

That Black Hole

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Secrecy is at the core of Taryn Simon's works, and few things are as seductive and powerful as secrets. They dominate politics, ruin lives, destroy countries, and change the fate of generations. As American philosopher and legal scholar Ronald Dworkin states in his commentary on Simon's work: "Secrecy is an enemy of justice and shame is its ally."<sup>1</sup> Through her collections of images and breathtakingly precise investigations, Simon interrogates not only the power and structure of secrecy, but also the way in which it is constructed: through the complex and sometimes dark dynamic between reality and fiction generating liminal spaces that cannot be defined as either.

In 1936, an American ornithologist named James Bond published the definitive study *Birds of the West Indies*. Ian Fleming, who was an active bird-watcher living in Jamaica, appropriated the name for the secret-agent hero of his novel, *Casino Royale*, because he found it "flat and colourless," which was fitting for a character intended as "entirely an anonymous instrument ... a cipher, a blunt instrument in the hands of the government."<sup>2</sup> This first of the Bond books was published in 1953. A year later, it made its US debut as a hardcover edition issued by Macmillan Publishing, but sold only 4,000 copies over the course of that year. In 1955, American Popular Library released a paperback version and, hoping to capture a larger domestic audience, replaced the title with *You Asked for It*. In the back-cover synopsis and marketing materials, the name James Bond was also changed to Jimmy Bond (it was not possible to alter the actual content of the novel). These were the first in a series of substitutions and replacements that would become central to the construction of the Bond narrative.

Substitution and replacement would also become central to Simon's approach in her dissection of the Bond films, a two-part project whose title, *Birds of the West Indies* (2013–14), she borrowed from the book by the original James Bond, and whose

taxonomic approach, design, and layout mimic those of Bond's 1936 volume. The first element of the work is a photographic inventory of women, weapons, and vehicles, recurring elements in the 007 franchise between 1962 and 2012 which function as essential accessories to the narrative's myth of the seductive, powerful, and invincible Western male. Perhaps more than in any other film series, these fixtures in the Bond movies are basic elements in building and controlling the relationship with the viewer. They effectuate an exercise in recognition, knitting our memories of past films to our expectations of the present one and our desire for the next. In this way, a contract has developed between the Bond franchise and the viewer, binding both to this set of expectations. In every film there is always a state-of-the-art gadget to help Bond out, a glamorous vehicle to enable his escape, and a beautiful woman to betray or assist him. It is the repeating pattern of these elements—all pressed into the service of an ageless Bond—that we desire. Our fantasies are skillfully structured and controlled by this formula; we demand something new, but only if it remains essentially the same. Continually performing and satisfying those obligations has allowed the Bond films to become "the most successful series in box-office history."<sup>3</sup>

The vehicles and weapons featured in the films reflect specific fashions and historical moments, such as the appearance of the then trendy Lotus Esprit Turbo in the early 1980s, or the nuclear devices that referenced the threats of the Cold War. Over the years, these fictional accessories have produced metanarratives in the real world, spawning products, sparking debates, and providing a document of how product placement became a general practice. In a surprising inversion of influence,



James Bond, *Birds of the West Indies* (Philadelphia: Academy of Natural Sciences, 1936)

the real MI6 admitted to seeking inspiration from the film's gadgets for its weapon development, and who can forget the uproar when the Aston Martin was replaced by a BMW at the end of the 1990s? *License To Kill*'s Hasselblad Camera Signature Gun (1989) made its entrance just before film was replaced by digital technologies. In a reversal of the film's famous initial signature motif of a gun becoming a camera, this camera could become a gun, suggesting a correlation between "shooting" a picture and shooting a weapon, and thus between preserving a moment and causing a death. As Roland Barthes wrote in his reflection on photography *Camera Lucida* (1980), every photograph freezes time but simultaneously illuminates the impossibility of breaking time's continuum. Therefore every photograph illustrates a moment's death.

