. Engaging his bell in time-keeping, time-marking practices meant Hiwa K could keep recent history present, acoustically animated, echoing far beyond Iraq. Hamdan understands the bell as "a territorial agent, signaling as far as the ear can hear that we are under the jurisdiction of a particular parish" and conjuring the spatial politics of sound.[54]

Within a Christian context such as Italy, the process of spoliation could be understood as "conversion" (here Kinney cites Philippe Buc), whether it be "a pagan idol melted down to form a chalice or the wine from donated land used for the eucharist."[55] Hence, "conversion" could be interpreted simultaneously as a material transformation of metal, with one object

melted down to become another, and as a religious change that could extend metaphorically to include the reuse and refunctionalization of one thing to signify something altogether different (i.e., wine produced by non-Christians becomes the blood of Christ). Beyond changes in the appearance or ritual context of the thing, the *interpretatio christiana* involved processes of "renaming" and "unnaming" that could underwrite a shift in the ownership, function, and context of an object.[56] This proves relevant for thinking about the material and symbolic changes undergone by Nazhad's metal.

In the making of Hiwa K's bell, as documented in the second video, the Christian "conversion" of the metal was overseen by "a bishop" who "was invited" and who "recited phrases from the Bible as the molten metal was poured into the mould."[57] If Reyes characterized the reconfiguration of guns as musical instruments in *Disarm* as an "exorcism," in *The Bell Project* transmuted metal was consecrated by a member of the clergy. The relationship of this project, this Christianization, to older practices of spoliation is indicated by the artist's invocation of another project he created, *What the Barbarians Did Not Do, So Did the Barberini* (2012), which refers to the "Vatican melting down the bronze from the ceiling of the Pantheon."[58] Regarding that project, the artist wrote: "Bronze is a metal used for both art and war, therefore linking the fields of visual representation and the military execution of power."[59] The relationship between *spolia* and violence recurs in the narratological muteness of the bell, despite its sonic power, and the expository function of the videos to reveal the it-narrative that metal's transformational properties melts down and thus renders untraceable. If the collaborative nature of the project—at various stages in both Iraq and Italy—suggests a hybridity antithetical to Samuel Huntington's "clash of cultures" rhetoric, which circulated in the wake of September 11 and on the eve of the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, the liquidation of cultural specificity that metal's state-shifting permits shades *The Bell Project* in perpetual ambiguity.

4. Shifting States: Against "It"

Simon Starling, Pedro Reyes, and Hiwa K understand the object as at least a node, if not necessarily an endpoint, in a process of transformation. Accordingly, we might understand their works as entries in what cinema and media scholar Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky has termed "the process genre," emphasizing filmic sequences of process but also considering text-based narratives of making and other routines.[60] With these projects by Starling, Reyes, and Hiwa K we might add the object that is reflexive concerning its own lived history prior to its inconspicuous arrival in the place and time, and taking the form it currently does, in the space in which one encounters it (a museum, gallery, or other exhibition space). The artists suggest that these metal objects are not made meaningful purely in relationship to discourse, but that their very materiality may be seen as constitutive of the flux of which they are instances. The world-historical dimension of these projects with metal, attended to with varying degrees

of specificity by these three artists, certainly resonates with the conjunction of imperialism, extraction, and capitalism characterizing the project of modernity that each, in their way, argues is both historically embedded and alive in the present.

