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INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 1 / 2021

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FROM FACTS TO NARRATIVES  
IN THE PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKS  
OF TARYN SIMON  
AND THOMAS DEMAND**

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# BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: FROM FACTS TO NARRATIVES IN THE PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKS OF TARYN SIMON AND THOMAS DEMAND

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## Abstract

Photography, after reaching a sophisticated conceptual development in the last decades, is probably one of the most powerful art forms nowadays, and omnipresent in a hyper-narrative society; in this context, new discursive concerns are emerging. This study discusses artistic works made by Taryn Simon and Thomas Demand to examine how art photography questions the “documentary” quality of the medium in new ways. Blurring the boundaries between reportage, conceptualism and portraiture, Simon’s projects often deal with issues of power: *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007) makes visible matters that are usually concealed from the public audience, showing inaccessible or unknown places that are inherent to America’s foundation, mythology and daily functioning. Demand’s recreations of apparently mundane scenes explore the frictions between opacity and intelligibility, fiction and veracity. Both Simon and Demand take as subjects the media-based narratives and perceptions of reality, remarking the potential of photography as a vehicle of consciousness.

## Keywords

Photography, Thomas Demand, Taryn Simon, Unfamiliar Sites, Media-based Narratives

## 1. Introduction

Photography is present in almost every aspect of our daily life and visual culture. Photographs were given a considerable amount of authority, since they supposedly tell us how the world is and what is important in it. David Campany explains how conceptual art photography involved a certain modernist “auto-critique”: “...Photography is inherently representational, inherently descriptive... Within conceptualism photography reflected on itself not by looking inward to define a special or essential character but by looking outward to reflect on how mass culture understood photography, how it puts its descriptive character to use in everyday life.”<sup>1</sup>

However, in the last decades, the photograph as an authoritative document has been largely examined, while postmodern practices have increasingly exploited its use as fiction and artifice. The supposedly indexical relationship between photography and its referent can be a form of fiction or narrative. Joan Fontcuberta affirms that “contrary to what history has instilled in us, photography belongs to the realm of fiction much more than that of evidence. *Fictio* is the

participle of  *fingere* , which means “to invent”. Photography is also pure invention. All photography. Without exception.”<sup>2</sup>

An inherent trait of current photographic practices is that there is often an inclination to understand reality as something visual which in turn obscures the visibility of ongoing processes. Working with photographic images allows artists to credibly reveal (and therefore criticize) the artifice of constructions and media-based narratives, directing the attention beyond the subject itself. Photography is an elastic, hybrid medium, that can thus function as a construct, as a simulation, a substitution and, ultimately, as a proposition.

In the background of a contemporary society dominated by hyper-narrativity or storytelling<sup>3</sup>, and the consequent excess of discursive narratives, art critic and curator Paco Barragán<sup>4</sup> proposes the concept of “credibility” as filter for those narratives. “Credibility, as this intangible quality, represents the condition-scale or filter when it comes to verifying the coherence of its narratives. The interrelationship between visual arts, politics and media allows us to frame the narrative power of society through its symbols, texts and images when manufacturing credible stories, even if they’re not necessarily true.”

The narrative is a form of manipulation which tends to fix a meaning according to a determined interest, frequently that of institutions of power. And this kind of manipulation demands a non-active spectator. Current practices assume that documentary will not be objective, since it will somehow involve a fiction, an opinion. Here the question arises as to what extent is there veracity or transparency in what is narrated to us as such? Facts are often more problematic than what we can see, than how they are presented. Also, Barragán notes, at present we are experiencing “complex relationships between a culture that is basically affirmative” and a visual arts that, while responding to the need of compromise with the society it takes part in, has generated critical and credible discourses that have been able to influence not only culture but also the sphere of that which is political.”<sup>5</sup> We agree with the necessity of a more emancipated, participative culture that promotes critical thinking, where photography can play a fundamental role as a critical and analytical medium.

