

EVER AIRPORT:
NOTES ON TARYN SIMON'S *CONTRABAND*

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Paul Virilio dedicated his 1991 book *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* to one Zara Kasnov, a woman compelled by circumstance to live between worlds, in a kind of 'interzone' where she could not be found, into which she constantly disappeared. At the end of her life, her existence played itself out at the limits of international law, space and time, in an ultimately fatal bid to escape all three. Kasnov travelled ceaselessly around the globe with her grandson, in order to escape the authorities who sought to retrieve the boy from her. Her journeying eventually settled into a shuttling back and forth between Holland and the US, until she finally dropped dead from exhaustion in an airport.

Kasnov's story reminds me of my beginnings as a curator, travelling on night trains every weekend to a different place in Europe; a marathon of visits to artists' studios, living on the cusp of today's time-space compression in the non-places of the train compartment and the station. For Marc Augé, the non-place is a new object for anthropology, a world 'surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral'; 'a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity'. Non-places 'create solitary contractuality', relations between people as between things that are determined by specific functions in a larger systemic whole.

The ideas of the marathon and of the non-place converge in Taryn Simon's recent labour-intensive work, *Contraband*, a prolonged investigation of both the inner life of the airport and its passengers – as a between-space, a place of transit – and of the global traffic in miscellaneous, forgotten, illegal and counterfeit objects. This project is an extended study of international transit, of the international currency of prohibited items, and especially of the tide of counterfeit goods that have flooded Western markets in the wake of the relocation of production to the newly developing countries of the East. Simon stayed at John F. Kennedy International airport for a week and photographed over one thousand items seized from passengers and express mail entering the U.S. from abroad. *Contraband* is a record of a flow of confiscated objects ranging from the fake to the contaminated, that marks the airport as what Augé calls a 'spatialized expression of authority', and Simon spent five days and nights, from November 16 to November 20, 2009, documenting items in both the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Federal Inspection Site and the U.S. Postal Service International Mail Facility, sites that are a contraband space, a space between America and other nations.

The series of photographs offers an exhaustive narrative of the airport, and of airborne traffic, in something approaching the appropriately impersonal and administrative form of the list, to be presented alongside actual lists of the objects themselves. Simon's work thereby takes its place in a long history of artists' deployment of the list-form, from the lists of Gilbert and George, to Hans-Peter Feldmann's and Christian Boltanski's lists from the 1970s: list-portraits of individuals as revealed through their belongings. Boltanski's *Lost Property – Tramway*, of 1994, gathered around 5,000 forgotten objects from as many people, and, as he told me: '...each person has his own history, each person is different ... each face is different; each adventure is different'. This history of the list has continued into the present, with Umberto Eco's extensive exhibition and event series, *The Infinity of Lists* at the Louvre in November 2009, a project that gathered together numerous list-forms, from ancient reliquaries (collections of objects as lists made tangible) to lists produced by artists from Bosch to Boltanski, writers from Aristotle and Diogenes Laërtius to Rabelais, and on to Borges and Georges Perec. Eco lists categories of lists: 'lists of infinities'; 'practical' lists and 'poetic' lists like Calvino's lists of books; and 'exchanges between practical and poetic lists' like Perec's inventories and itineraries:

A few fleeting slogans ... A little soil ... A few stones ... A little asphalt ... A few trees ... A fairly large portion of the sky ...

Of course, Eco pays tribute to the 'mother of all lists', the Internet, and it is not without significance here that Taryn Simon lists Google among her key inspirations. The hyperlink creates trajectories within this endless list-space, micro-lists within the mother of all lists. Douglas Coupland has recently written of this new virtual space, where linking and listing meet:

Everywhere we look, people are making online links – to conspiracy, porn, and gossip sites; to medical data sites and genetics sites; to baseball sites and sites for Fiestaware collectors; to sites where they can access free movies and free TV, arrange hookups with old flames or taunt old enemies – and time has begun to erase the twentieth-century way of structuring one's day and locating one's sense of community ... Time speeds up and then it begins to shrink. Years pass by in minutes.

