

1. Taryn Simon, Press IV, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, 2015. Pigmented concrete press, dried plant specimens, archival inkjet prints, text on herbarium paper, and steel brace, 11.1 x 56.4 x 78.1cm
2. Taryn Simon, Agreement Establishing the International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation. Al-Bayan Palace, Kuwait City, Kuwait, May 30, 2006, Press III, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, 2015. Pigmented concrete press, dried plant specimens, archival inkjet prints, text on herbarium paper, and steel brace, 11.1 x 56.4 x 78.1cm
3. Installation view, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, 56th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale, 2015
4. Taryn Simon, Memorandum of Understanding between the Royal Government of Cambodia and the Government of Australia Relating to the Settlement of Refugees in Cambodia. Ministry of Interior, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, September 26, 2014, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, 2015. Archival inkjet print and text on herbarium paper in mahogany frame, 215.9 x 186.1cm
5. Taryn Simon, Protocol Decision on the Principles of Resumption of a Full-Scale Freight Railway Communication through the Territory of Pridnestrovie. Tiraspol, Transnistria, March 30, 2012, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, 2015. Archival inkjet print and text on herbarium paper in mahogany frame, 215.9 x 186.1cm
6. Taryn Simon, Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement. Caracas, Venezuela, October 30, 2000, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, 2015. Archival inkjet print and text on herbarium paper in mahogany frame, 215.9 x 186.1cm

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SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

Kate Fowle

At first glance, Taryn Simon's latest body of work bears little relationship to its title, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*. It consists of thirty-six large-scale photographs of flower arrangements in heavy wooden frames, and twelve sculptures, each comprising two concrete columns supporting two identical concrete blocks, on which lie loose stacks of herbarium paper with pressed flowers sewn onto them. One of these concrete sculptures is presented as a single column with one block on top of the other, sandwiching the stack of herbarium paper. This demonstrates that each sculpture's weighty materiality ultimately has a function—it operates as a flower press.

A closer look at the works reveals that they do, in fact, include aspects of the “paperwork” alluded to in the title, in terms of both the administration of information and the bureaucracy that the word implies. Also visible on eleven of the sculptures are pages with texts and small photographs of flower arrangements, conveying information that is at once available and partially obscured. Cut into the right-hand edge of each framed photograph is a small niche displaying a text in a font size that demands close scrutiny—in contradistinction to the larger-than-life images, which require distance in order to be taken in. In effect, “paperwork” here is less a primary subject than a countermeasure to the monumental images and forms.

Dedicated observers of Simon's research-oriented practice may assume that the production of large-scale single images and material objects is not among her primary concerns. She is first and foremost a storyteller of facts, a chronicler of truths that are hard to believe. Through her dexterous juxtapositions, realities appear as fictions or imaginative narrations, but in her elaboration of them it becomes clear that they would be hard to invent.

Simon uses image and text to display enormous quantities of evidence systematically, layering accounts of real-world phenomena to which she ascribes no fixed outcome or punch line. Her sources are often as labyrinthine as the processes of research and production on which she embarks to make a story manifest. Take *Contraband* (2010), for example, for which she spent a week working day and night at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport, in the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Federal Inspection Site and the U.S. Postal Service International Mail Facility. During that time she photographed 1,075 items that had been seized from passengers or detected in express mail entering the United States from abroad. The result is a series of photographs that present sequences of objects against a pale gray background. Like specimens under a microscope, they are visual testimony to an experiment revealing an alternative view of global commerce, immigration, and desire.

1. Taryn Simon, Folder: Handshaking, *The Picture Collection*, 2013. Archival inkjet print, 119.4 x 157.5cm
2. In the manner of Abraham Storck, *The Island of Onrust near Batavia (Jakarta)*, 1699, oil on canvas, 77 x 110cm
3. Coin minted in 1735 by the Dutch East India Company
4. Pieter Schenk the Elder, view of the East India warehouse and shipyard in Amsterdam, c. 1675–1711, etching on paper, 16.8 x 20.3cm, printer unknown
5. Rachel Ruysch, *Bouquet*, 1706, oil on canvas, 100 x 81cm