This study aims to reflect, from the analysis of the works by artists Thomas Demand and Taryn Simon, on how photography explores complex or disturbing facts of our recent and present history, examining prevailing narratives in which image-based images play a key role. Using photography in a way that opens up new questions about the documentary and narrative capacity of the medium, Demand and Simon address themes that depart from but complement those from recent art history such as conceptual art, postmodernism, relation between image and text, the “constructed” image, and the political image. Their sophisticated artworks push beyond

conventional thinking and make critique of the unconscious of the archive, of its partiality, its inconsistencies and exclusions.

The analysis of works presented in this research intends to be a vehicle for shedding light on the complicated relationship between facts and narratives, addressing issues of freedom and security, individuals and the state, and exploring rich concepts and themes that include secrecy and disclosure, violence, power, surveillance, territory, and the visible versus the hidden.

## **2. Thomas Demand: The stories behind reconstructed empty spaces**

Thomas Demand makes large-scale color photographs of life-size paper models that recreate actual places, based on images he obtains from different sources, including the media and internet. Basically, As Roxana Marcoci<sup>6</sup> explains, Demand starts with an image, frequently from a photograph obtained from the media, newspapers or the internet, which the artist later translates into a three-dimensional life-size paper model. Once the model is ready, it is photographed with a large-format camera with telescopic lens to obtain the highest resolution and appearance of reality. After this, the model is destroyed, leaving us only with Demand's staged image. Then, the photograph is printed at a large scale and laminated with Plexiglas, displayed without a frame, which enhances the feeling of a new reality completely apart from the objects depicted in it.

Thomas Demand's painstaking work really developed out of sculpture. His signature procedure always begins with an archive photograph; his work is based on pre-existing images from the media, often of sites of political or cultural interest. These spaces related to exceptionally charged scenes of political or cultural importance are appropriated from mass media. As Ralph Rugoff notes, the images "re-present existing information, rather than depict it."<sup>7</sup> Demand's appropriation of media imagery evokes a sense of familiarity. The viewer cannot identify the specific memory, but the images suggest locations we think we know. On many occasions, these apparently banal sites are linked to specific events of a disturbing nature, including some associated with crime and extreme violence.

In his images, Demand leaves small signs of the imperfection in the reconstruction, with subtle details such as tears or gaps in the paper as a way of signaling to the viewer that this is not a fully convincing reconstruction of a site. Sometimes we can see joins, the fit of a paper surface. His almost *trompe l'oeil* approach never attempts an absolute verisimilitude. As François Quintin explains,

When you look at an image by Demand, everything seems uniform, regular, but traces of their making can still be seen in certain areas. Each detail gives warning: what you see is not what is shown. This fragile construction of cut and folded paper reveals its imperfections. "I don't cut paper on purpose so that you can see how it was cut [Demand has

said]. But it is true that at every stage I can choose whether or not to leave these visible flaws. Over time I developed a more acute sense of this kind of subtlety. That, maybe, is the perfection my efforts are directed at.<sup>8</sup>

The idea that photographs are indexical is crucial to Barthes's arguments in *Camera Lucida*. This notion is true in Demand's photographs; the images are indexical to their paper models. However, the models are mediatised simulacra. According to Baudrillard, contemporary society is dependent on models, symbols, and signs; we have replaced all reality with a simulation of reality.<sup>9</sup> Baudrillard suggests that contemporary society no longer has the capacity to distinguish between what is real and what is artificial. The simulacrum omits the distinction between reality and its artificial representation.

Demand's scenes (typically devoid of people) may have a banal, dull appearance, but they recreate places that hold a key role in frequently controversial narratives. These photographs often repeat the scheme of what we could call *the scene of a crime*, since they frequently depict places of special historical or political significance, or sites where crucial events took place, even if we never witnessed them.

