**FLORAL
BORDERS:
PHYSICAL
AND SEMIOTIC
UPROOTING IN
TARYN SIMON'S
PAPERWORK
AND THE WILL
OF CAPITAL**

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An exposé of the “stagecraft” and performance of politics, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* (2015) (fig. 1) sees American artist Taryn Simon recreate the floral arrangements displayed at thirty-six political treatise signings involving countries present at the 1944 United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference, which responded to economic globalization, establishing the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.¹ This essay will outline Simon’s articulation of capitalism as the root of ontological and ecological collapse: the subsuming of flowers into an economic sign system and Simon’s representation of that practice jointly disclose a symptom of the issue, an analogy for cognate issues, and a complex of indices to historical antecedents.

Sifting through documentary photographs of political meetings, Simon was struck by the recurring motif of the bouquet centrepiece; calling upon a botanist to identify the floral species involved (fig. 2), Simon acquired the requisite flowers, (re)assembled the bouquets, and photographed them against abstract backgrounds—unidentifiable as specific sites—that draw on the colours of the meetings as represented in the source images.²

Simon’s brilliantly-hued photographs are framed in mahogany, quoting a specific aesthetic of a romanticised Western socioeconomic power founded on colonialism and the slave trade: indeed, the first imbrication of this particular wood with the trade involved the use of felled trees to replace the captive humans as ballast on ships.³ This is but one of the ways in which *Paperwork* articulates the anti-ecological decontextualization of humans and plants as they are subsumed and recirculated as goods in a system of capitalism; the physical dislocation, Simon emphasises, is inextricable from an ‘uprooting’ of ontological meaning.

On the subject of early- to mid-17th century Dutch flower painting (concurrent to the origins of Dutch involvement with the Atlantic slave trade⁴), Norman Bryson states that “flower paintings exist in economic space”—amongst other examples, he suggests that flowers are symbolic of cash, and that the time and skill required for flower painting is such that the genre can only “flourish” when the demand allows artists to expect proportionate compensation.⁵ The flower pieces’ popularity prefigures a succession of other such objects invested with sign value, suggesting their fundamental value as such; eventually outmoded, the paintings’ decorative replacements included silk wallpaper, gilded leather, and faience tiles.⁶ Uniquely deriving monetary value from the contemporary monetary value of their subject matter and representing “a kind of gilt-edged security” for investment,⁷ Dutch flower paintings evidence the anticipated fixed monetary value of flowers as well as thus—crucially—the flowers’ fixed denotation of their cash value.

That period and region hosted the rise of modern capitalism, the first multinational corporation, and the first modern stock exchange⁸, imbricating globalism, colonialism and capitalism with the shifting instability of signification and value. Alongside the re-articulation of plants’ ontological status as significations of cash value, Bryson also notes that Dutch flower paintings depicted solely flowers that require horticultural labour. Where wild flowers can signify the “generosity of nature,” Dutch flower paintings communicate “the power of technique (first of horticulture, then of painting) to outstrip the natural world.” The paintings’ customary disregard for seasonal blooming cycles extends this premise: presenting flowers of different regional origins and blooming seasons in implausible proximity and synchronous bloom, the ‘impossible bouquet’ communicates not nature’s abundance but its glory when controlled by a human with economic power. The genre is, indeed, inextricable from its context of burgeoning capitalism and global trade, not only because flowers were central to the Netherlands’ economic ‘golden age’ but also because the variety of floral species depicted was enabled by the wealth required to constitute botanical gardens and the Dutch-led intensification of the global flower trade. Thus the ‘impossible bouquet’ becomes the symbol par excellence of time-space compression as caused by capitalism, while also referencing the subjugation of nature to human will.