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For *The Picture Collection* (2013), Simon produced large-scale photographs, each containing numerous images selected from the vast holdings of the Picture Collection at the New York Public Library. The collection serves as a space where images that are historically inscribed and validated exist beside those that are not. This flattening of hierarchies positions generic advertising pictures next to photographs by Weegee or Steichen, and a Rauschenberg or Malevich reproduction next to a travel postcard or an anonymous artist's work. The Picture Collection's content and categories follow a crude algorithm, reactive to the happenstance of image donations over time, the interests of librarians, and the specific requests of library users. Works such as *Abandoned Buildings and Towns*, *Cats*, *Rear Views*, and *Financial Panics*, to name a few, reflect the oddly heterogeneous categorizations that order the 1.29 million prints, postcards, posters, and magazine pages. Simon suggests that such processes of image gathering have an inbuilt and improbable futurity—the advent of Google image search alone is testimony to this.

Paperwork and the Will of Capital is no less speculative in its narrative, but its form is expressly sculptural, with each component of its presentation immediately apparent as a statement in relation to the subjects that Simon weaves together. The framed photographs and the sculptures become characters rather than messengers, assuming the guise of traditional art forms and museum displays from different periods and genres. On the one hand, the photographs and minimalist sculptures speak the language of the contemporary white cube; on the other, their visual relationship to still-life painting and natural history specimens evokes early encyclopedic museums. Placed in proximity, these contrasting signifiers make it difficult to discern just what kind of chronicle is unfolding. At the same time, the bold, sumptuous flower arrangements—assured in their monolithic presence—and their counterparts, the fragile flower samples and their empirical documentation, possess an irreducible visual language that seduces the viewer without provoking an immediate need for further explanation. Momentarily, they *are* the story.

The photographs, in particular, create their own hermetic world. Each floral arrangement is presented against a backdrop of two colors that are sometimes complementary, sometimes contrasting. In a few images this produces surreal results, with the flowers, crisp and clear in their detail yet virtually devoid of shadow, seeming to float over the two planes of flat color. One work shows a spherical arrangement of layered carnations—red on the top, white at the bottom—in a stout glass vase against a rust-brown foreground and sky-blue background. Although the images are portrait in

orientation, the proportions of foreground to background suggest landscapes. Most lack any sense of depth or perspective in the choice of color pairings. Some are rendered in black and white. Some shout Pop art or Op art; others are more classical or sedate. The sensation of the tonal range is artificial, as opposed to naturalistic, even though the flowers themselves are clearly real.

There's one photograph that looks like a display from an amateur flower show—one that didn't get a prize. Another is like a sad wedding-table decoration. Some announce "office," while others speak to domesticity, kitsch, or exoticism. Still others give off an "avant-garde" vibe, looming in the picture plane, chaotic, flamboyant, or abstract. *Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement. Caracas, Venezuela, October 30, 2000* looks like "contemporary art": It portrays an asymmetrical, spiky parlor palm in a black pot, set against a divided gray-blue and cream backdrop. One unifying characteristic is that, to varying degrees, all of these works bear a likeness to seventeenth-century Dutch still-life flower painting. They all share the same proportion of foreground to background, saturation of color, and lack of any locational detail, but for no apparent reason other than to achieve visual cohesiveness.

This is as far as observational detective work can get a viewer before Simon's inclusion of text adds to the plot. In her introduction to the series, she writes that each arrangement represents an "impossible bouquet." This is a concept that emerged in Dutch still-life painting, wherein the floral arrangement represents a fantasy, depicting flowers that could never have been seen together—ones that bloom in different seasons and geographic locations, for example—in a single vase.

What Simon doesn't write about explicitly, but hints at, is the connections between still-life painting and the "will of capital," which coalesce in Dutch history during the economic boom of the seventeenth century, marking the beginnings of modern capitalism. With the advent of a middle class—created through commerce—came disposable income and an increased demand for products that could display status, such as art. As demand for portraits outstripped possible supply, still-life paintings became a new symbol of wealth. The rise of the genre mirrored the growing prosperity of the Dutch Republic, which is regarded as the world's first modern consumer society, with the Dutch East India Company its first multinational corporation. Even more directly, the "impossible bouquet" was made conceptually possible through the expanding network of Dutch colonies and trading posts that brought exotic specimens to markets in the Netherlands. (The legendary "tulip mania" of