Every image serves as a replica of something rather transposed or translated without human touch.<sup>10</sup> These psychologically charged spaces induce feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and isolation. They lead the viewer to question what act or event they might be intruding upon or a witnessing. In his book *The Architectural Uncanny*, Vidler discusses Freud's concept of the "unhomely". Freud's concept refers to an instance where an environment or feeling is familiar yet foreign at the same time.<sup>11</sup>

When standing before one of Demand's photographs, the viewer goes through a two-stage response to them: A first stage in which the image seems unexceptional, cold and abstract, and a second moment in which the viewer perceives there is something missing or wrong and starts to detect that the scene is not but a reconstruction of a place. At first glance, images appear ahistorical, tricking the viewer into thinking that their appearance is merely aesthetic.<sup>12</sup> According to François Quintin, as soon as the viewer discovers Demand's photographs are re-creations of actual places, they encounter a "psychological strangeness."<sup>13</sup> This strangeness in Demand's images is also reinforced by a lack of information there should be in the elements of the images: ballots with no writing or marks in them, boxes and bottles with no labels. No signs of use or wear -no coffee stains, no dirt, and of course, no human presence at all. In "Thomas Demand: Phototrophy", Rugoff notes this noticeable absence of signs of use. Demand omits graphics, such as the text on a piece of paper, logos on household items, or numbers on the buttons of a phone.<sup>14</sup>

Demand provokes the viewer to become a voyeur.<sup>15</sup> The minimalist aesthetic in the images makes it difficult for the viewer to experience any kind of empathetic projection. The viewer, thus, is emotionally and imaginatively apart. Something was there, and something that was linked to this place, to these objects, to this title, to the story hidden behind the surface of things, but nothing in the image seems to vibrate. The artist explains:

I'm sitting in the very same media world as you are, and I realise that there are places that we all know but have never set foot in. And I feel that it's a lot better to stay in these places and reinterpret what's there than to invent new things. It's a kind of privatisation of the public world of images instead of just going along with creating more and more new images that compete with each other [...]<sup>16</sup>

Regarding Demand's work, Charlotte Cotton affirms:

It makes for hyperconscious stance, as we look for narrative form despite the in-built warning signs that this is staged, therefore unreal, place. The closeness with which we as viewers are placed to the scenes and the large scale of the works makes us less and audience looking into an empty stage and more investigators of how little of a physical subject, and how much of the photographic approach, we need in order to start the process of imagining meaning and narrative.<sup>17</sup>

Thomas Demand has typically addressed contemporary events of recent history of Germany. In *Room* (1994), Demand replicates a photograph of Hitler's bunker at Rastenburg, East Prussia, after the failed bomb attempt on his life in 1944. A mundane sight turns out to be the coded representation of a political incident. Another photograph with Nazi associations is *Archive* (1995). The picture refers to Leni Riefenstahl's film archive; Riefenstahl was the maker of *Triumph of the Will*, the famous propaganda film about the Nazi's Party rally in Nuremberg in 1934. Getting back to another historical time, *Office* (1996) recreates the East Berlin headquarters of the Stasi secret police: A room with crumpled papers all over, based on images of Stasi offices following the collapse of East Germany in 1989.

With a forensic style, *Bathroom (Beau Rivage)* (1997) recreates a photograph of a bathtub in a hotel where Uwe Barschel, a well-known German politician was found dead in mysterious circumstances in an apparent election scandal in 1987. Scenes like these invite the viewer to try to discover through the details of the image the key to solve what happened. The narrow point of view, square bath tiles, and angled composition of Demand's photograph replicate those of the original photograph seen on the cover of *Stern* magazine.<sup>18</sup>

In *Tavern* (2006), a series of 5 photographs depicts five corners in a bar in the German village of Burbach, where in 2001 a boy was kidnapped and eventually killed. The story, extensively covered in the media, appalled the German public. Apparently, everything in the image is clean, walls lit with sun. There are no signs of any crime here, but since we are aware that something horrible happened, the smallest details suddenly acquire an enormous metaphorical weight.