In citing the Dutch Golden Age impossible bouquet as *Paperwork*’s historical precursor,⁹ Simon sets the cash-led movement of flowers in relation to the contents of the featured political treatises: the forced, cash-led movement of people, the reclassification of humans as goods, and the prioritization of economic benefit over the imbricated concerns of human lives and environmental sustainability. For example, Libya and the US settle on compensatory payments for terrorist attacks, calculating the value of a human life in USD; St. Kitts & Nevis’s “Citizenship by Investment Program,” meanwhile, offers a family of four, for USD 596,000, citizenships that allow the circumvention of travel restrictions without requiring any actual residence in the Caribbean island. Cuba and Venezuela settle the exchange of oil for service workers, who are forced to live under strict police surveillance to deter their defection from Venezuela;¹⁰ in 2014, Australia avoids accepting refugees by paying Cambodia AUD 40 million to settle them instead.¹¹ Evident in these examples is the prioritisation of the economically convenient and profitable at the expense of human lives; further, human mobility is impelled or hampered based on, essentially, whichever is more profitable for the economic force—i.e., the wealthier party—involved. Indeed, while flowers from East Africa travel comparatively comfortably by airplane to their affluent European destinations, people seeking to leave the same area must “traverse deserts by truck and even by foot” and “board unstable boats for risky crossings of the Mediterranean, knowing full well that thousands who came before them died on the same journey.”¹² Thus people and plants become traded goods, made discrete and divested from their ‘natural’ state of participation within an ecosystem to circulate instead in a new ecosystem, capitalism. While other goods might similarly crystallise the flow of trade, the crash of the Dutch tulip market is the ubiquitous example of a ‘financial bubble’—its ‘bursting’ anticipated but nevertheless unavoidable—allowing the global flower market to uniquely signal our desire and limited ability to understand and control the economic forces that govern us.¹³ Such a conception of the economy complements the idea of the economy as the ‘new ecosystem’ into which plants and humans are relocated, in relation to our incomprehension of atmospheric forces and the nonhuman environment alongside our unceasing drive to

explore, understand, and explain them.

Indeed, the flower market additionally represents the environmental degradation that occurs as corollary to capitalism. Noa Bronstein identifies the market as a paradox of environmental degradation in the name of an ostensible appreciation of the natural; the multi-million dollar flower export markets of Kenya and Colombia, for example, co-produce hazardous working conditions and environmental destruction through their reliance on toxic chemicals and pesticides.¹⁴ The product, the bouquet, is generally perceived in its Western, European-dominant destination without this fact of its violent origins; decontextualized, it suppresses its decontextualization by way of artful arrangement—emphasised firstly in Simon’s lush bouquets, neatly arranged and showing no signs of decay, and rehearsed in her polished, symmetrical, and colour-coordinated photographs; the installation’s minimalist aesthetic (fig. 3); and the bookwork’s repetitive imaging (representing the photographs as stacked on the flower presses) (fig. 4), highlighting the artificial, forced order imposed on the plants. The construction is underlined by deconstructing the bouquets into sheets of pressed specimens (fig. 5), highlighting also the plants’ retention of aesthetic capacity in death, and thus the inconsequence of their natural life and ecological function when deployed in a human sign system.

Reformulated into a symbol of wealth, the bouquet points also to the suppressed correlation between environmental degradation and the ‘will’ of the privileged in a capitalist system (the sort of suppression that might lead us to term an era, vaguely, the ‘Anthropocene’¹⁵). Appropriately, many of the featured treaties involve ecologically damaging practices, ranging from diamond mining to large-scale petroleum exports and natural gas contracts to the preponderance of deals addressing unbridled nuclear development.¹⁶

The subjugation of human lives and environmental sustainability to economic benefit is communicated in Paperwork, then, by way of ontologically rearticulating humans and plants in terms of capital, and we can take one featured conference in particular as representative of the concern of ‘losing meaning’ by way of movement impelled by economic and colonial forces. The 2015 Cairo Communiqué (fig. 6) challenged the Declaration on the Value and Importance of Universal Museums, which claims that cultural artifacts, regardless of origin, become the rightful cultural property of the states of the museums that house them,¹⁷ thus articulating a specific belief in the validity of recirculating artifacts into a new system of meaning and of physical decontextualization for the purpose of cultural capital.

