

**A SOLDIER IS TAUGHT TO BAYONET THE ENEMY AND  
NOT SOME UNDEFINED ABSTRACTION – A POCKET  
COMPANION TO THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF TARYN SIMON**

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**Birth of Confucius, Quince Tree, Siamese Twins and Man Being Hanged  
(Unable to Fill)**

The evening I was working on the layout for *The Picture Collection* in the Galerie Rudolfinum, Justice Antonin Scalia went to hunt blue quail and later that night he died. In the coming weeks the media stumbled to piece together a sensational, but strangely typical American story surrounding the death of the 79-year-old Supreme Court goliath during a presidential campaign: the luxurious Texas ranch famous for bird, bison and mountain lion hunting 40 miles from the nearest city; the absence of the U.S. marshals who usually provide protection for justices; the lack of an autopsy or even examination of the body; the unpaid-for trip on a private plane with members of a secretive society of elite hunters founded four centuries ago in Bohemia; the alleged pillow over the Justice's face...

For a brief moment the unexpected death of one the most powerful people in the world to define reality with words exposed America's underbelly – something that is not necessarily hidden, just not always on the radar. The long shady corridors of institutions fundamental for society's daily functioning and their extraordinary affiliation with behind-the-scenes power games, the fraternities of those-in-the-know, backdoors, and museum cabinets. It put light on otherwise the most boring proceedings offices churn out every day, their authority and their possible association with the inheritance of

America's violent and sectarian past and its often-surprising current lives. In the end the United States is where post-war presidents can get assassinated and where nothing rivals the love of its inhabitants for fantasies – from Hollywood to Disney World to conspiracy theories. In June 2015, over 40 percent of Texas voters believed that a routine military training operation was the government's way to send troops to Texas and other states so that President Obama could impose martial law or take their guns.<sup>1</sup> In February of this year, 38 percent of voters in Florida believed Ted Cruz, the Republican presidential candidate, might be Zodiac, the serial killer who terrorized California in the late 60s and early 70s, and who was never identified.<sup>2</sup> Just one month earlier, a serious Twitter feud unleashed between a Georgia rapper and an award-winning astrophysicist over the rapper's claim that the Earth is flat.

Taryn Simon's subject matter explores just that: the seemingly banal and the critical, in the drama of little, neatly arranged objects. Even before Donald Trump, who not only dragged America's bloated underbelly into the spotlight, but also cut it open and let out whatever was resting inside, even before Vladimir Putin's expert use of manipulation in his information wars, even before the Internet invigorated various alternative explanations for everything, there was the widespread belief (certainly not only in America's public imagination) that there is a version of events, that regular people are unable to fathom – either because they are not allowed, willing or capable. This growing divide between public and expert access and knowledge is what Simon studied in *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007).

Inspired by the U.S. government's post-9/11 hunt for other countries' secrets, especially weapons of mass destruction, she set off to look for what's unknown on her home turf: art at the CIA headquarters; a warhead test; the only facility in the U.S. licensed to cultivate cannabis for research; a decomposing body at a Forensic Anthropology Research Facility; a deformed, inbred white tiger; a studio of a U.S. government-sponsored Arabic-language TV network not allowed to broadcast in the U.S.; hymen restoration surgery ... The only image that seemed to be missing from her map of the dark side of the American Dream was Stanley Kubrick faking the Apollo moon landings.

But there was *Star Wars*. Death Star II, the deep space battle station measuring 100 miles in diameter, capable of annihilating planets and civilizations in George Lucas' *Return of the Jedi*, is in fact 4 ft by 2 ft. Without a caption we would not learn its pitiful size even from Simon's photograph, as photography is one of the primary vehicles in conveying and preserving such illusions. Simon has a special talent to fill simple things like a list of paper or a mosquito with significance, make them appear fatal or forbidding, often evoking the atmosphere of McCarthyism and the Cold War. The government, security,

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<sup>1</sup> Ramsey, Ross. "UT/TT Poll: Texans Wary of Domestic Use of Military," *The Texas Tribune*, June 25, 2015, <http://www.texastribune.org/2015/06/25/utt-poll-texans-wary-domestic-use-military/> (accessed March 28, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> Dean, Michelle. "Ted Cruz is the Zodiac killer: the anatomy of a meme gone rouge," *The Guardian*, March 9, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/09/ted-cruz-zodiac-killer-meme> (accessed March 28, 2016)

science, and entertainment institutions that she surveyed in *An American Index* know such techniques all too well as they are all invested in covering their operations and are rich sources for myth creation and multiple truths.