Parallel to his attention to events happened in his own country, Demand has also turned his artistic gaze to relevant events and secret stories happened in America. In his photograph of 1996 titled *Corner*, Demand recreates the dormitory room where Bill Gates created his first computer operating system. Made in the same year, *Room* depicts the hotel room in which L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology, wrote *Dianetics*. Two apparently banal stances in which two still unknown people would work in creations that would become game-changers worldwide.

A more sinister image, *Corridor* (1996), depicts a hallway that leads to the apartment that belonged to American serial killer, Jeffrey Dahmer (1960–1994). The hallway appears pristine, without any clue that would allow identification. The viewer may imagine something lurking within the image as the ceiling lights highlight one door, that of Dahmer's apartment.

For *Poll* (2001), Demand reproduced images of the Palm Beach County Emergency Operation Center, where the recount for the 2000 United States presidential election took place: A manual recount of around 425000 ballots would (legitimately) determine whether Al Gore or George W. Bush would be president of the United States. Images like *Poll* have, by virtue of its omnipresence in the media, crystalized in public imagination. The laborious process of manually recounting thousands of votes is echoed by Demand's meticulous reconstruction of the scene in paper. In relation to this work, Demand explains:

If images like the ones I use in "Poll" can be traced to ones transmitted by the media—that is, to a context with its own set of meanings—then the work will naturally have entirely different connotations, which, in turn, have to be conceived of differently. But what one might be justified in calling a dehistoricized effect is perhaps related to the influence that digital image production and distribution on the Net have had on our conception of reality.<sup>19</sup>

Besides his photographs, some film works by Thomas Demand also fit the same narrative pattern. *Tunnel* (1999) explores the passage through a model of the tunnel resembling the one in Paris where Princess Diana died in 1997. In the words of Michela Parkin:

*Tunnel* is intended to evoke the idea or the memory of such a journey, rather than to simulate the experience of any actual event. It is closer in feeling to the images that form in the mind while dreaming, or when thinking about what it might be like to travel

through an underpass, for instance. The audience is taken on a succession of endlessly repeated drive-throughs of a strangely familiar yet unidentified place, an archetypal, entirely non-specific tunnel. It could be any tunnel. One does not need to have been there to feel that one knows it well. Some might be reminded of a fateful night in Paris, but Demand is careful not to limit readings of the work by linking it to any one interpretation or event. The absence of any characters, obvious narrative, or action, invites the viewer to engage in a process of speculation and personal identification with the work.<sup>20</sup>

Demand is fascinated by the nature of perception and the way in which media-generated images structure our experience of the world, to the point where they become more real than reality itself. The deliberately vague titles of his photographs (*Office, Room, Tunnel...*) and the absence of human figures or obvious narrative let the audience enter the image as if they entered an empty stage or filmset, projecting their own stories. The viewer is encouraged to decipher the significance of the space and the human acts or story that might have taken place there, looking for a narrative.

In his essay “Interpreting the Void: Architecture and Spatial Anxiety”, Vidler suggests that “...all space has a history, or even many histories,” if it is correlated with economic, political, and social forces.<sup>21</sup> Demand’s sculptures and photographs attempt to recapture the plainness or innocuousness of historically violent spaces; the artist achieves a basic, incorrupt first impression of a content-charged space.

As much as Demand copies and reproduces the world, he also describes it. And description is rarely neutral, even when everything is described in an extremely plain and uninflected way. These images have an unequivocally emotional flatness, somehow equivalent to the prose of a police report. And perhaps there resides the disturbing.

### **3. Taryn Simon: America’s hidden sites and forbidden objects**

Conceptual artist Taryn Simon has already become one of the leading visual anthropologists of American culture. In terms of her creative intentions and conceptual approach, Simon is at the vanguard of a relatively new kind of photography that evades simple categorization and often blurs the boundaries between reportage, conceptualism and portraiture. Simon moves between documentary photography and fine art practice, bringing the real world and politics into galleries and museums.