1. Building a bouquet (Treaty Establishing the United System of Regional Payment Compensation. Cochabamba, Bolivia, October 16, 2009). Taryn Simon Studio, New York City, 2015
2. Preparation of flowers imported to New York from Aalsmeer Flower Auction in the Netherlands. Taryn Simon Studio, New York City, 2015
3. Pieter Holsteyn the Younger, *A Tulip: Semper Augustus*, c. 1614–1673, watercolor and gouache over chalk, 30.1 x 20.8cm
4. *Proceedings and Documents of the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference, Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, July 1–22, 1944, Vol. 1* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1948)
5. Source image with botanist's identifications, Memorandum of Understanding between the Royal Government of Cambodia and the Government of Australia Relating to the Settlement of Refugees in Cambodia. Ministry of Interior, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, September 26, 2014

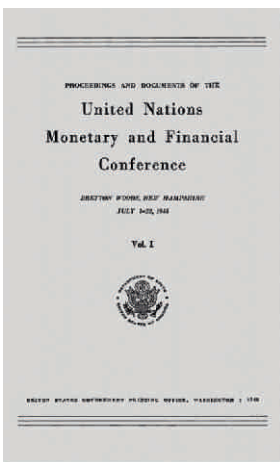
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1636–37, sparked by the importation of these flowers from Turkey, caused the world's first speculative market bubble.) As a consequence of expanded trade, artists could study wider varieties of flora and portray them in opulent compositions, allowing their paintings to reflect and amplify the bounty that was becoming increasingly prevalent among the prosperous.

While Simon writes that her photographs reference “impossible bouquets,” her own flower arrangements are real. Through modern flower cultivation and transportation, blooms are no longer limited to their natural seasons and locales. The flowers in Simon's reconstructed arrangements were sourced from Aalsmeer in the Netherlands, the world's largest flower auction and epicenter of the world's modern flower trade—where consumers can purchase virtually any flower at any time of year. More than 4,000 flowers and plants were shipped from Aalsmeer to Simon's New York studio, underscoring how the physical hurdles of space and time that gave rise to the staged still-life painting of nearly four centuries ago work quite differently when it comes to the contemporary photographic equivalent. However, the issue of *what* to stage remains, which returns us to the question of why Simon's images appear as they do.

Clues to this reside in the texts embedded in the frames encasing her photographs. Each starts with the pronouncement of a treaty or agreement signed at a given place and date, followed by a list of attendees, details of the negotiation, and a suggestion as to the economic, social, and political conditions that triggered the creation of the document (the “paperwork”). For example, the text for *Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement. Caracas, Venezuela, October 30, 2000* explains that presidents Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez signed an agreement establishing an “oil for services” trade whereby Venezuela would ship 53,000 barrels of oil per day (bpd) to Cuba in exchange for technical assistance, mostly in the form of human capital, in the fields of agriculture, medicine, sports, education, and transportation. Over the following years, Venezuelan oil exports to Cuba rose to 90,000 bpd, while Cuban medical personnel in Venezuela increased to 30,000. Cuba started re-exporting up to 50 percent of the oil (reportedly making more than USD 2 million a day), and the U.S. Embassy in Caracas processed thousands of applications from Cubans seeking political asylum. Beneath this description is printed one additional line: “*Chamaedorea elegans*, Parlor Palm, Mexico”—the name of the plant visible in the photograph.

Simon's introductory text states that the flower arrangements—which she calls the “silent witnesses”—were found in archival photographs that provide the historical record of contracts, treaties, and

decrees drafted to influence systems of governance and economics. Each of her bouquets represents the ceremony surrounding such agreements—what she describes as the “stagecraft of power.” She isolates and exaggerates the decor of these signings by using colors present in the source images to inform the foreground and background colors of each of her works. The treaties and contracts she selected all involve countries that were present at the 1944 United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, which established the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, two institutions instrumental to the formation of present-day global capitalism.

The pointed contrasts between the scale of image, object, and text slow the process of understanding the layers of information present in Simon's works. Each flower arrangement's looming presence in the framed works makes manifest the intricacies involved in the stagecrafting of power. The innocuous arrangements take on menacing or chameleonic undertones as one tries to imagine what the small text in the recess of each frame will reveal of their pedigrees.