Simon's visual database of these interchangeable variables examines the economic and emotional value generated by their repetition. Each of her pictures of vehicles and weapons floats in a black space, an imposed formula where fiction has been subtracted. In this way, they become time capsules, since all that they are (or were) is represented without context, blurring their relationship to the world and to the films. When, for example, she presents a photograph of Bond's Aston Martin DBS (2006) in impeccable condition and then in a damaged state, she does not present a before and after, but two fictional views, since different cars were used for each take. Their appearance in the context of *Casino Royale* blinds us to their differences and makes them appear as one. Fiction and reality also become one in *From Russia with Love* (1963). The film starts forty seconds after the credit sequence with a man following Bond in a park. By minute 2:32, the villain has strangled Bond, and lights go on in the background, illuminating a villa. A man walks into the scene, pulls out his watch, and at 2:49 dryly observes: "Exactly one minute and fifty-two seconds. That's excellent." One minute and fifty-two seconds is precisely the length of time the film has been running since the end of the opening credits; fictional and real time collide, a conceit also utilized in the early 1960s by experimental Structuralist films.

At first, the taxonomical organization in Simon's *Birds of the West Indies* seems elucidating, as all taxonomies should be, but in fact it creates an endless chain of fresh narratives: for each new exhibition of *Birds of the West Indies*, the images will be reshuffled and hung in different, arbitrarily determined sequences using a random-number generator called the Mersenne Twister.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while the elements of *Birds of the West Indies* remain constant, their endless possibilities of combination thwart any attempt to give them order, and keep them suspended between imaginary and material realms.

The second part of *Birds of the West Indies* pushes the question of taxonomy, its possibilities and failures, even further. Taking up the role of James Bond the ornithologist, Simon identified, photographed, and classified all the birds that appear within the twenty-four films of the James Bond franchise. Often the birds are incidental to the films; they function as background for the sets they happened to fly into. Simon analyzed every scene to discover these chance occurrences. The birds were then categorized by locations both actual and fictional: Switzerland, Afghanistan, and North

Korea, as well as the mythical settings of Bond's missions, such as the Republic of Isthmus and SPECTRE Island. As with all other collections of images, this one is again built through and inhabited by twists and contradictions. It starts with the seemingly arbitrary decision to focus on a completely irrelevant detail: birds passing by chance in front of the camera that is recording the heroic endeavors of James Bond. This insignificant moment gets frozen, isolated, carefully cropped and beautifully framed. For a multimillion dollar franchise celebrating gadgets, stars, and stunts that leaves nothing to chance, this comes close to an insult. The effect is further increased by the fact that in their new static form, the birds often resemble dust on a negative, a once common imperfection that has disappeared in the age of Photoshop. From there, more doors to art and absurdity open as some birds are frozen in compositions reminiscent of different genres from photography's history, some appear as carefully conceived still lifes, while others are picturesque or have a distinctive snapshot quality. Some look low-res or obscured, as though photographed by surveillance drones or hidden cameras that might have been used by MI6 within the context of the films. Many are quite frankly beautiful and one could easily call them works of art. In any case, the result is an elegant, almost poetic, yet absurd inventory of fleeting moments, a celebration of chance and an homage to 331 birds that will never know about their fame, nor care about it. So far, this is the most self-deprecating taxonomy in the artist's oeuvre, yet, as we will see later, it is far more than a joke or an "exercise de style."

Simon had investigated the power and failure of taxonomy already in *The Picture Collection* (2013) composed of forty-four images representing folders from The New York Public Library's picture archive, one of the impressive institution's lesser-known troves. Most of the archive's 1.2 million prints, posters, postcards, and other images were cut from books and magazines, and organized according to a complex cataloguing system of over 12,000 subject headings. From its beginning in 1915, curators have collected and culled images for the archive associated with specific terms. The collection has been an important resource for writers, historians, artists, filmmakers, fashion designers, and advertising agencies, and is the largest circulating picture library in the world. But *The Picture Collection* functions like an equalizer, where images that have historically been extolled and validated sit beside those that have not. Simon's arrangements of the photos, clippings, and cutouts all overlap, hiding parts of the images and blocking the viewer's potential to see the whole picture. The collection, like the reordering of parts in *Birds of the West Indies*, questions the hierarchies by which visual and cultural materials are categorized.