The revelation that there were no WMDs in Iraq and the admission that the pre-war intelligence was heavily and possibly deliberately misinterpreted just added to *An American Index*'s pointedness. And the feeling that the news imitates contemporary art only grew with Simon's later works like *Black Square* (2006-), an ongoing project in which she collects objects (we are increasingly accustomed to defining ourselves through objects or photographs of objects), documents, and individuals within a black field that has the same measurements as Kazimir Malevich's 1915 Suprematist work. Reading some of the recent headlines, you get the feeling that her work has almost prophetic qualities:

"Ku Klux Klan rally in Anaheim erupts in violence; 3 are stabbed and 13 arrested," February 28, 2016, *Los Angeles Times* vs. "Imperial Office of the World Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Sharpsburg, Maryland," 2007 from *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*.

"Playboy magazine publishes last issue featuring naked women," December 11, 2015, *The Guardian* vs. "Playboy, Braille Edition, Playboy Enterprises, Inc., New York, New York," 2007 from *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*.

"Russian Ships Near Data Cables Are Too Close for U.S. Comfort," October 25, 2015, *The New York Times* vs. "Transatlantic Sub-Marine Cables Reaching Land, VSNL International, Avon, New Jersey," 2007 from *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*.

"A scientist found a bird that hadn't been seen in half a century, then killed it. Here's why," October 12, 2015, *The Washington Post* vs. the letter from the ornithologist James Bond to Col. Jack Vincent, May 8, 1970, 2014 from *Field Guide to the Birds of the West Indies*.

"Test of Zika-Fighting Genetically Engineered Mosquitoes Gets Tentative F.D.A. Approval," March 11, 2016, *The New York Times* vs. "Black Square IX, Genetically engineered male mosquitoes of the species *Aedes aegypti*," 2012.

"Russia PM warns of 'new cold war' amid Syria accusations," February 13, 2016, *The Guardian* vs. pretty much everything else.

But more likely than being a pythoness, Simon's work deals with themes that linger in the Western media space, checking on information that transfers quickly and fluidly like

memes. At the time of the greatest movement of mankind across Europe since World War II, *Contraband* (2010), Simon's documentation of items detained or seized from passengers and express mail entering the United States from abroad at JFK Airport in New York, inevitably brings to the fore questions of smuggling things, people and meanings, questions of cultural norms, of the West and "the Others," but also of patterns that seem to be almost universal: those featured in J.J. Abrams stories or on Louis Vuitton bags.

Based on extensive research and investigation, covering the world, and utilizing all the capabilities of photography, text and graphic design, Simon's work often resembles a current affairs magazine, enlarged, deconstructed to bits and spread out on a gallery wall. Even if signed in capital letters, her works decidedly feel impersonal like the collective signature of *The Economist*.<sup>3</sup> But the newsworthy themes and her initial visual style, in tune with widely distributed magazine pages, are only resources. The actual content is a contemplation and a play with the many theories of epistemology, social sciences, media, and communication.

### **The Necessary Equipment for Warfare of Global Extent**

The night the layout for *Field Guide to the Birds of the West Indies* (2014) in Room 1 of the Rudolfinum took shape, Umberto Eco died. (No more casualties in this text, I promise.) Twenty-six years earlier, among many other admirable things the Italian novelist and semiotician managed to do during his prolific life, he published *The Limits of Interpretation*, a volume of older texts in which he traced the then recent developments in hermeneutics, the interpretation of communication. There he checked on many postmodern theories he himself frequently inspired, but thought they were already too benevolent in the interpretational powers they ascribed to readers, up to the level of "anything goes." If we are not looking at a secret code, Eco prompted, we can say "a fig" means a fig, i.e., a fruit, the first meaning we find in a dictionary, and not a quince or even a hat, for example.