Take *Memorandum of Understanding between the Royal Government of Cambodia and the Government of Australia Relating to the Settlement of Refugees in Cambodia. Ministry of Interior, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, September 26, 2014*, an image that suggests exotic holidays in far-flung lands, with its emerald-green and gold decor and its busy arrangement of yellow, pink, and red blooms. The text accompanying this image states that as a result of this agreement, Australia gave Cambodia AUD 40 million in aid in exchange for the permanent settlement of refugees and asylum seekers who had previously been detained in an Australian offshore-processing center. This caused international concern, not only because of Cambodia's notorious record on human rights and Australia's apparent exploitation of one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia but also the fact that this agreement could set a precedent for developed nations to leverage their economic advantage and offload their refugee responsibilities.

The list at the end of this text cites four plant species in the arrangement, including “Anthurium” from the Netherlands, orchids from Venezuela and Thailand, and a rose from Kenya: a dream combination for any seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painter, created to mark the signing of an agreement that produced anything but a holiday for the refugees it affected.

The archival source image that Simon used for this particular photograph shows two bespectacled men leaning on a shiny gold tablecloth to sign papers partially obscured by an elaborate flower

1. Aalsmeer Flower Auction, 2011
2. Aalsmeer Flower Auction, 2009
3. Taryn Simon, Nuclear cooperation agreement. Baghdad, Iraq, December 2, 1974, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, 2015
4. Taryn Simon, Bratislava Declaration. Bratislava, Slovakia, August 3, 1968, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, 2015
5. Taryn Simon, Classified "Spare Parts" deal. Oval Office, White House, Washington, D.C., United States, May 16, 1975, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, 2015
6. Taryn Simon, Agreement on Non-Aggression and Good Neighbourliness between the Government of the People's Republic of Mozambique and the Government of the Republic of South Africa. Komatipoort, South Africa, March 16, 1984, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, 2015

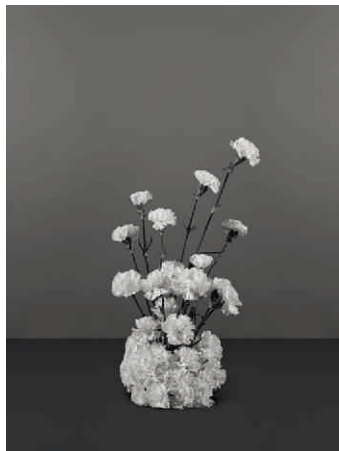
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arrangement that has small Australian and Cambodian flags sticking out of it. A row of officials, their faces displaying a combination of boredom and entitlement, stand close behind them, in front of a green wall that bears the name of the agreement. This is a photograph in which pomp and circumstance mask what is, in effect, the administration of an insidious contract already in play.

Marked onto Simon's scanned reference image are lines emanating from the bouquet, with the letters A, B, C, and D: notes made by a specialist from the New York Botanical Garden who identified the specific components of each arrangement. This research—which used thirty-six source images depicting the signing of various agreements—informed the choice of species and color of flowers that were shipped from the Netherlands for each shoot, as well as providing the list of flowers at the end of each text.

After the bouquets were arranged and photographed, Simon selected one stem of each species of flower to dry and press for the sculptures. But first, each arrangement was recreated and photographed twelve times. In all, Simon produced and photographed 432 flower arrangements in order that each small archival ink-jet print presented alongside the corresponding sheet of pressed flowers would be unique. In this way, each of the twelve sculptures is original and tells its own slightly different version of the story of its contents. Taken together, these sculptures demonstrate the variables and mutations in the representation of history. Purposely hiding as much as they reveal, the works underscore the specificity of the individual—the precise and obsessive hand of the artist—butting up against the abstraction of power.

Neither Simon's methodology nor her source images are visible in the final works. Instead, selective levels of information, visual distillation, and aesthetic judgment indicate that her practice is much more than the sum of its various sources, procedures, and inspirations. Given that her production is informed by visual elements from the stagecraft of economic deal making, the recreated flower arrangements themselves become a form of restaging, or visual interpretation, of history. In her focus on a flower arrangement in a room, Simon makes evident both the fragility of the negotiations themselves and the tenuousness of any resulting agreement's endurance beyond the documented historical moment.