Just like Thomas Demand’s, Taryn Simon’s images involve painstaking creative processes, leading to projects that end up being incredibly laborious. Taryn Simon’s photographic work is characterized by its complexity and ambition and has always shown a powerful critical and political approach. Interestingly, most of Simon’s work process is not exactly photographic; it

involves researching, searching for people, places and data, collecting information, obtaining permission to access her subjects, analyzing. She is meticulous, to the point of being obsessive, in her preparation and research. The act of taking photographs is only a very small part of the process.

Simon's photographs do not have the aesthetic of reportage we are more used to, with the appearance of the "real": hand-held camera, grainy film, casual framing of the scene... Instead, her images are carefully lit, hyper-realist, presented in high definition that put an extreme focus in the places and things that are kept hidden from the society. Simon's main concern is with the hidden or overlooked, as evinced by two of her books, *The Innocents* (2003) and the acclaimed *An American Index of the Hidden and the Unfamiliar* (2007).

*An American Index of the Hidden and the Unfamiliar* is series of 70 photographs made over five years, in the midst of a national identity crisis post 9/11, of some of America's hidden objects and sites: a nuclear storage facility, the interior of the CIA headquarters, an avian quarantine facility and a cryopreservation unit where bodies are frozen just after death, among others. On the one side, the book is a collection of curiosities—including an image of a Braille edition of Playboy, a hibernating bear, an inbred white tiger and a stacks of sexual assault kits awaiting DNA analysis. But it is also an elliptical portrait of America at a crucial and anxious moment in its history.

*An American Index* delves deep into a secret vision of America in images that are distant and threatening at the same time. "Over a five-year period following September 11, when the American media and government were seeking unknown sites beyond its borders, most notably weapons of mass destruction," Simon said of the project, "I chose to look inward at that which was integral to America's foundation, mythology, and daily functioning. I wanted to confront the boundaries of the citizen, self-imposed and real. And confront the divide between privileged and public access to knowledge."<sup>22</sup>

Getting access to certain subjects takes time, effort, and commitment. Also, patience, tenacity and strong diplomatic skills are needed to access some organizations not known for their openness, such as the Church of Scientology, the Ku Klux Klan and the Prisoner of War Interrogation Resistance Programme run by Team Delta, a private body run by former US military personnel. Ironically, one of the few organizations that denied her access was Disney, whose spokesperson sent her a fax that read: "Especially during these violent times, I personally believe that the magical spell cast on guests that visit our theme parks is particularly important to protect, and helps to provide them with an important fantasy they can escape to."<sup>23</sup>

According to the introductory essay on the book *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, Simon "assumes the role of a shrewd informant while invoking the spirit of a collector of curiosities, culling from the diverse domains of science, government, medicine,

entertainment, nature, security, and religion. One commonality persists in her chosen subjects: each remain relatively unknown or out-of-view to a wider public audience. These are the hidden and unfamiliar.”<sup>24</sup> The project works, indeed, as an inventory of elusive, hidden and otherwise controlled spaces within the United States. Examining sites from within the fields of government, defence, science, industry and religion, Simon blurs the divide between those with the privilege of access and those without, reflecting on both the workings and mythologies of America in the process.

As Aaron Schuman states, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* “is so far, the twenty-first century’s finest response to a longstanding tradition within American photography, described by Robert Frank in his own 1954 Guggenheim application as, ‘The making of a broad, voluminous picture record of things American, past and present... *American Index* presents a resolutely more obscure collection of curiosities, but just as accurately reflects the United States at a very particular point in its history... Whereas earlier photographers sought to define America through that which was common – ‘elevating the casual, the everyday and the literal into specific, permanent symbols’– Simon chooses to symbolize the country’s current incarnation precisely through that which is official, exceptional and freakishly extraordinary.”<sup>25</sup>