In the fifty-seven images of Simon's *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007), she again uses cataloguing, in this case to track power and secrecy at the level of institutions. The pictures document objects and sites throughout the United States that remain inaccessible or unknown, but are nevertheless integral to America's foundation, mythology, and daily functioning. *An American Index* opens up the space between public and privileged access and knowledge. The collection includes views of a nuclear-waste encapsulation facility, a cryogenics laboratory, a Braille edition of

*Playboy*, a Palestinian woman undergoing hymenoplasty, a threatened rain forest harboring agents to fight cancer, a great white shark in captivity, and a forensic-anthropology research center. It also contains images of The Central Intelligence Agency's hallway in Langley, Virginia, in which hang two paintings by Thomas Downing of the Washington Color School. As revealed twenty years ago, throughout the 1950s and 60s the CIA had secretly promoted American abstract art as "a weapon in the Cold War ... Because in the propaganda war with the Soviet Union, this new artistic movement [Abstract Expressionism] could be held up as proof of the creativity, the intellectual freedom, and the cultural power of the US. Russian art, strapped into the communist ideological straitjacket, could not compete."<sup>5</sup> For decades, Abstract Expressionism was heralded as one of the most accomplished expressions of personal freedom and creativity, but it turned out to owe part of its success to the CIA, who recognized in abstract art a James Bond—"a blunt instrument in the hands of the government"—for a Cold War cultural policy.

In another project, *Contraband* (2010), Simon builds an extensive, machine-like, and potentially open-ended catalogue of yet another form of secrecy. Compared with *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, *Contraband* is a more private, almost benign secret; it catalogues 1,075 items that were detained or seized from passengers and mail entering the United States. In this performance in documenting, Simon moved into John F. Kennedy International Airport and recorded impounded items nonstop for an entire working week. While we might imagine that guns and drugs would predominate—and they were among those items confiscated—the majority was counterfeit goods. As Simon notes, "The collection reflects an economic battle—one that involves the preservation of the original that Western economies rely upon. Photography itself produces a copy of what's before the lens. In this project I was making copies of copies—photographs of counterfeit pharmaceuticals, counterfeit Louis Vuitton bags, counterfeit Disney merchandise, pirated Hollywood films. The counterfeit goods couldn't pass customs, but the photograph could, and the photograph could be entered into yet another economy—the art economy."<sup>6</sup>

*Contraband* is also an exercise in repetition: for the photographer making 1,075 images, for the customs officer discovering yet another cache of khat (an amphetamine-like stimulant), and for the viewer seeing one more box of pills. Unlike in *An American Index*, we never learn the stories surrounding the objects, never see behind the curtain, but instead are left with a visual formula that repeats itself to the point of exhaustion. Structurally, *Contraband* follows the procedure by which secrets are upheld. A formula (a picture of a seized object in front of a neutral background) is used over and over again until it becomes a self-sufficient taxonomy that pretends to provide order and clarity. We try to discern meaning in this pattern of images, losing sight of the fact that it is a curated subsection of information. Thus taxonomy becomes a ritualistic formula that in fact prevents clarification, in the same way that a secret often constructs narratives to create an alternative world that only pretends to be real.

Simon has commented on this recurring aspect of her work in reference to her

recent web-based inventory, *Image Atlas* (2012): "It's linked to a continued struggle to find some sort of order or equation in chaos. I'm interested in the murky areas where there are no clear answers—or sometimes multiple answers. It's here that I try to imagine patterns or codes to make sense of the unknowns that keep us up at night. I'm also interested in the invisible space between people in communication; the space guided by translation and misinterpretation. This space highlights the inevitability of solitude and the impossibility of true understanding."<sup>7</sup> In *Image Atlas*, developed together with the late software engineer and activist Aaron Swartz, Simon penetrates cultural differences and similarities. This work indexes the top image results for given Internet search terms across local engines throughout the world to interrogate the possibility of a universal visual language and question the supposed innocence and neutrality of the hidden algorithms upon which search engines rely.

In Simon's earliest body of work, *The Innocents* (2002), truth is the secret. Here, Simon photographed wrongfully convicted men "at sites that had particular significance to their illegitimate conviction: the scene of misidentification, the scene of arrest, the scene of the crime or the scene of the alibi."<sup>8</sup> The series is as much a reflection on a judiciary system gone wrong as it is a critique of its (and our) trust in photography, since photography, in the form of mug shots, snapshots, and Polaroids, played a crucial role in the men's wrongful conviction.