Linking creates lists and creates trajectories. For Simon, who – she has assured me – spends 'most days researching on the Internet': 'Google usually fails my original intentions but then leads me to something I would never have imagined.'

Who would have imagined the litany of stray items, the 'redundancy of garbage' in Simon's strange collection?

Pork (Mexico), syringes (Indonesia), Botox (Indonesia), chicken and duck, chicken, duck, beans and nuts, beans, nuts, beef, bird's nest, booze, gastro meds, GBL date rape drug, heroin, hydrochlorothiazide, imitation Lipitor, Ketamine tranquilizer, Klonopin, Lidocaine, Lorazepam, locust tree seed, ginger root, deer tongues, cow urine, Cohiba cigars, toy AK47 and protective goggles, toy AK47, Egyptian cigarettes (24 cartons).

The sheer repetition of objects (endless accumulations of counterfeit luxury handbags, every time the same; bottomless supplies of sexual stimulant drugs; meat products; pirated DVDs; animal parts used as medicine or for religious rituals) presents a metonymic view of the social whole, as constructed by our endless drive to accumulate; an overproduction of stuff.

Contraband therefore raises profound questions of preservation and ecology amid continuing technological upheaval. If the digital revolution has in many ways dematerialized aspects of everyday life, the paradigm of built-in obsolescence has not been superseded, nor does it seem likely to anytime soon, in the absence of some singular transformative event. Simon's work clearly shows the myriad ways in which we continue to rely on the ceaseless material production of ever more disposable commodities, a maelstrom of overproduction steadily depleting our natural resources. *Contraband* gives the lie to phrases such as the 'dematerialized economy', which only ensure that we conveniently forget that we are beholden to both nature and material production as never before.

Simon's lists are also playful and absurd, like those of OuLiPo, the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*: the famous literary group founded by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais in 1960, which to this day functions like a permanent research laboratory for innovation. In their works, OuLiPo writers from Perec to Jacques Roubaud have invented and imposed new rules of the game, and while at first these rules might appear as limitations, they can in fact open up all kinds of previously unimaginable possibilities, or potentialities for literary production, enabling the creation of what Harry Matthews, one of the protagonists of the group, has called 'absolutely unimaginable incidents of fiction'. Matthews has written eloquently of the continual interplay of order and disorder within poetry, of poetry's constant dialectic between conformity to, and deviation from, systems of rules:

'All formulas for meters and stanzas distort language, and the strictest, most arbitrary formulas – for example, the formula of the limerick – produce writing that verges on nonsense and sometimes topples over the edge. Instead of avoiding such formulas, however, writers embrace them.'

Similarly, the photographs and texts of Simon's *Contraband* reveal disorder and chance within the strictures of a system determined by absolute order and control; both the logistical control of the airport – its rhythms, structures, issues of access, authorization and exclusion – and the legal control of the restriction on certain categories of foreign objects entering U.S. territory. Simon's images and lists embrace both order and disorder, and open up a third space within the cracks of these forms of control: a space of the surreptitious, the forgotten, the bizarre and the banal, exposed to the cold light of the camera, and all set against an unchanging grey backdrop, the colour of administration and neutrality. The very uniformity of the photographs' formats, what Simon calls their 'painful repetition', echoes the repetition of the objects. It is a production-line aesthetic that conceals the intense concentration of labour expended by both Simon and her assistants in the production of the artwork, and the immense concentration of labour contained in the objects themselves. As Simon has told me: 'Photography inevitably looks

easy, like it's a simple exchange with whatever the subject is... the conquest of it all is not necessarily a part of what you digest visually.'

As one of the distinctions that can be introduced in order to cope with these diverse items, Simon has suggested to me the distinction between those objects that had been personally smuggled, and those that had been mailed. Mailing, she has told me, 'offers up a space of anonymity', a space of 'anonymous desire', where anonymity ensures the disclosure of private desires. The distinction also suggests the different levels of risk that are in play in the traffic of illegal objects. The collection of photographs is, above all, an answer to some big questions of our time. What are people after today? What threatens authority and security in today's world? *Contraband* cannot be said to present an entirely optimistic picture of our world, but rather suggests what Simon has called a 'flattening of personality' through objects, or again, a 'flattening of desire' into a parade of artificial desires: for luxury, for the cheap fix, the quick high, for religious experience as well as entertainment. Perhaps it speaks of the collapse of all of these forms of experience into one another. Does *Contraband* present the forging of a new global space, 'une nouvelle région du monde' as Édouard Glissant might say, or is it somehow more entropic?