The theories he would go over could include the concept of semiotic democracy, a term coined by media scholar John Fiske in his 1987 book, *Television Culture*. Or, to some extent, works based on the 1970s concept of encoding/decoding by Jamaican-born British cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall. And Eco could certainly include some of the later theories of fan creativity. Their authors may have differed as to the amount of leeway they ascribed to the readers of various messages (be it novels, news or photographs), but agreed on the fact that their audience is not a passive recipient of served meanings and that producers of such "texts" create them with intentions that can

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<sup>3</sup> Her work of course is a collaborative endeavor involving not only her studio, but also a gallery and many others, a fact she further explores in her latest work with nuclear material in Russia. Due to her American passport, the work needs to be produced through proxies in places she isn't allowed to enter. Strangely enough, even her audience is removed, as it will only be safe to see the work in 999 years.

be ignored or resisted by their consumers.<sup>4</sup> Despite Rambo's "patriotic" motivations, Australian Aboriginal viewers famously viewed Ronald Reagan's favorite soldier like a Third World hero, seeing his conflict with the white officer class as their own.<sup>5</sup> This distortion between the moment of production and the moment of reception was built into the system, rather than being a "failure" of the producer or the viewer.

Today, semiotic democracy is a term popular mostly among authors writing on user-generated content, fan fiction, or any other re-workings by someone other than the original author. And it is probably fair to say that *Birds of the West Indies* is the work of a serious fan. If Part 1 (2013), one of many Simon's classifications, this time listing all the interchangeable props in 24 of James Bond movies – cars, gadgets, and yes, women – studies what Hall would call dominant and professional readings, Part 2, *Field Guide to the Birds of the West Indies*, is a demonstration of negotiated or oppositional decoding. Even though today's producers invite and encourage diverse uses of their creations, a preferred reading of any 007 would be a story of Her Majesty's heroic agent saving the ancient values of the crown and, while at it, a similarly dated masculinity. But as every 90-minute feature film overflows with meanings that are impossible to control, it welcomes many different takes. Using Bond's movies as an atlas of birds arranged according to real and fictional countries is one of them, hilarious and anarchic in its arbitrariness (it is questionable to what extent are these birds real or fictional as they all appear in works of fiction, but most probably they were not in the script; they also seem equally real – or fictional – whether in a real or fictional country). It is not completely random, of course, as in its vitrines it examines the relationship between fiction and reality, the often-humorous analogies between James Bond, the agent licensed to kill, and James Bond, the ornithologist licensed to kill and take birds for three months in Trinidad and Tobago.

So how else can meanings shift for texts that travel in time, space, or contexts? Sometimes they can get out of reach completely. In *Contraband*, the grotesque shopping list of diasporas, dead animals travelling through JFK for healing purposes become threats. In the site-specific installation *A Polite Fiction* (2014), Simon recorded the "gestures" that became entombed "beneath and within" Fondation Louis Vuitton's surfaces during the five-year construction of the museum, possibly for a future discovery (or not) – like a newspaper article about the 2013 murder of Kurdish activists in Paris, placed in the ceiling of the executive office. Objects taken from the construction site, including "copper and aluminum cables sold to scrap dealers; cement used by a father to build the walls of his daughter's bedroom; and an oak sapling that a worker took to Poland, planted, and named after his boss" then change value and meaning when moving from employer to worker and, ultimately, to artist or possibly *on* the museum walls. The

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<sup>4</sup> Hall distinguishes four ways of decoding: dominant, or hegemonic, that accepts the preferred reading; professional – focusing on formal qualities like news and presentational values, etc.; negotiated reading – acknowledging the hegemonic definitions while making exceptions to the rule at a more restricted, situational level; and finally oppositional reading. Hall, Stuart. (1973) *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Michaels, Eric. (1991) "Aboriginal Content: Who's Got It—Who Needs It?" *Visual Anthropology* 4: 277-300.

darkened Bill Gates portrayed in “Black Square I” hid the Bettmann Archive, a collection of approximately 17 million pictures 220 feet below ground, “cryogenically” preserved for prospective future use, but also technically inaccessible. “Black Square X” shows the Time Capsule of Cupaloy, buried beneath the grounds of the 1939 New York World’s Fair, deemed capable of resisting the effects of time for 5,000 years. It explains the English language to the creatures that certainly will not know what it was. “Black Square XVII” – a square made from vitrified nuclear waste containing a letter to the future written by Simon – will be seen only approximately one thousand years after its creation.