Stolen cultural objects have been aptly described as “déraciné—derooted,” converted by way of relocation from subject into object.¹⁸ Central are the ideas of legibility derived from metaphysical connectivity to a site, and the maintenance of that original meaning as contingent on physical connectivity to that site. Regarding Simon’s 2010 *Contraband* series,¹⁹ Hans Ulrich Obrist articulates a linked premise in classifying vehicles of transportation and sites defined by their transience of use (e.g., airports) as examples of Marc Augé’s “non-places”;²⁰ Richard Sennett describes the development of capitalism, a system founded on exchange and upwards mobility, as resulting in humans developing new anxieties about being and belonging, becoming “bodies now restless yet alone.”²¹ Identity, meaning, and stability are acquired by way of fixed relation to a site, then, and, significantly, Doreen Massey discusses this regarding time-space compression, stating that a human need for—again, aptly—“rootedness,” for connectivity to place, is not a response to time-space compression; far from being “reactionary,” it is a fundamental aspect of inhabiting the earth.²² So, much like economic and colonial powers have historically marshaled plants from all over the globe, they also impel a movement of goods that purports to recirculate artifacts into a new cultural system, problematized by the resultant loss of meaning. Humans, too, are forced to relocate when conflated with capital or goods; alternately, when wielding the economic power, they are often forced to be mobile, unattached, placeless (as per Sennett; recall, e.g., the *Citizenship-By-Investment*). The equivalency between loss of place and loss of meaning is, fundamentally, the erosion of a natural or livable state of existence, both for humans and for the nonhuman.

Dislocations of meaning are further articulated in *Paperwork*’s various textual elements, charting the obfuscating quality of language when engaged as the sole method of comprehending our environments. Michel Serres’s suggestion that, in Western society, “the essentials [of our lives] take place indoors and in words, never again outdoors with things”²³ offers a constructive approach; as compilations of words, created indoors to regulate the comparatively out-of-doors and largely off-site, we can understand Simon’s integral treatises as engagements with ‘the world’ as reduced to data, to words. This is clearly paralleled by the deployment of the bouquet and its constituent flowers as nature reconceived as (i.e., reduced to) cash or capital, and further emphasised by the text panels, encased behind small glass windows in the mahogany frames, identifying the bouquets’ subjects. Lists itemize by letter the constituent flora, stating their common and scientific names and place of origin, foregrounding word-based classification and the conversion of nature into data. The lingua franca quality of scientific names aims for the global universality of a Linnaean ordering system; common name differs across languages and localities²⁴ but appears here in English, the prime linguistic representation of colonialism and globalisation; and an alphabetised list takes the alphabet as a non-arbitrary sequence and ordering principle, suggesting the crucial role of language and words in mediating our perceptions of our surroundings. Listing place of origin expresses the frequently disparate origins of the assembled plants, while characterising the place of origin as ontologically integral and, now, far removed. Indeed, by way of situating the bouquets in abstract backgrounds—itsself creating a sort of new indexical cipher—Simon communicates the disorienting placelessness (paralleled, here, by loss of life) that follows physical and ontological deracination.

Simon takes the Victorian culture of flower collection as another historical precursor, citing George Sinclair’s nineteenth century horticultural study containing dried grass specimens.²⁵ The concrete flower presses (see fig. 1, fig. 7), which constitute the sculptural element of *Paperwork*, engage that central method of Victorian botanical study. Simon photographed each of the thirty-six bouquets twelve times and attached the prints to herbarium paper (conventionally used for the archival preservation of plant specimens) alongside text explaining the bouquet’s related political treatise (see fig. 5). Further, samples taken from each of a bouquet’s species were dried, pressed, and sewn to twelve sheets of that same variety of herbarium paper and also stacked on the concrete press.²⁶