Take the case of Frederick Daye. In 1984 a young woman in San Diego, California, was forced into her car, raped by two men, and robbed. That same day, Frederick Daye had been pulled over by a policeman for a minor violation and had his picture taken. The Polaroid was used in a photo array shown to the woman in order to identify her attacker. She picked out Daye as one of her assailants. Despite a mistaken identity defense, an all-white jury convicted Daye on two counts of rape, kidnapping, and vehicle theft. Finally, in 1990, the other defendant confessed that Daye had played no part in the crime. After he had served ten years in prison, DNA testing established Daye's innocence. It also identified the real perpetrator, a man named Smallwood. But the prosecutor was unable to try Smallwood because the victim refused to press charges. She claimed that the police had permanently altered her memory by convincing her that Daye was guilty. For her, the fiction could not be replaced by the reality.

Simon's works confront us with absence. In *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* we never fully see the hidden or the unfamiliar. It is only *represented* in the image, and described by an accompanying text. Between text and image, a space is created. We move back and forth between what we see and what we absorb, only to realize that power is invisible, constantly obliged to represent itself through tradition, order, violence, weapons, and other status symbols. Thus Simon's use of a formulaic heightened reality exposes the fact that the power of the hidden and unfamiliar relies heavily upon, and virtuously performs, formula and heightened reality. It is an illusion to think that photographs show anything, Simon's work suggests: they translate reality into a formula, a composed image. We should not be surprised, then, that we see little in *Contraband*, or rather, we see only what there is: smuggled items of no great

value. The story behind the objects is absent, only to be projected by the viewer onto the neutral background on which each article is displayed and photographed. We imagine the reasons why people were trying to get powders, fruit, or pills into the United States, and we imbue a simple banana with the weight of the forbidden. In *The Innocents*, the background is again the main actor. The people are innocent, but the location in which they pose has invaded their biography and changed it forever. In all three series, possibly in all of Simon's work, the background is the foreground, and the absent is the present. Secrecy is like air; it is invisible, both background and foreground.

*A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* can be understood within the same dialectic of showing and hiding, yet it goes further. It has been compared to August Sander's *People of the 20th Century*,<sup>9</sup> in which the photographer sought to obtain a cross-section of German society at the beginning of the twentieth century, and to Edward Steichen's landmark exhibition *The Family of Man*, which opened in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and was then presented in thirty-seven countries and seen by nine million visitors.<sup>10</sup> For *A Living Man Declared Dead*, Simon traveled around the world researching and recording, often under the most difficult conditions, selected bloodlines and their related stories. The eighteen sections or "chapters" of this investigation, spanning from 2008 to 2011, cover five continents, the majority of the world's religions, and some of the most pressing topics of the early twenty-first century, such as human trafficking, dictatorship, racism, biogenetic interventions, genocide, pharmaceutical disasters, colonialism, deadly feuds, sectarian beliefs, and LGBT rights. While Steichen's *The Family of Man* tended toward faith in humanity, Simon's panorama of our time is black, skeptical, and dystopian. There is no space for a family of man, no reconciliation between the people of the twenty-first century, no comforting universalism, but merely the possibility of a thoroughly coded life: "This mass pile of images and stories forms an archive. And within this accumulation of images and text, I'm struggling to find patterns and imagine that the narratives that surround the lives we lead are just as coded as blood itself."<sup>11</sup>

*A Living Man Declared Dead* maps the relationships among chance, biology, and the "political economy of fate."<sup>12</sup> Building on extensive research and portraying hundreds of people from all over the world, this panorama not only is ambitious in size, but also proposes a different relationship with the viewer. As in previous series, Simon developed a formula for acquiring her material and for its display. Intellectually accomplished and exquisitely executed, her presentation structures a potentially entropic situation in a new way. However, pushing this structure to perfection risks making it a goal in itself. Taxonomies are not objective, are not given, but invented—in this case, by Simon, and here she perfects them to the level where, as a spectator, one has to take a step back to ask whether a fine line has been crossed between creating one's own structure to manage the confusion of life and its reversal into a private mythology or obsession.