Paradoxically, while the title states that the body of the project is an index, Simon’s images are not mere documents. According to Jung Joon Lee, Simon “challenges the indexical value of her photographs by suppressing events or narratives in them, letting them unfold when the photographs are joined by the text. These texts are products of year-long investigations and studies of her objects. Most of the seventeen images on view lack the events that we often look for in photographs, such as events or drama; some are very abstract, even uncanny. Yet the texts reveal intensely complex issues selected by the artist such as a physician-assisted suicide and nuclear waste storage.”<sup>26</sup> Each image is accompanied by a brief text written by the artist, that precisely explains what is seen and why it is hidden or off-limits. After reading these combinations of text and image, the viewer is allowed to grasp what is at stake in these images, abstract and uncanny. Taryn Simon explores photography’s intertextuality through the use of literary documentation as an extension of the photographic image, enhancing its documentary value.

In the introduction to the book, Salman Rushdie wrote: “Ours is an age of secrets. Above, beneath and beside what Fernand Braudel called the ‘structures of everyday life’ are other structures that are anything but everyday, lives about which we may have heard something but of which we have almost certainly seen nothing, as well as other lives about which we have never heard, and yet others in whose existence it is hard to believe even when we are shown the pictorial evidence.”<sup>27</sup>

Simon's projects are complex and multilayered, but also direct and engaging. They are often focused on issues of power, mainly American power, at a historical moment when governance and power structures are destabilizing and changing. In her later work *Contraband* (2010) continues to explore faces of the post-9/11 America and cast light on the global networks that are hidden just out of sight.

*Contraband* consists of a book with 1075 photographs of items confiscated by US customs and the US postal service international mail facility at John F Kennedy international airport, New York, during a week in 2009. The seized items include various drugs (Xanax, anabolic steroids, Ritalin, ketamine, hashish), counterfeit jewelry, bags, DVDs and watches as well as several kinds of plants, seeds, grass, and foodstuffs. Among the more extravagant confiscated substances are deer antlers, deer blood, deer penis and deer tongue, as well as cow-dung toothpaste. Simon photographs these cleverly concealed packages, often carefully arranging them in symmetrical compositions that are strangely pleasing to the eye.

*Contraband* is an inventory of the illegal and the prohibited. But it's also a comment on the ingenuity, both of those attempting to bring banned goods into America and of those who try and prevent the illegal traffic of goods across international borders. *Contraband*, in both its style and content, shares similarities with another inventory-style book made in another airport: Christien Meindertsma's *Checked Baggage* (2004), a record of the 3264 prohibited items seized at Schiphol, Amsterdam, in a single week<sup>28</sup>. This project was made in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in New York, when increased airport security meant that many ordinary items carried by passengers – nail scissors, corkscrews, tweezers, lighters, hairspray, toy guns – were suddenly viewed as dangerous objects, as potential weapons that could be used in a mid-flight terrorist attack. Meindertsma categorized and photographed all of the 3264 prohibited objects on a white seamless background as if for a sales catalog.

Hans Ulrich Obrist, curator and art historian, draws clear connections between *Contraband* and Simon's previous works<sup>29</sup>, like *The Innocents* (2002), where "Simon investigates photography's function as a credible eyewitness and arbiter of justice" or *An American Index*, "which, like *Contraband*, is an almost anthropological view of America, as told through its material life, its secret history of things. She confronts the divide between public and expert access through an investigation of that which is little known but at the very foundation of America's mythology and daily functioning".

Combining the visual and the textual powerfully, Simon's work is sophisticated in terms of contemporary art practice but also tightly connected to the real world and its narratives. Taryn Simon's commitment with the present is undeniable. Salman Rushdie states:

In a historical period in which many people are making such great efforts to conceal the truth from the mass of the people, an artist like Taryn Simon is an invaluable counterforce. Democracy needs visibility, accountability, light... Somehow, Simon has persuaded a good few denizens of hidden worlds not to scurry for shelter when the light is switched on, as cockroaches and vampires do, but to pose proudly for her invading lens [...]<sup>30</sup>

Both *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* and *Contraband* say much about contemporary America. Although they force us to confront the darker side of democratic society, they also convey the fascination that attends the exploration of forbidden territories, objects and realities.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this study, we have explored how the photographic work of Thomas Demand and Taryn Simon is much concerned with the authority and power of images, what is revealed and what is not shown. The direction of their interrogation into truth takes as its subject the media-based perceptions and representations of reality. Narrativity as an essential and key theme in recent years, both in art and photography, will be one the negotiating points for the image of today and of the future.