Contraband is a 'time-capsule' of early twenty-first century global experience as revealed through one of the principal conduits of the distribution of commodities, whose oddities and surprises will surely only increase and continue to transpire as their historical moment recedes from us. It is a portrait of the world, but, as Simon has also told me, 'as time passes, it'll become even more of a portrait, because right now all of these items are so familiar, they're what's currently surrounding us'. And so, 'as the objects cease to be familiar', what kind of a portrait can we expect *Contraband* to become?

Not least, it tells us of a world where the traffic in counterfeit goods is ever on the increase, where designer-label desire reaches fever pitch, and where – according to one report pointed out to me by Simon – 'fake Porsches and Ferraris zoom along the streets of Bangkok', while a 'bank has discovered an ersatz gold ingot made of tungsten in its reserves'. The proliferation of the fake has been one result of the enormous shift of commodity production to the South and East in recent decades, where there is in general far poorer protection of intellectual property, and hence, the same report continues, there is a greater 'opportunity to make knock-offs' without fear of reproach.

Already, in our own time, we can see that *Contraband* strips away the aesthetic and lays bare these dispossessed items, which cover an enormous range of types, from the mundane (undeclared jewelry, visas) to the illicit (numerous counterfeit items, from DVDs to the Louis Vuitton bags and Gucci buckles, Nike trainers and even a fake set of Disney matryoshka dolls) and the esoteric (a deer penis, a dead bird intended for use in witchcraft rituals). All of these objects appear like abbreviated ciphers of their geographical origin (in some cases clear, in others unknown) and of their anonymous owners, who themselves have been subject to abbreviated forms of identification amid the efficient 'speed-space' (Virilio) of the airport – the x-ray, passport control and body search – and its abbreviated consumer rituals: champagne and caviar bars, coffee and sandwich stops and one-shop-holds-all duty free.

To return to that most important element of *Contraband*, the labour of the artist, we can say that the tremendous self-discipline and effort that Simon imposed on herself in order to produce the project is an OuLiPian self-imposition of constraints, to sleep for five days at JFK and to photograph the innumerable items with a metronomic regularity that repeats that of the objects' continuous arrival and handling by airport officials: a painstaking, forensic photographic procedure; and the cancellation, following the initial decision to impose these constraints, of any and all subsequent artistic decision-making and spontaneity. For Simon, after all, 'photography is closely linked to imitation', and the work seems to enact an 'industrialization of seeing'. In the event, Simon suffered from sleep deprivation and was able to take only one shower during the entire period. She was yoked to the twenty-four hour rhythm of the movement of goods across borders and time zones, to which the project bore witness; yoked to 'the tyranny of real time'.

It is, finally, of utmost interest for the artist that this tremendous effort of labour and discipline in her work – which, as she told me, represents 'nearly 100 per cent' of her activity – is hidden and remains off-camera, just as the origins and secret histories of the objects themselves is forever concealed, knowable only by type, understandable only as contraband, as Simon's laconic title suggests. There are clear links here to earlier photographic series by Simon, like *The Innocents* of 2003, in which Americans wrongly convicted of crimes are catalogued at sites that had particular significance to their illegitimate conviction. Simon investigates photography's function as a credible eyewitness and arbiter of justice. Or like *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* of 2007, which, like *Contraband*, is an almost anthropological view of America, as told through its material

life, its secret history of things. She confronts the divide between public and expert access through an investigation of that which is little known but at the very foundation of America's mythology and daily functioning. *Contraband* is, of course, more intensive than expansive. It is the result of an extreme performance over a concentrated span of time; very much a marathon. But like the production and distribution of illicit goods around the world, and the continual effort to restrict their supply, as well as the sheer overproduction of material goods in all corners of the world, its 'challenge is invisible'.