One way to mitigate this is to allow in other voices by attributing an active

role to the viewer. *The Innocents*, *An American Index*, and *Contraband* provide us with historical facts while at the same time inviting us to fantasize: Who was the real murderer? What unfolds in these hidden places? Why do they bring unidentified powder into the country? In *A Living Man Declared Dead*, however, the emphasis lies elsewhere. Portraits of people we do not know, with purposely neutral expressions that refuse to guide interpretation, are lined up in front of a cream-colored background. The few illustrative pictures included by the artist in her "footnote panel" further the ambiguity. The accompanying text uses language to illuminate the visual voids that she has constructed. We are asked to process data in order to map these relationships and our position within them. Fantasy gives way to history and it is, as Geoffrey Batchen observes, a tough transition. "[It] shifts the burden of assigning that meaning from the artist to the viewer, making us all complicit in the act of signification, and indeed in the histories we are asked to witness."<sup>13</sup> But it is not only a burden; it is also an act of understanding and emancipation. As Homi Bhabha writes: "Simon turns the reader of images into a conceptual and speculative agent involved in the fate of photography as it confronts history. The frailty of the art of photography is its tendency to fetishize what is seen as foreign, exotic, alien, or other. Photography's voyeurism becomes exacerbated in the face of racial, cultural, or sexual differences."<sup>14</sup>

This brings us to the question of the relationship between the viewer and the artwork. The avant-garde movements of modernism not only invented new artistic languages, championing experiment, process, transparency, and an expanded notion of art, but they also asked for and helped to create a new active, critical, and emancipated spectator. Modernism sought not just to shock viewers, but also to present them with a liberating catharsis. Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (distancing effect) is a good example of this new relationship: spectators must regularly be made aware that they are sitting in a theater assisting an illusion created by art. The "distancing effect" is there to break the illusion of reality and enable the viewer to develop a critical understanding of the work and the world. This considerably changes the work itself, because if a successful reception depends upon the spectators' active cooperation, they ultimately finish the work. This process is described by Umberto Eco in his books *The Open Work* (1962) and *The Role of the Reader* (1979), where he writes how, in the case of James Joyce's *Ulysses* for instance, the text itself is laid out in such a way that interpretation becomes "a structural element of its generative process,"<sup>15</sup> and the reader is "inscribed within the textual strategy"<sup>16</sup> from the beginning. Whenever we start reading a text, stand in front of an artwork, listen to music, or watch a film, rules are established to which we consciously or unconsciously subscribe in order to continue, or not, our exposure to the work. There are many tricks to sustain this implicit contract, and the Bond films, with their constant rearranging of essentially the same elements, offer a perfect example of how it is built and maintained.

The opening sequence of a Bond film starts with the now legendary shot of Her Majesty's secret agent shooting into a gun, into whose barrel, we, the spectators, look.



Blood runs down the screen, the barrel turns into the lens of a camera, and the first action sequence begins. This shot, transforming the barrel into a lens, is nothing less than a shot into the spectator's eye by which the retina becomes the screen for the film: reality is replaced with fiction. As Eco notes in "Narrative Structures in Fleming,"<sup>17</sup> the structure of the Bond film remains unchanged, and the same goes for the introductory scenes that lay out the basic ingredients: recurring elements such as danger, death, style, sex, games, politics, and luxury form patterns that are skillfully varied and provide pleasure to the viewer. We ask for this repetition, which is part of the game that keeps our desire—and the franchise—running. Repetition is an efficient tool to renew the contract with the viewer so that each new film is also an adventure in comparison. As much as Bond lives in a constant balance between life and death, the film itself balances between repetition of and rupture with our expectations. Yet the rules are never fundamentally broken; after all, this is not a film by Jean-Luc Godard, who stands at the other extreme in film, taking corrosive pleasure in constantly altering the contract with the viewer. Eight minutes into his film *Band of Outsiders* (1964), for instance, Godard, as the narrator, tells the audience: "For latecomers arriving only now in the movie theater, we offer a few words chosen at random. Three weeks earlier. A pile of money. An English class. A house by the river. A romantic girl." The film suggests that things could have been different, that contingency rules not just our lives but also the making of a movie. With the Bond series, quite the opposite is true: here the film is bound to a certain plot, and the women and other accessories are key aides to this plot—with the exception of the birds.