To understand how this rehearses the theme of economic power, we might consider William Withering’s 1818 publication *An Arrangement of British Plants: According to the Latest Improvements of the British System: With an Easy Introduction to the Study of Botany*, which popularized the Linnaean “artificial system of plant identification” by offering its English translation.²⁷ Thus combining the physical and verbal re-“arrangement” of plants alongside an Anglocentric semiotic, this guidebook aimed to familiarise us (on human terms) with our environment, while neglecting to extend this same prerogative for belonging to the plants it catalogued, advocating for their deracination to assemble a herbarium. If the inspired Victorian were unable to locate a “workman” to construct an iron flower press, they might instead press their specimens between the pages of a “large folio book, laying other books upon it to give the necessary pressure,”²⁸ in a coincidental analogue to a plant’s conversion into human-oriented commodity by way of its being physically subsumed into ‘paperwork,’ language, the verbal. The requisite materials for gathering and preserving specimens, further, are no trifle; the ‘capital’ of the business of flower pressing, their quantity and cost require the would-be phytologist to be of comfortable socioeconomic standing.²⁹ Evidently, Simon here references one chapter in the longstanding tradition of nature manipulation and decontextualization as the domain of those with economic power and, indeed, with deleterious environmental effects: contemporaneous publications lament the decreased biodiversity and disappearance of nature caused by collecting practices.³⁰

Returning to our first historical precursor, we should note that Dutch Golden Age flower painting does not constitute a precise analogue to today’s impossible bouquet: while flower painter Jan van Huysum famously tended to spend two years on single works in order to paint their multi-seasonal constituents from life,³¹ Simon’s photographs record flowers that she first physically assembled. The ‘impossibility’ of Dutch Golden Age flower painting subverts spatial constraints in actuality but temporal constraints on the canvas alone; Simon, meanwhile, can overcome both, articulating the intensification of time-space compression and the power and possibility engendered by wealth. Indeed, in requiring the delivery of over 4000 flowers

from North Holland's Aalsmeer, the world's largest flower auction and centre of the floral trade³², Paperwork effectively constitutes large-scale support for the environmentally-damaging and anti-ecological global flower trade; further, when Simon articulates the divestment of flora from participation in its natural ecosystem in favour of deployment as a symbol within an anthropocentric semiotic system, as a symbol of wealth, she also deploys nature as not-nature-but-cipher, mobilising the bouquet as an multifaceted analogy for the international political treaty, for its participants, for humans reconceived as goods with cash value. In thus remaining entirely complicit within the system she critiques (i.e., contemporary capitalism, but also, for example, Victorian collection and classification), Simon articulates the inescapability of participating in capitalism and its decontextualization of nature. In turn, in so doing, she also poses a fundamental question about the role of non-ameliorative artistic practice. In an age when we seem to have severed irreparably the bond between entity and meaning, between truth and fiction, what does Paperwork accomplish?

Quite apart from most other forms of art, ecological art, in thematizing an urgent, global crisis, renders it difficult to avoid desiring results: not only do conceptions of art's absolute autonomy seem a thing of the past, but 'making people think' seems an insufficient hermeneutic. In this sense—inasmuch as satisfying delineations of the 'efficacy' of ecological art desperately seek quantitative statements—a concrete solution to this question is largely beyond the scope of this paper. Perhaps, however, there is one uniquely significant idea to be drawn from Paperwork. In centring text, semiotics, language, writing, and human systems of organization—indeed, paperwork—Simon refuses to reiterate the double bind of ecocriticism and neoliberalism, where the former's call for the 'de-centring of humans' tends to intersect too neatly with the latter's alienation and loss of agency (frequently, this manifests in eco art as a sort of 'new sublime'). As articulated by Naomi Klein, neoliberalism "has isolated us enough from one another that it became possible to convince us that we are not just incapable of self-preservation but fundamentally not worth saving."³³ Instead of shocking us with the vastness of environmental crisis, Simon chooses to disclose the human ontological network that propagates it; instead of attempting once more to show us something frequently defined as exceeding the limits of our comprehension, Simon locates the issue specifically at the level of our comprehension. This is not so much a "solution," of course, as it is a clearer lens: culture must cease to subjugate nature, but it should do so without ceasing to exist.