Through the scale of the project, and the repercussions of each signing alluded to in the textual accounts, Simon provides a sense of the quantity and complexity of such international agreements. Through the installation itself—the pressed flowers that will continue to fade as they are displayed, and the notes she provides that

testify to their human and economic impact over time—she also suggests that their consequences are still unfolding.

As with any good story, there are many detours and details in *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* that create nuances in Simon's plot and how her characters can be understood. In addition to oil deals and refugee settlements, the range of accords represented here address the global diamond trade, unionization, the establishment of the European Union, covert military actions, nuclear cooperation and armament, international property rights, and the re-creation of a nation's postal system, among others. Their combined scope far exceeds what could have been imagined as the legacy of the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference, which created a regulatory framework for international monetary and financial relations and facilitated global flows of capital. In another twist, while the agreements selected include interactions between the "allied" countries from all five continents that were present at Bretton Woods, the time frame of the treaties starts later, in 1968, which is the year in which the Aalsmeer Flower Auction—and with it, the modern global flower market—was established. This was the moment when it became possible to physically realize the "impossible bouquet."

There are four black-and-white photographs in Simon's framed series, corresponding to the four source photographs that were also without color. The juxtaposition of these photographs with their pressed flowers—fading, like all the others, but still possessing some color—points toward the gap between ephemeral events and the visual evidence that remains to tell the story. This incongruity is further emphasized in the listing of plant species at the bottom of each framed text, which are sometimes followed by the word "prohibited." The plants marked prohibited are flora that cannot be imported into the United States, for medical, botanical, or political reasons. Although they could not be present in Simon's arrangements, they are recorded in the texts because the botanist was able to identify them in the source images; their inclusion in the text reminds us that the image presented does not give the complete picture. Moreover, the textual accompaniment is only an informed approximation of the particulars, which were never fully recorded. Even with all the paperwork and will of capital in the world, rendering events and their origins visible makes fictions of facts. In turn, the resultant "truths"—in this case Simon's body of work—harbor their own stories.

While there are many other discernible nuances of meaning and concept in the form and visual content of *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, as a postscript it seems fitting to tell one of the stories that

1, 2. George Sinclair, *Hortus gramineus woburnensis: or, An account of the results of experiments on the produce and nutritive qualities of different grasses, and other plants, used as the food of the more valuable domestic animals: instituted by John Duke of Bedford* (London: B. M'Millan, 1816)

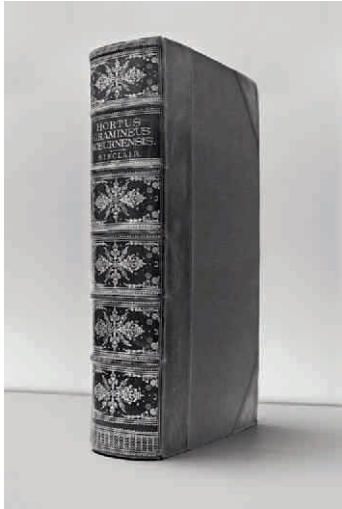
3. Richard Simon, Siamerican Securities Ltd. Bangkok, Thailand, 1970

4. Richard Simon, Soi On-Nut Housing Project under construction. Bangkok, Thailand, 1968

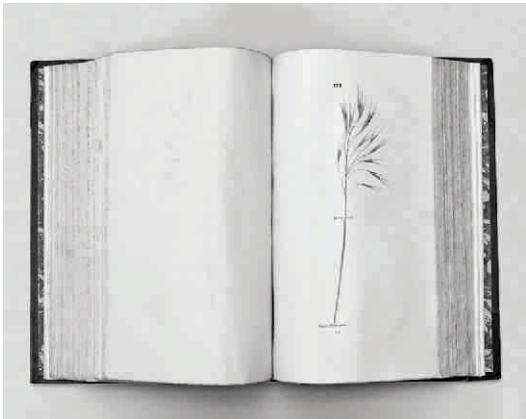
5. Floral collar from Tutankhamun's embalming cache, New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, reign of Tutankhamun, c. 1336–1327 BC