In his 1975 tome *Discipline and Punish* French philosopher Michel Foucault talked about poaching and “peasant’s rights,” originally tolerable acts of the population largely without any privilege, which might have included stealing a duck from the master’s pond or skimming flour from the harvested grain stores. It is not hard to see *A Polite Fiction* as a play on such acts of resistance. Later, in the study of popular culture in the 1980s and 1990s, the poaching of meanings has come to be regarded as a strategy of defiance without any direct material gain. In *Understanding Popular Culture*, John Fiske sees poaching of meanings as guerrilla tactics against the strategies of the powerful, where the weak “make poaching raids upon their texts or structures, and play constant tricks upon the system.”<sup>6</sup> Taryn Simon is in no way weak or underprivileged, but in collecting the birds from the James Bond franchise she demonstrates this type of poaching – the power of registering her own readings. Her chronicling of the creative forces of construction workers building a billionaire’s museum (a plastic bottle of urine hidden behind ceramic tile in the administrative restrooms) displays situations similar to what the above authors describe as examples of popular culture trickery, such as window-shopping or simply hanging out in malls – consuming without purchasing.

The way to keep boats from pirates and meanings from drifting away is to chain them to something. In 1964 French cultural critic and semiotician Roland Barthes explains in *The Rhetoric of the Image* how “the linguistic message,” the caption, clarifies ambiguity in images, anchoring and emphasizing some of its many potential meanings while leaving out others. Or, on the another hand, it expands, points to something not evident in the image, describing its significance so when the viewer comes back to the photo after reading the caption, he or she sees a different picture – some roads open, some closed. The interplay in which text and image work together to create meaning and the spaces that open between them, are one of Simon’s core interests. When specifying the size of the captions for her works, she maintains that the texts be small so they cannot be read simultaneously with the image and the viewer is lead into a productive exchange, moving back and forth between the text and the image.

In 1928 American sociologist William I. Thomas formulated what is known as the Thomas theorem: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”

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<sup>6</sup> Fiske, John. (1989) *Understanding Popular Culture*. New York and London: Routledge. p. 32.

It put aside the question of verifying truth or distinguishing reality from fiction; it merely postulated that whatever people were able to accept as real could lead to very real actions. Foucault might say that knowledge has the power to make itself true and that what we think about virginity or marriage, how we define it, has a bearing on hymenoplasty patients. The fact that photography, once a beacon of verity, a legal proof and inherently objective vantage point, is in its nature no less manipulative than a campfire story, became well understood even before the ascent of Photoshop, with the focus on selection, placing, framing and captioning. Simple examples of gentle lens tilting giving a very different story were often enough for revelation. In *The Innocents* (2002) Simon investigated very literally this notion of photography as a fact and photographic fiction making itself true, using photography's failed role in criminal investigations against it, highlighting cases where replacing memory with photographic images lead to wrongful convictions.

This idea of a seemingly innocuous piece of often trivial information, usually in the form of images, having dire consequences, is further explored in *The Picture Collection* (2013), a project dealing with the New York Public Library's collection that was established in 1915 and soon became largest of its kind with some 1.29 million prints, postcards, posters, and clippings available. In Simon's vitrines that supplement the frames of neatly and deliberately arranged selections from the archive, one can find champions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American discussion on documentary as a subjective interpretation or documentary as mixture of information and emotion, with letters by Roy Stryker, an economist and the leader of photographers who recorded the changes in America in between 1935 and 1943 for the Information Division of the Farm Security Administration, the "documentary style" titan Walker Evans, or the early exponent of the humanistic documentary reportage Lewis Hine, who as a former sociologist also considered the camera a powerful tool for research. The 1942 Annual Report of the collection documents the use of its images, which are normally borrowed by artists, advertising agencies and children, by the U.S. military in World War II. Donated tourist catalogues became a means to identify the enemy for the invading army or target places for bombing. The report begins:

The enemy loomed large as the most popular subject in picture requests all during the year. Since a soldier is taught to bayonet the enemy and not some undefined abstraction, he must learn to recognize that enemy; he must go into the battle armed with visual knowledge of the face of the enemy and the contour of his lands. A bombardier must be able to visualize the appearance of the factory which is to be his target; a designer of camouflage must have the specific knowledge of the shape of the forests in the battle area as seen from the air. Since this war is fought far from our familiar soil, in places and among and against peoples whose appearance is unknown to us, we need full training in recognition of these places and these peoples. Pictorial records borrowed from

this collection helped impart the visual facts and experience which are necessary equipment for warfare of global extent.

These very explicit effects of photographs are accompanied by a subtler, but no less powerful function of the collection – its ordering of the information and thus construction of knowledge, defining the truth about its 12,000 subject headings that range from art galleries to police to taxation and wealth.

It becomes more evident when put together with a parallel project created by Simon together with programmer and Internet activist Aaron Swartz. *Image Atlas (2012)* is a picture collection for the world where not only the culture industry, but also our social media feeds make the flattening of hierarchies that “positions generic advertising pictures next to photographs by Weegee or Steichen, and a Rauschenberg or Malevich reproduction next to a travel postcard or an anonymous artist’s work” a daily reality. *The Picture Collection*, as well as its digital counterpart, is not about the individual images as it is about the way information is structured and how that influences its meanings. Every representation involves the selection and organization of symbols, so its structure inevitably favors some meanings while excluding others. There is a difference if a person is described as an “armed terrorist” or a “freedom fighter,” or if a victim of police violence is displayed in a menacing hooded sweatshirt or a graduate cap. In *The Picture Collection* it is telling to compare not only the contents of frames representing Israel as an almost bucolic Holy Land and Palestine as a place of 1970s terrorist chic, but also parallel the amount of information – the fact that Israel somehow has two frames as opposed to Palestine’s one.

While the library’s picture collection was ordered by a handful of individuals along themes like Cats, Hair Combing, and Rear Views, *Image Atlas* indexes top image results for given search terms across local engines throughout 57 countries around the world, exposing cultural differences and similarities as well as the bias of the search engines algorithms. Different players come into play – governments, languages or regional customs – and together they ruin the idea of image as a universal language.

The list of theories could continue. It would be easy to use Simon’s work to illustrate a textbook on representation, signifying practices, critical media theories and other fixtures of liberal-arts curricula. A bird inadvertently flying into a shot in a multimillion-dollar film production – what could be a better representation of the uncontrollable excess of signifiers in a media text? Or chance in a place where everything is accountable? The bottom line is that Simon constantly challenges the idea of the reliability of our perception of knowledge.



## You Have All the Runnings of the City Underground So They Can Preserve the Fantasy above Ground

Much of today's conceptual art stems from theory, often citing the same authors and works as Simon's. It mostly stays away from the means its authors associate with popular media, manipulation and corporate or any other interests of the powerful. For them, this more often than not includes images, and especially beautiful images.

Simon's approach could not be more different. To represent the complex and abstract ideas other than in writing, visually, and resound or activate them in her works, she embraces the very techniques the theoreticians often dissect. "I consider the material forms that the work will live in; as a book, as an exhibition, in print. These forms desire an audience. I consider the multiple contexts it will enter into and work very hard to establish a fixed context within the work that can survive all these mutations intact. I am admittedly invested in seducing a broad audience and strategically use tools that have been proven to do so. My technical approach gives a stage typically reserved for heavily funded and distributed visual forms to subjects that would not receive such a stage," she said in a conversation with architect Markus Miessen and artist Liam Gillick.<sup>7</sup>