Both Thomas Demand and Taryn Simon develop complex relations with the photographic medium and its power as document, or index. They raise new questions through photographs that are paradoxically indexical and that challenge media-based narratives. Their works ensure that photography becomes a vehicle of consciousness as much as a form of testimony to seeing anew.

In some way, Thomas Demand's photographs are about the meanings we ascribe to things, what we know and what we project. Demand's photographs of contemporary events work as images that appear to be at once realistic, yet also strangely anonymous, abstract, and vacant, producing an uncanny and anxious combination of the alien and familiar. As viewers, we are invited to virtually enter those empty stances where crucial or terrible things once happened, places we did not know that existed, and that we could only know through the media.

A desire to uncover unknowns, understand their purpose, and display their impressive - in many different ways- appearance motivates a great part of Taryn Simon's work. She makes use of the annotated-photograph's capacity to engage and inform the public and transforms that which is off-limits or under-the-radar into a visible and intelligible form, confronting the divide between the privileged access of the few and the limited access of the public.<sup>31</sup>

Visual storytelling always requires positioning, sometimes ethical positioning. There must be a responsibility in the way the media and photographs are used and arranged, a commitment in the ways of targeting ideologies, and also of working with poetic capacity. When constructing visual narratives, questions about what to tell, which stories are more authentic than others, and which narratives should be generated become relevant. Neither Thomas

Demand nor Taryn Simon's projects are preeminently critical, or at least do not have any political agenda. Rather, they share a strong commitment to the facts and challenge the narratives in an attempt to open other ways of thinking and acting.

Perhaps today more than ever, we should ask ourselves if a picture is worth a thousand words. Paradoxically, photography is capable of revealing, with its apparent objectivity, a radically non-objective word. Within this context, it might be asked if the photographic narrative can bring us closer to the "real" world or if, on the contrary, the image is what keeps us at a distance. In short, photographs like the ones analyzed in this study might function as a question about reality and its position with respect to us.

When we look behind the curtain, we may realize that what we have come to rely on, the institutions that are supposed to guarantee our security, the people in charge of important issues, the actual places in which decisions are made, are actually crumbling. Seeing the reality of things is not going to solve the inner problems, but at least it may create further awareness and help understanding the complexities of contemporary society. Thomas Demand and Taryn Simon invite an interrogation about the "truth" of representation. Thanks to their photographic projects, we are presented a way of accessing to these sites and facts that we were not supposed to know. All these things that happen behind closed doors.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Company, *Art and Photography* (New York/London: Phaidon, 2003), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Fontcuberta, *El beso de Judas. Fotografía y verdad* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili), 1997, 167.

<sup>3</sup> Paco Barragán defines the contemporary narrativity or storytelling as a hyper-narrativity that has literally infected all fields of society, from the state bureaucracy to the economy to mass media and politics. See Barragán, Paco, "Narrativity as Discourse, Credibility as Condition: Art, Politics and Media Today". PhD diss., Universidad de Salamanca, 2020. <https://gredos.usal.es/handle/10366/145323>

<sup>4</sup> Paco Barragán, "Narrativity as Discourse, Credibility as Condition: Art, Politics and Media Today". PhD diss., Universidad de Salamanca, 2020, p. 430. <https://gredos.usal.es/handle/10366/145323>

<sup>5</sup> Paco Barragán, 429.