6. The Munich Conference. Munich, Germany, September 1938. Italian prime minister Benito Mussolini, German Reich chancellor Adolf Hitler, German Foreign Ministry chief translator Dr. Paul Schmidt, and British prime minister Neville Chamberlain

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could never be deduced from the work itself, but which testifies to the project's resonance. In a recent conversation with Simon, she explained to me that her interest in creating this series started when she found a book written by horticulturalist George Sinclair, *Hortus gramineus woburnensis: or, An account of the results of experiments on the produce and nutritive qualities of different grasses, and other plants, used as the food of the more valuable domestic animals*. First published in 1816, Sinclair's book is a record of what is now sometimes regarded as the first ecological experiment, conducted to compare the performance of different species of grasses and herbs in various types of soil.

Instituted by the Duke of Bedford, for whom Sinclair worked as a gardener at Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire, England, the research was overseen by the chemist Sir Humphry Davy with the goal of maximizing the nutritional value of animal fodder and thus the productivity of the duke's estate. In his advocacy for the book Davy writes: "The soil offers inexhaustible resources, which when properly approached and employed must increase our wealth, our population, and our physical strength. Discoveries made in the cultivation of the earth are not merely of the time and country in which they are developed, but they may be considered as extending to future ages, and as ultimately tending to benefit the whole human race." This esoteric book helped lead to renown for Sinclair, who became regarded as one of the modern benefactors of agriculture. The extent of his influence was little known until 2002, when new archival research published in the journal *Science* reported that an unattributed botanical experiment described by Darwin in *The Origin of Species* (1859) was actually the work Sinclair had conducted and written about in his *Hortus gramineus woburnensis*.

Reports of this discovery first brought Sinclair's book to Simon's attention as she was conducting research for another project, but what left its mark was seeing a first edition of Sinclair's book. Between the pages of this massive volume are dried specimens of the grasses Sinclair used in his studies, nearly 200 years ago. It was the durability of these specimens that triggered Simon's desire to use plants in a work as both subject and object, cause and effect. Additionally, the grandiose statements made by Davy at the time, and by the two scientists more recently, as well as the underlying financial gain for the duke that had prompted Sinclair's research, influenced the direction that Simon would take in the development of this work and its relation to capitalist agreements in the name of international progress or world peace.

After deciding to work with pressed flowers, she thought at first that her project would focus on her father, whose job had been to

create opportunities for capitalism in places where communism dominated. While he was establishing the first stock exchange and mortgage system in Thailand during the Vietnam War, he also pursued his passion for photography by making images, many of which included flowers. In the end, several years later, this avenue of inquiry failed to yield the outcomes Simon envisaged for the piece. Nor did her fascination with an image that she found of Hitler, sitting around a table with other world leaders, flanking a bouquet. But they remain ghost references in the work, as does her interest in how the flowers buried with ancient Egyptian pharaohs are almost as perfect in their preserved form today as they were when first entombed.

In her final work, Simon's specimens are pressed against photographs that depict their original color and form. The press enacts a competition, and seals the record of the real (a photograph and a text) along with the real itself (dried flower specimens), in what Simon refers to as a "race against time." While there is material evidence of nature's survival in the tombs of pharaohs, what will become of machine-made documentation or even comprehension of the English language? How long will these conventions endure? The flowers that Simon cites were at one time silent witnesses to treaties that have since mutated and dispersed. Similarly, her sculptures confront preservation and disappearance while challenging the idea that the evolution of people and planet can be controlled through the strategic planning represented in the contracts, treaties, and decrees that are the subject of the work.

In writing this response to *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, I keep returning in my mind to the phrase "survival of the fittest." Presenting real pressed flowers was primary to Simon's artistic motivation, before any specific political or social context entered in. Amid all the leads she explored and the directions in which each could have taken her, this visual outcome remained paramount. She eventually chose to create a series of photographs from scratch, rather than documenting existing ephemera or subjects. As a result, she created forty-eight works that are at once referential and unique. Together they manifest Darwin's theory, which describes how those forms that leave the greatest number of variants of themselves in successive generations are the ones that will ultimately survive. The result incites the viewer to embark on a process of investigation and discovery that follows the one Simon herself undertook. But we have the advantage of her vision as a guide.