The inanimate objects—the cars and weapons—were submissive sitters, willing to be portrayed by Simon. But it became more complicated with the women. Simon has become known for gaining access to inaccessible places and getting past barriers between experts and the public, but in *Birds of the West Indies* she met perhaps her greatest adversary, which she has described as vanity, although "not just vanity, but also the power of these fictional characters."<sup>18</sup> Ten out of the fifty-seven women she approached declined to participate. Their reasons included pregnancy, not wanting to distort the memory of their fictional character by inviting a comparison with how they appear now, and avoiding any further association with the Bond formula. With a few exceptions, nearly all the actresses, and most famously Ursula Andress (who refused to be photographed by Simon), had not been known before the Bond films.<sup>19</sup> The franchise defined their image; its power left an indelible mark that still bleeds into their reality. This situation only changed in the 1980s, with the appearance of Grace Jones in *A View to a Kill* (1985), who, as an actress and singer with her own career, was not overwhelmed by being a Bond girl. The same is true for Sophie Marceau (*The World is Not Enough*, 1999) and Halle Berry (*Die Another Day*, 2002). Tellingly, all three agreed to be photographed for *Birds of the West Indies*.

The actresses were invited to select their own clothing and to decide how they would pose. Simon imposed a blank screen similar to the one she had used for the smuggled goods in *Contraband* and the portraits in *A Living Man Declared Dead*,

but this time she introduced a black ground on which the actresses stand. While in *Contraband* the formulaic presentation was used to offer a space for fantasy and to investigate a self-engrossed taxonomy, and in *A Living Man Declared Dead* it was the placeholder for historical facts, in *Birds of the West Indies* the screen behind the actresses represents absence—the time gone by between the film and the moment when the portrait was taken—while the black space beneath their feet is ungrounded: the same time-capsuled space in which the weapons and vehicles reside. The time span between the images then and now is the source of potential vanity, and there is ruthlessness in exposing temporality so boldly. However, while Simon's work is known for its rigorous approach, with its distant, almost cold view, these portraits strike us as empathetic, since it is precisely in this gap between then and now that life takes place and prevents the actresses from remaining mere accessories. Making time visible is the price to be paid for not being just an element in a film like a weapon or a car, and while some of the women who refused to be portrayed may hope to remain ageless, those who allowed themselves to be photographed distance themselves from the Bond formula, and thus from the status of accessory. However, they remain grounded in their fictions, which ultimately make up the framework within which they are understood. In Simon's formula, the women presented to us are no longer the characters



C.39 2006 Aston Martin DBS, *Birds of the West Indies*, 2006

C.40 2006 Aston Martin DBS (with roll damage), *Birds of the West Indies*, 2006

they stand in for, yet they simultaneously remain those characters. We are presented with images that are both patently true and completely false.

There is no such thing for the 331 birds. They are not true nor false; they are outside. They are like servants or people who seem to have missed the train of history. Staying in the background of the background means also not being controlled by the main narrative, but floating like overlooked punctuations in a thoroughly executed phrase. For almost forty years, until they were catalogued by Simon, these birds flew free. Taxonomy, this great bridge to knowledge, brought them back into the frame and took their freedom to pass unrecognized. Never again will I be able to ignore the birds in a James Bond film—which is great. This work forces us to have an eye for more than the supposed center.

More than a mere meditation on the Bond films, *Birds of the West Indies* exposes to what degree stories, objects, and even lives are built through and imprisoned by references and the subplots they construct and are embedded in. The Bond franchise is a great exemplar of, and sometimes solipsistic exercise in, cross-referencing. As much as it is natural or at least human to cross-reference in order to manage experiences and impressions, such strategies are just as often used to solidify existing knowledge instead of producing new knowledge. This is when reference can become fiction. The art world is particularly fond of cataloguing as a potent tool to market its products. Artists' works, and also their biographies, are continuously branded through reference to stereotypes. This process was described as early as 1934 when psychoanalyst and art historian Ernst Kris, in collaboration with Otto Kurz, published their pioneering study *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*.

*Birds of the West Indies* is a play in four parts cataloguing truth, fiction, and the liminal states that hover between them. Act One is a presentation of the cars and weapons that are the fiction's passive servants. Act Two presents the portraits of the actresses who were all exposed to the devouring Bond formula, but for whom the impact of fiction varies: for some it was defining and took over their lives, becoming an image to be protected and never changed; for others it was a threat, looming over their careers; for some it was just another role. Act Two draws a complicated and nuanced picture of the sometimes-perverse relationship between fiction and reality, and invites us to interpret the gap that this relationship creates. Act Three, *Honey Ryder (Nikki van der Zyl), 1962* (2013), radically departs from this. It reverses the situation and uses exposure to bring down fiction and put reality back on stage through reenacting fiction.