<sup>6</sup> Roxana Marcoci, "Paper Moon", in *Thomas Demand*, exh. Cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), pp. 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Kluge, "A Conversation Between Alexander Kluge and Thomas Demand," in *Thomas Demand at the Serpentine Gallery, 2006* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2006), 7.

<sup>8</sup> François Quintin, "There is No Innocent Room," in *Thomas Demand*, exh. cat. (Paris, London, and New York: Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain and Thames & Hudson, 2000), 52.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Horne, "Thomas Demand: Catastrophic Space," *Parachute* 96 (October/December 1999): pp. 21-24.

<sup>11</sup> See Freud, Sigmund, David McLintock, and Hugh Haughton. *The uncanny* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003). See also Anthony Vidler, "Unhomely Houses," in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 23.

<sup>12</sup> Ulrich Baer, "End of a World: On Thomas Demand's Photography," in *Thomas Demand: L'Ésprit D'Escalier*. Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2007, 87.

<sup>13</sup> Quintin, "There is No Innocent Room," 53.

<sup>14</sup> Ruggoff, "Introduction," 6.

<sup>15</sup> Katya Tylevich, "Hide and Seek," *Mark* 25 (April/May 2010), 159.

<sup>16</sup> See Morris, Robert "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1" in *idem, Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1993), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*. (London/New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), pp. 73-74.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander Kluge, "A Conversation Between Alexander Kluge and Thomas Demand," in *Thomas Demand at the Serpentine Gallery, 2006* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2006), 19.

<sup>19</sup> Yilmaz Dziewior, "100 Words: Thomas Demand". *Artforum* vol. 39, n° 9. (May 2001).

- <sup>20</sup> Michela Parkin, “Art Now. Thomas Demand. Online exhibition guide, Tate Britain, London 1999. <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/art-now-thomas-demand> (accessed March, 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021).
- <sup>21</sup> Anthony Vidler, “Interpreting the Void: Architecture and Spatial Anxiety”, *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Concepts in Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 292.
- <sup>22</sup> Taryn Simon, “Photographs of Secret Sites”. Filmed July 2009 in Oxford, UK. TED video, 17:09. [https://www.ted.com/talks/taryn\\_simon\\_photographs\\_of\\_secret\\_sites?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/taryn_simon_photographs_of_secret_sites?language=en)
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- <sup>24</sup> Elisabeth Sussman & Tina Kukielski, Introduction from *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*. [http://taryn-simon.com/essays-videos/docs/Introduction%20from%20An%20American%20Index%20of%20the%20Hidden%20and%20Unfamiliar\\_Elisabeth%20Sussman%20%26%20Tina%20Kukielski.pdf](http://taryn-simon.com/essays-videos/docs/Introduction%20from%20An%20American%20Index%20of%20the%20Hidden%20and%20Unfamiliar_Elisabeth%20Sussman%20%26%20Tina%20Kukielski.pdf)
- <sup>25</sup> Aaron Schuman, “American Surfaces: Taryn Simon’s *An American Index of the Hidden and the Unfamiliar*”, *Spot*, Houston Center of Photography (2007). <https://aaronshuman.com/tarynsimon.html>
- <sup>26</sup> Jung Joon Lee. “Photography’s Intertextuality.” *Afterimage* 35, no. 1 (2007), 28.
- <sup>27</sup> Salman Rushdie, Foreword from *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*. Taryn Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*. Exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art. (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007), 8-9.
- <sup>28</sup> Christien Meindertsma, *Checked Baggage: 3264 prohibited items* (Eindhoven, Netherlands: Soeps Uitgeverij, 2004).
- <sup>29</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Ever Airport: Notes On Taryn Simon’s *Contraband*” (2010). [http://tarynsimon.com/essays-videos/docs/Ever%20Airport\\_Hans%20Ulrich%20Obrist.pdf](http://tarynsimon.com/essays-videos/docs/Ever%20Airport_Hans%20Ulrich%20Obrist.pdf). Originally published in Taryn Simon, *Contraband*. Göttingen: Steidl/New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2010.
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