If Simon's interest in the hidden "was always to confront this divide between public and expert access to both sites and knowledge and where these boundaries are and how those boundaries allow for certain agendas to proliferate, sometimes incite rebellion or create more stable space,"<sup>8</sup> it applies not only to the CIA headquarters and the Russian nuclear program, but to the same extent to the theoretical grounding that forms the backbone of her projects. The knowledge she is employing and/or questioning is generally a thing of research libraries accessible only to those with enough cultural capital, hiding behind the purposely intricate language of request slips for books with no pictures – the *Playboys* in Braille. Simon makes them into attractive objects and brings them out into galleries and museums, slightly more open and welcoming spaces, at least in their architecture. "I was always working in a fragmented form – a single image in which I'm constantly trying to keep both my conceptual and my visual interests alive. And sometimes one is failing and one is succeeding," she told director Brian De Palma.<sup>9</sup> Reversely, it is probably in her constitution, judging by how she is able to talk about it, but more importantly her interest, to render juicy subjects without emotions – the loss/regaining of virginity, guns, sexual stimulants, deer penises, cow dung toothpaste, voodoo, weed, Indiana Jones; the tension between the sensationalism of the subject matter and deliberately academic, surgical approach is thrilling.

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<sup>7</sup> Miessen, Markus. "The Dilemma of Instrumentalization (or: From which Position is one talking?)." Markus Miessen in conversation with Taryn Simon and Liam Gillick, [http://tarynsimon.com/essays-videos/docs/The%20Dilemma%20of%20Instrumentalization\\_Markus%20Miessen.pdf](http://tarynsimon.com/essays-videos/docs/The%20Dilemma%20of%20Instrumentalization_Markus%20Miessen.pdf) (accessed March 28, 2016)

<sup>8</sup> Public Talk: Taryn Simon and Nikita Medyantsev, ROSATOM specialist, Garage, <https://youtu.be/LPrU66lBefA>

<sup>9</sup> Blow-Up, Brian De Palma & Taryn Simon in conversation, 2012, [http://tarynsimon.com/essays-videos/docs/Blow-Up\\_Brian%20De%20Palma%20%26%20Taryn%20Simon.pdf](http://tarynsimon.com/essays-videos/docs/Blow-Up_Brian%20De%20Palma%20%26%20Taryn%20Simon.pdf) (accessed March 28, 2016)

However, the polished form is here not only to lure unsuspecting viewers into problems of representation, to make these accessible. Her form is an argument. Simon considers photography, writing, and graphic design all part of her medium. Synchronization and consistency, for which her capabilities and resources in these fields allow, the sheer, excessive amount of information presented in captions, accompanying texts or even the elongated titles, their impersonal, scientific tone, the detached, author-less persuasiveness of her photographic inventories, the seriousness and restraint of the designs and exquisiteness of the materials used for making these into desirable artifacts, all present a face of objective and unquestionable authority. They ostentatiously expose the amount of effort and resources that went into them and present one elaborate classification after another. A summary of birds, a catalogue of global desires, a picture collection, an American index, a search engine – what they are actually here to do is obscure and by that ultimately highlight the necessarily manipulative nature of the organization of information and the ever more elusive line between reality and fiction, the trustworthy and unbelievable, essential and arbitrary, order and chaos. Even if they look very neutral, they present the language of one particular woman, her vantage point, her ability to make jellyfish the most mysterious creature on earth. The defile of instruments of persuasion present complex systems that hide behind an appearance of impeccability, but are in fact decidedly erratic, arbitrary, and their changeability contrasts with the definitive form.

As Simon puts it, “Something is said in the gaps between all the information.” By exposing the systems of knowledge, she not only points to their biases, their tendencies, the interests they serve and their power, but also their vulnerabilities, their proneness to chance. Most of the subjects in *An American Index* are absurd in their fragility, being comic and/or sad. The design seems to be preempting every doubt, with no backdoor through which to question its absoluteness. But Simon is in no way as protective as the people at Disney World, who, when she sought permission to shoot at their off-limits underground facilities, told her that “the magical spell cast on guests who visit our theme parks is particularly important to protect.” She points to the openings in the semblance of perfectness by distancing effects, by accepting and highlighting rejections or manipulations by the subjects she deals with – be it the very rejection letter, or the acceptance of guidance by the Chinese Office of Foreign Propaganda in Chapter XV of *The Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII* (2008–2011), or painting black rectangles on the wall of an exhibition in China to represent panels censored by the government, or empty spaces in a line of portraits to portray subjects of a bloodline not available for photographing. These blind spots – their awkward, hysterical résumé being the three minutes of *Cutaways* (2012) – also point to the fact that when “let in” by other institutions, she, together with us viewers, is incorporated, becomes a part of their agenda.