From 1962 to 1979, Nikki van der Zyl provided voice dubs for over a dozen major and minor characters throughout nine Bond films—*Dr. No*, *From Russia with Love*, *Goldfinger*, *Thunderball*, *You Only Live Twice*, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, *Live and Let Die*, *Man with the Golden Gun*, and *Moonraker*. An uncredited performer working behind the screen, Van der Zyl was the most constant voice within the filmic Bond universe and its most prolific agent of substitution. Simon's discovery of Van der Zyl led to another work of art. She decided not to produce a photographic portrait, but to create a film of an actor who had never been seen

before. In *Honey Ryder (Nikki van der Zyl), 1962* (2013), Van der Zyl stands upon the same black floor and in front of the same white screen as the actresses in the photographs and reads the lines of the first character she voiced, the original "Bond girl" Honey Ryder, played by Ursula Andress in *Dr. No*. This short film reveals a well-kept secret and gives back Van der Zyl her voice.

Act four circles back to the "original" James Bond, with Simon in the main role. She uses the ornithologist's field of operation to question the power and limits of taxonomy and photography, the very basis of her artistic practice. One could argue that this collection of 331 accidental birds functions as a Brechtian distancing effect that estranges us not only from the entire Bond project but from Simon's whole approach. Here, photography questions photography (with great results) while taxonomy mimics itself, all of which leads straight into the black hole of the absurd. There is dark humor at work, and, as humor often does, it ignores taxonomy, fiction and reality. Simon adopts, like an actor, the role of James Bond (the ornithologist) to bring James Bond (the fiction) back to where it all started. But it's impossible to say precisely where any of it started, or who started it: everything is the result of multiple accidents not unlike the birds which happen to fly by, some of which may in fact just be particles of dust anyway. Call it contingency, or secrets.

All of Simon's projects investigate how structures build and deploy power through impermeable and often imperceptible formulas—through secrecy. *Birds of the West Indies* pursues this approach while turning to the individual to reveal different forms of dependency and patterns. The vehicles and weapons offer a ballad of advanced dependency. Portrayed with an almost sadistic simplicity, they are presented as perfect fetish objects and a mirror of our desires. Their presence is as total as their absence of character. In the films, the women are attributed the same role: endlessly mirroring the desires of the viewers, the brilliance of Bond, and the sexiness of the franchise. But Simon's portraits break up this pattern by exposing the best-kept secret and biggest enemy of this repetition: the passing of time. The passing of time—in life and in fiction—can be kept a secret only as long as a formula's inherent promise that everything will always remain the same is not altered. By randomly reconfiguring the picture series using the Mersenne Twister, *Birds of the West Indies* mimics this longing for endless reiteration unaffected by time and history. The short film about Van der Zyl breaks the most sharply from this formula precisely because it brings history into the equation. Again, we see the power of dependency: a double dependency of Andress on Van der Zyl and vice versa. Both were bound to secrecy, itself bound to money, vanity, and perpetuating a fiction. But this eight-minute-long exercise in Brechtian distancing drags us into the space where ambivalence reigns, and time pulls us in and forces us to acknowledge that things, once again, are far more complicated than they seem. This is Simon's achievement: that although she lifts the curtain, things don't get easier. Her art is not about redemption.

When shooting images for *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, Simon was denied access to the vaults underneath Disneyland. The corporation stated that

its reason for refusing permission was that secrets “protect and help to provide [the public] with an important fantasy they can escape to.”<sup>20</sup> Simon comments: “Reality threatens fantasy. They didn’t want to let my camera in because it confronts constructed realities, myths, and beliefs, and provides what appears to be evidence of a truth. But there are multiple truths to every image.”<sup>21</sup> That fiction wants to be protected is demonstrated in the “portraits” of the women who refused to be pictured in *Birds of the West Indies*. Just as Simon obscures the image that was on Bond’s original book cover in her version of the cover for the exhibition catalogue, she represents the missing Bond girls with a black rectangle that was cut out from the mat to frame the portrait and reinserted, concealing and at the same time representing their absence. The captions were just the same as the rest: the role of the actress followed by her name and the year the film was released. Reality and fiction are still present, but cannot be linked to a portrait, and thus remain ungrounded. Absence creates a space where identity is denied because truth and fiction start to become interchangeable. Secrecy builds on this form of absence in order to maintain its power. These black holes, these murky unknowable spaces, are what Simon investigates—spaces where solitude and misunderstanding reside.