We might also consider these projects in their stark contrast to the metalwork made most iconic in the years immediately preceding their making. Take, for instance, Frank Gehry's behemoth, the Guggenheim Bilbao, completed in 1997, understood to transform the struggling Basque region, rusty with postindustrial decline, into a gleaming cultural destination rendered in titanium. Or consider, in the field of sculpture, Jeff Koons's stainless-steel *Balloon Dogs*, begun in the 1990s, as scaled-up funhouse mirrors of speculative capitalism. Or compare them to Anish Kapoor's crowd-pleasing stainless-steel sculpture *Cloud Gate* (2006), better known as "the Bean," in Chicago's Millennium Park, a surface attracting a multitude of selfies. Interpreting these metallic icons as "placemaking" magnets amid the global expansionism characterizing the turn of the millennium, and the digital design tools and aesthetics all three embody, casts in relief the particular ways in which Starling, Reyes, and Hiwa K engage with metal in their respective projects. If their work is reflexive, it is not *reflective*; indeed, even when polished to a sheen, their objects are opaque and dull in their self-revelation. It is the remoteness of their objects' histories, undetectable in their present state, that makes the it-narrative a corrective to the putative straightforwardness of the "it" with which we are presented but that we can't readily decipher. What emerges is that while Gehry's, Koons's, and Kapoor's works in metal repress the role of making in favor of surface effects, Starling, Reyes, and Hiwa K variably understand extraction, collaboration, and artisanal skill as crucial to the logic of their work. Nevertheless, they play with the ways in which metal can be variably "mute" and "talkative" to expose the fundamental contradictions both of it-narratives and of commodities more generally.

Perhaps this is part of what Hiwa K means by "archaeology in reverse": a burying of the present rather than an unearthing of the past. Indeed, nonlinear time is conjured by these artists' projects, which produce unpredictable wormholes between historical moments and practices usually kept far apart. Geospatial and cultural displacement is crucial to the obfuscation being performed, resonant with the alienating effects of a global division of labor and its relationship to the making of contemporary art. Recall Starling's comment in the interview with Rekade: "I'm really interested in what it means to make something in a culture in which our connections with making and manufacture are increasingly distant—we have become estranged from the things we use every day."[61] These it-narratives propose an understanding of "it" as constantly in flux and unintelligible outside of transformation. These objects are constantly in the process of being made, even as they are unmade and remade, liquid even when they seem most solid, motile even as they appear inert. Thus, the twenty-first-century object is understood as historically continuous with the past but also as unfixed for the future. These artists seem to suggest that the fugitive present, too, can be melted down and remade.

Notes

1 On "it-narratives," see Mark Blackwell, ed., *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2014).
2 Helenus Scott, *The Adventures of a Rupee* (London: J. Murray, 1783), pp. 6–7.
3 Karl Marx, *Capital,* vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 197.
4 Ibid., p. 206.
5 Ibid., p. 222. The connection between it-narratives and Marx's writing on money, coins, metal, circulation, and value appears frequently in twenty-first-century scholarship on this literary genre, including in contributions to Blackwell, *The Secret Life of Things*.
6 Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22. Blackwell and the other contributors to *The Secret Life of Things* also acknowledge the genealogy linking it-narratives and Brown's work on things.
7 Dale Kinney, "The Concept of Spolia: Addendum, 2019," in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, ed. Conrad Rudolph, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), p. 331.
8 Ibid.
9 Richard Brilliant, "Authenticity and Alienation," in *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, ed. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), p. 174.
10 Ittai Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 3.
11 Simon Starling and Francesco Manacorda, "Francesco Manacorda in Conversation with Simon Starling," in *Simon Starling*, ed. Dieter Roelstraete (London: Phaidon, 2012), pp. 11–13.
12 Daniel Birnbaum, "Transporting Visions: On the Art of Simon Starling," *Artforum* 42, no. 6 (February 2004): 106.
13 Simon Starling, "Replication: Some Thoughts, Some Works," *Tate Papers* 8 (Autumn 2007), https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/08/replication-some-thoughts-some-works.
14 Simon Starling, email to the author, January 17, 2022. Thank you to Simon Starling for his generosity in answering my questions.
15 Ibid.
16 Birnbaum, "Transporting Visions," p. 105.
17 Simon Starling and Christiane Rekade, "Clever Objects – Tell-Tale Objects," *Art History* 36, no. 3 (June 2013): 647. For more on "talking objects," see Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2004).
18 Starling and Rekade, "Clever Objects – Tell-Tale Objects," p. 648.
19 See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1996); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000); for televisual "flow," see Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974).
20 Christopher Steiner, "Rights of Passage: On the Liminal Identity of Art in the Border Zone," in *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, ed. Fred Myers (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 2001), p. 210.
21 Simon Starling, email to the author, January 17, 2022.

