I state that in 2014 I worked as the graphic designer on an exhibition for the British artist Simon Starling.[1] I recall that the exhibition, organized by curators Dieter Roelstraete and Karsten Lund for the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gathered eleven works created by the artist over a thirteen-year period. I point out as examples of works exhibited Starling's *Autoxylopyrocycloboros* (2006), a film in which the artist travels the Scottish Loch Long in a boat whose own hull he burns to fuel its motor, and *The Long Ton* (2009), two suspended masses of marble (one Chinese and one Italian) whose differences in scale correlate to their market values. I recall that Starling insisted on writing his own titles, media lists, collection details, and descriptions to be printed on the museum's object labels. I recall that, some months before the opening, Starling delivered to the museum's editorial staff a dense, technical, repetitive, eleven-page document whose explicit titles sometimes rivaled their descriptions in length. I recall that the bulk of my time working on the exhibition was spent typesetting and refining this document. I observe that Starling's titles, media lists, and descriptions are usually three variations on the same theme: explicating their production processes and the histories tied up in those processes. I offer the reader a typical example:

> *One Ton II (Five handmade platinum|palladium prints of the Anglo American Platinum Corporation mine at Potgietersrus, South Africa, produced using as many platinum group metal salts as can be derived from one ton of ore),* 2005
> Five platinum/palladium prints framed in acrylic boxes
> Rennie Collection, Vancouver
>
> One Ton II, the result of a protracted journey, adheres to a rigid, scientific system—the number and size of the exhibited prints are determined by the quantity of platinum derived from one ton of ore mined in the vast mine at Potgietersrus, South Africa, depicted in the image.
>
> Because the valuable metals are spread widely within the ore, huge amounts of energy are required to produce tiny quantities of metal; ten tons of ore are needed to yield just one ounce of platinum. The crystalline surface of these platinum-rich handmade prints contrasts with the surface of the brutally grandiose engineering project that facilitated their production: the vast scale of the mine against the delicate chemical structure of the age-old printing process.
>
> —Simon Starling

I propose that readers familiar with Starling's work will understand his wish to author and sign off on his object label texts rather than leave them to be crafted by the museum's more than capable editorial and curatorial staff. I bolster this proposal by reminding the reader that the objects Starling produces undergo elaborate shipping methods, chemical reconstitutions, international-judicial scrutiny, and destruction over long periods of time, and that the artist's auto-ekphrasis is worthwhile because these processes are otherwise difficult to define and illustrate in the short moments viewers

spend with them inside museums and art galleries. I presume that Starling wrote his object labels as if he were writing a technical manual necessary to be read in order to grasp where the viewer exists in an artwork's timeline, and that he triangulates meaning somewhere between the acts of looking at the work, reading the object label, and contemplating the work's provenance.

I advocate that Starling's work often uses the work of other artists, places historical precedents in contemporary contexts, and questions the materials of making. I consider that Starling once spoke in a lecture[2] of appreciating "medium" in both senses of the word: "material holding data, and conduit to the dead."

I recall attending many critiques in the Graphic Design, Painting and Printmaking, Photography, and Sculpture departments while a graduate student of Graphic Design at the Yale School of Art. I draw attention to my specific interest in the first ten minutes of Sculpture critiques, wherein a student designated as "the Describer"—a different Describer with each critique—would take the floor to describe the material conditions of the artwork to be discussed that day. I express my appreciation that the Describer was asked to do so without the help of the artist and without knowing the title of the artwork, that the Describer would verbally provide for the audience a material inventory of the work in the space without chancing to guess the ideas motivating the artist's material choices, and that the audience would quietly listen to another human being seeing an artwork in detail for the first time. I opine that a good Describer would take no material details for granted in their description, and that rather than briefly referring to an object as, say, a skein winder, would note to the audience that skein winder's uncharacteristically small scale and lack of hardware, would pause on the material it spun long enough to suppose that the skein winder must be used to make bunched strands of human hair rather than wool or mohair, and would attempt to work out in their speech the production loop that this hair suggested in the way it wrapped the machine.[3] I paraphrase the previous sentence: a good Describer would take into account that any object contains within it an infinite amount of linguistic potential, and so would conduct their description thoughtfully and seriously.

I suggest that the role of the Describer is useful beyond the occasion of an art school critique. I acknowledge that outside of an art school the Describer may be an institution, a curator, a critic, or oneself. I admit that I carry on the method of the Describer inside my own head when I encounter an object in space or an image on screen, and that I secretly wish for an audience to listen to me as I translate my sight into language.

I state that when I take on the role of the Describer, I often recognize material details *because* I am tasked to speak them. I liken this experience to the act of walking a path as it renders before me. I allow that I fill in gaps of my knowledge of making by guessing at certain production processes. I suggest that my guesses, at the very least, will place me closer to the logistical planning and actions of the artist, will start me wondering whether the artwork at hand was initially sketched in a notebook or in 3D software or physically arranged at scale in unseen iterations. I concede that in these thoughts and others like them I have begun to overstep my boundary as the Describer by supposing the artist's intent.

I pause to invoke the words of the American poet Lyn Hejinian:

> Description, with its tendency to evaluate even as it pretends to objectify, is deeply implicated in the establishment of hierarchies—including those that structure and restrict identity. Indeed, to the extent that a description may also become a definition, it lays down strictures that can be nearly impossible to disrupt.... I hoped that by insisting on its contingent relation to both "art and reality, or intentionality and circumstance"—that is, by positioning description in and as the intermediary zone between them—I could open a space through which a person might step. In or out.[4]

I acknowledge that the Describer wields a degree of power in the way that they introduce an artwork. I advance the possibility of a description that does not violate its object by aspiring to the status of a definition, and at the same time confess that even as I restrict my language to the object at hand, I encode this restriction with my own judgment. I suggest that the translator—whose task is simultaneously necessary and doomed to failure—is an appropriate analogue to the Describer. I recognize, as Hejinian does, that the Describer simultaneously explores, discovers, and communicates, and I suggest that the Describer's words, like the translator's, may very well say as much about the Describer as they say about a given artwork. I remind myself that the simplex mind must link exploration and discovery to conquest.

I surmise that the Describer's project has become a form of ekphrasis, and that it cannot help but expand its subject's meaning. I surmise that Starling aims to write a definition of his art, and that his art belongs to this definition in the way that a file belongs to its file extension.

I survey the parts I've established in the above sentences: the artwork, the artist's definition, and the Describer's description. I point out that there is no guaranteed order in which the viewer will encounter these parts. I declare that these parts will continue to inform one another as they enter the viewer's awareness.

1. *Simon Starling: Metamorphology* (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2014).
2. "Simon Starling on Tacita Dean on Merce Cunningham" (Dia Art Foundation, 2018).
3. My remembrance of Ian Page's description of a Sula Bermudez-Silverman sculpture (2017).
4. Lyn Hejinian, "The Person and Description," *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 200.