#### Notes

1. Ronald Dworkin, “Commentary,” in Taryn Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, exh. cat. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007), p. 145.
2. Ian Fleming, interview by Playboy, “The Playboy Interview: Ian Fleming,” December 1964, [http://www.hmss.com/lagniappe/PlayboyInterview\\_IanFleming\\_1964.txt](http://www.hmss.com/lagniappe/PlayboyInterview_IanFleming_1964.txt) (accessed May 15, 2013).
3. According to James Chapman, *Licence to Thrill: A Cultural History of the James Bond Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 13.
4. The Mersenne Twister is a pseudorandom number generating algorithm developed by Makoto Matsumoto and Takuji Nishimura. The algorithm has implementations in the computer programming languages, C, C++, D, Erlang, Fortran, Haskell, Java, Javascript, Lisp, MATLAB, Pascal, Perl, PHP, and Python. It was designed to address many of the flaws in various previous generators, and is marked by its fast generation speed and efficient use of memory. <http://www.math.sci.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/~m-mat/MT/emt.html> (accessed July 7, 2013).
5. Frances Stonor Saunders, “Modern Art Was CIA ‘Weapon,’” in *The Independent*, October 22, 1995, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html> (accessed May 15, 2013).
6. Taryn Simon, interview by Roxana Marcoci, “Between the Image and the Word: Photographs and Annotations by Taryn Simon,” in *Aperture* no. 209 (2012), p. 7.
7. Taryn Simon, interview by Lauren Cornell, “Taryn Simon’s Visual Babel,” *New Yorker*, August 2, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/08/on-image-atlas-an-interview-withtaryn-simon.html> (accessed July 4, 2013).
8. From artist’s website, [http://tarynsimon.com/works\\_innocents.php](http://tarynsimon.com/works_innocents.php) (accessed May 1, 2013).
9. Geoffrey Batchen, “Revenant,” in Taryn Simon, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII*, exh. cat. Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin (London and Berlin: Mack and Nationagalerie Staatliche Museen, 2011), p. 741.
10. From the Museum of Modern Art, New York archives, [http://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2010/11/17/edward-steichen-archive-the-55th-anniversary-of-the-family-of-man](http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/11/17/edward-steichen-archive-the-55th-anniversary-of-the-family-of-man) (accessed May 6, 2013).
11. Taryn Simon, The Stories Behind the Bloodlines, TED Salon London, November 2011, 16:54–17:11, [http://www.ted.com/talks/taryn\\_simon\\_the\\_stories\\_behind\\_the\\_bloodlines.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/taryn_simon_the_stories_behind_the_bloodlines.html) (accessed June 12, 2013).
12. Batchen, “Revenant” (see note 9), p. 743.
13. Batchen, “Revenant” (see note 9), p. 751.
14. Homi Bhabha, “Beyond Photography,” *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII*, p. 9.
15. Umberto Eco, “Introduction,” in *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 9.
16. Eco, “Introduction” (see note 15), p. 10.
17. Eco, “Introduction” (see note 15), chapter 6.
18. Taryn Simon, interview by Lauren Wetmore, in Daniel Baumann, Dan Byers, and Tina Kukielski, eds., *2013 Carnegie International*, exh. cat. Carnegie Museum of Art (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 2013).
19. Chapman, *Licence to Thrill* (see note 3), p. 117. Chapman also names Honor Blackman (portrayed) and Diana Rigg (refused).
20. Excerpted from a faxed response from Disney Publishing Worldwide, July 7, 2005, in *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, p. 133.
21. Taryn Simon, *Taryn Simon Photographs Secret Sites*, YouTube video, minute 1:12 onward, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKI0tb3VmfQ> (accessed June 12, 2013).

Originally published in Taryn Simon, *Birds of the West Indies*.  
Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013