But Simon's relationship to photography evolves with every project. While obviously still intrigued by it – *The Picture Collection* vitrines, full of funny, bizarre and moving requests, show genuine passion for words and images, and they could be signed, as Dorothea Lange wrote to Romana Javitz, the determined and eloquent head of New York City Public Library's picture collection, "as one picture lover to another" – her skepticism towards the medium grows. And with it she moves from exquisitely staged, rich and saturated film still-like scenes and their descriptive qualities to the *sachlich*: from people in very specific environments in *The Innocents*, to largely humanless spaces in *An American Index*, to isolated items in *Contraband*, to arrangements of images of *The Picture Collection*, to simply cutting out grainy bits of images of movie birds. Lately she has increasingly ventured out of the two-dimensional world and further into sculpture and performance – not that it was completely new to her as her pieces at least since *An American Index* were never really just photographs and texts, but 3D objects. She also always thought of *Contraband's* five days of constant shooting as of a performance piece, and generally her methods have the dimension of performance in that she is personally testing physical and intellectual boundaries, always around viruses, nuclear waste or at least at burning fields.

### Paint the Black Hole Blacker

Nietzsche's definition of truth as a moving army of metaphors and metonymies whose metaphoricality has been forgotten inspired the idea of knowledge not as the discovery of truth, but the construction of interpretations about the world that consider themselves truth. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* published in 1976, Foucault states that theory is never neutral or objective, but always a creation of human beings who reflect their time and space. With that he abandons the quest for the foundation, the stable and universal truths. The truth is not found, but constructed in given discourse – opened to chance, different beliefs and understandings. The discourse, Foucault's 1972 notion of "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment"<sup>10</sup> appears across a range of texts and as forms of conduct at a number of institutional sites that wield their power through definition and exclusion – mostly those as in *An American Index*: religious, entertainment, governmental, scientific, medical, legislative. It is discourse that produces knowledge, defines any given topic, and limits how it can be interpreted through written and unwritten rules and shared assumptions. Reality is produced in a net-like organization, not radiating from a single source, but operating in private spheres of the family as much as in public spheres of law, politics, and the economy.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hall, Stuart. (1992) "The West and the Rest" in Hall, S. and Gieben, B. (eds) *Formations of Modernity*, Cambridge Polity Press/ The Open University.

<sup>11</sup> It also illuminates some of the principles behind Simon's later work *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I – XVIII* (2008-2011), a project that was again about "the forces of territory, power, circumstance, or religion colliding with the internal forces of psychological and physical inheritance," about information and chance (DNA being the new photography, recently starting to lose its absolute grip on truth).

The myths Simon approaches in *An American Index* and later works are shown not only as shadowy tactics deployed by real and fictional secret agents, but also as a necessary condition of the impossibility of accessing the essence. Simon tried to get to the heart of the system and came out showing that there seems to be no such thing. The only thing she found was a body of associates, no center, no almighty movers of the importance featured in most of the Bond stories and conspiracy theories, only a structure of complementary, often competing, subjects and fantasies. These photographs don't unmask or discover anything – it is highly improbable she would be given access to places that are actually classified – and in the end, when all put together, “there is no conclusion, or overarching declaration,” declares Simon. Revealed is nothing; she just shows or even adds another layer. “Photography is always another distance from which to see something,” she deadpans. What is really uncovered in her projects, and especially the ones focusing on the taxonomies, indexes and classifications that are gathered for this exhibition, is the functioning of systems of knowledge, the various ways in which knowledge is produced and made real.