22 Mark Godfrey, "Prints, Particles, Palaces, and Planets," in *Metamorphology*, ed. Dieter Roelstraete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 115.
23 Starling and Manacorda, "Francesco Manacorda in Conversation with Simon Starling," p. 27.
24 Simon Starling, email to the author, January 17, 2022.
25 Ibid.
26 José Luis Falconi, "Ad Usum, Ad Hoc (Or How to Use This Book)," in *Pedro Reyes: Ad Usum/To Be Used*, ed. José Luis Falconi (Cambridge: Department of History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University, 2017), p. viii.
27 "Palas por pistolas," in *Pedro Reyes: Ad Usum/To Be Used*, pp. 79–80.
28 Tyson E. Lewis, "'Move Around! There Is Something to See Here': The Biopolitics of the Perceptual Pedagogy of the Arts," *Studies in Art Education* 57, no. 1 (October 2015): 61.
29 Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process" in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 75.
30 Here I have benefitted from the Marxian interpretation of Duchamp's ready-mades in relation to labor and use value in John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007).
31 Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages*, p. 3.
32 Pedro Reyes in discussion with Robin Greeley, February 20, 2013, as quoted in Robin Greeley, "Modernism as a Toolbox," in *Pedro Reyes: Ad Usum/To Be Used*, p. 412.
33 Kinney, "Introduction," in *Reuse Value*, p. 4.
34 Starling and Rekade, "Clever Objects – Tell-Tale Objects," p. 647.
35 Dieter Roelstraete, "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art," *e-flux journal*, no. 4 (March 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/04/68582/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/.
36 For analysis of the "antiquarian" strain of contemporary artists' engagements with history, see James Meyer, *The Art of Return: The Sixties & Contemporary Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).
37 Pedro Reyes, quoted in José Esparza Chong Cuy, "Gun Politics," *Domus* 962 (October 2012): 109.
38 On the "misuse" of objects by contemporary artists, see Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
39 Finbarr Barry Flood, "Appropriation as Inscription: Making History in the First Friday Mosque of Delhi," in *Reuse Value*, p. 122.
40 Pedro Reyes, email to the author, February 21, 2022. Thank you to Isabella Tang and Sofía Canesco for their work in supporting this communication.
41 Reyes made the connection (between these earlier projects, their critical reception, and *Return to Sender*) explicit in ibid.
42 Lawrence Abu Hamdan, "Body Count," in *Don't Shrink Me to the Size of a Bullet: The Works of Hiwa K*, ed. Anthony Downey (London: Koenig Books, 2017), p. 61.
43 "Raw Materiality," in *Don't Shrink Me to the Size of a Bullet*, p. 233.
44 "The Bell Project," in *Don't Shrink Me to the Size of a Bullet*, p. 211.
45 For the relationship between art, artisanal labor, reskilling and deskilling, and intellectual labor, see Roberts, *Intangibilities of Form*.
46 Ben Fergusson, "Digging Upwards," *Frieze* 187 (May 2017): 184.
47 Ibid.

48 Kinney, "The Concept of *Spolia*," p. 331.
49 For a related argument about bronze bells made of a melted-down statue, see Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages*, p. 4.
50 "Raw Materiality," p. 233.
51 Ibid.
52 Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Swerve Editions, 2000), p. 83. Here DeLanda is drawing from Robert C. Davis, *Shipbuilders of the Venetian Arsenal: Workers and Workplace in the Preindustrial City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 44.
53 Shama Khanna, "56th Venice Biennale," *Art Monthly* 387 (June 2015): 387.
54 Hamdan, "Body Count," p. 61.
55 Kinney, "Ancient Gems in the Middle Ages: Riches and Ready-Mades," in *Reuse Value*, p. 107.
56 Ibid., pp. 110–11.
57 "The Bell Project," p. 212.
58 Ibid.
59 "What the Barbarians Did Not Do, Did the Barberini," in *Don't Shrink Me to the Size of a Bullet*, p. 176.
60 Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).
61 Starling and Rekade, "Clever Objects – Tell-Tale Objects," p. 648.

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