- 1 Taryn Simon, "Paperwork and the Will of Capital, 2015," Taryn Simon, <http://tarynsimon.com/works/pwc/#1>.
- 2 Simon, "Paperwork."
- 3 Charles Dickens wrote that the varnished wood reflected "in the depth of its grain, through all its polish, the hue of the wretched slaves." Christy Anderson, "Architecture of the Slave Trade," Lecture, Baroque Architecture and Urbanism (University of Toronto, Toronto, ON), October 2, 2018.
For exact quote, see also Eve M. Kahn, "Beyond the Luster of Mahogany," *The New York Times*, August 23, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/24/arts/design/mahogany-history-in-slavery-in-the-caribbean.html>.
- 4 Louis P. Nelson, "Architectures of West African Enslavement," *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 21, no. 1 (2014): 88-125, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/550678>, 97.
- 5 Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 108.
- 6 Sam Segal, "Les fleurs dans la peinture aux Pays-Bas: de Jan Brueghel à Vincent Van Gogh," *La peinture florale du XVIe au XXe siècle*, ed. Hans Devisscher and Siska Beele (Brussels: Crédit Communal, 1996), exhibition catalogue, 8.
- 7 Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 116.
- 8 Claire Grace, "Taryn Simon: Paperwork and the Will of Capital," *College Art Association Reviews*, 26 October 2016, <http://caareviews.org/reviews/2917#.XFUK1S0ZPYI>.
- 9 Taryn Simon, "Paperwork and the Will of Capital, 2015," Taryn Simon, <http://tarynsimon.com/works/pwc/#1>.
- 10 Simon, *Paperwork*, 58.
- 11 Simon, *Paperwork*, 102.
- 12 Nicholas Kulish, "Dying before blooming," *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2016), 23; see also Simon, *Paperwork*, 90.
- 13 Kulish, "Dying before blooming," 23.
- 14 Noa Bronstein, "(Im)possible Bouquets," *esse arts + opinions* no. 86 (2016), 48.
- 15 I.e., obscuring the link between (a) environmentally-degrading resource extraction, production practices, and waste production and (b) capitalism's inherent need for incessant economic growth and emphasis on consumerism obfuscates the fact that not all humans are equally implicated in producing—and resisting the prevention of—climate crisis.
- 16 Taryn Simon, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2016), 32–102.
- 17 Simon, *Paperwork*, 82.
- 18 Robin Scher, "Back to Where They Once Belonged: Proponents of Repatriation of African Artworks Take Issue with the Past—and Present and Future," *ARTnews*, June 26, 2018, <http://www.artnews.com/2018/06/26/back-belonged-proponents-repatriation-african-artworks-take-issue-past-present-future/>.
- 19 For *Contraband*, Simon spent a week at New York's JFK airport and "continuously photographed items detained or seized from passengers and express mail entering the United States from abroad." The resulting work involves 1,075 photographs.
- 20 Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Ever Airport," *Contraband* (Gottingham and New York: Steidl and Gagosian Gallery, 2010, first edition) http://tarynsimon.com/essays-videos/docs/Ever%20Airport_Hans%20Ulrich%20Obrist.pdf, 1.
- 21 Richard Sennett, "Moving Bodies: Harvey's Revolution," *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 256.
- 22 Doreen Massey, "A Global Sense of Place," *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- 23 Mark A. Cheetham, *Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature Since the '60s* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 147.
- 24 "Scientific and Common Plant Names," *Plant Management in Florida Waters: An Integrated Approach*. Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants, University of Florida,

- <https://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/manage/research-and-outreach/educators/scientific-and-common-plant-names/>
- 25 Taryn Simon, "Paperwork and the Will of Capital, 2015," Taryn Simon, <http://tarynsimon.com/works/pwc/#1>.
 - 26 Simon, "Paperwork."
 - 27 Maria Zytaruk, *Nature on the Page: The Print and Manuscript Culture of Victorian Natural History* (Toronto: Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, 2019), exhibition catalogue, 11.
 - 28 Zytaruk, *Nature on the Page*, 11-12.
 - 29 Zytaruk, *Nature on the Page*, 14.
 - 30 Maria Zytaruk, *Nature on the Page: The Print and Manuscript Culture of Victorian Natural History* (Toronto: Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, 2019), object panel.
 - 31 Sam Segal, Jan van Huysum, Mariël Ellens, and Joris Dik. *The Temptations of Flora: Jan Van Huysum, 1682-1749* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2007), 28.
 - 32 Taryn Simon, "Paperwork and the Will of Capital, 2015," Taryn Simon, <http://tarynsimon.com/works/pwc/#1>.
 - 33 Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2014), 62.