Editor's note

This interview-based video was produced in 2003 and premiered in 2006 at Orchard in an exhibition of the same name, where it screened every half hour during the gallery's public hours. Simon's camera captures Vero Saverino throughout the film in close-up. She is seated on a couch and against a readymade backdrop from her parents' home, a wall of wood-paneling. The transcription of the video's sound, Severino's interview for Simon's camera, shows Simon's technique of giving a primary grammar to the film and yet still getting out of the way of his human subject material.

Vera 2003

Jason Simon

Vera[1] smiles and rubs her nose: I'm having a yard sale in two weeks.

Q: Yeah, I want the details of it.

Vera: Okay. [*Laughing*] tons of clothing will be spread out in addition to all the other junk. But tons of brand new and gently worn clothing will be—my girlfriend said to me—"No"—because I said, I'll fold them up, I'll hang them. And she's like, "No, you get a big sheet and you throw it on and they rummage through." Apparently that's the trick. People feel like they are getting their "thing" if they rummage through.

Q: But don't you have real expensive stuff?

---

[1] For the tape, Simon interviews Vera Saverino, who sits highly focused before a stationary camera and readily, fluently, as if writing a short story, generates a self-narrative. Simon would later call his work an "assisted self-portrait."

Vera: Yeah, and I have to be prepared to sell it for about $1.50.

Q: Why, why do you have to sell it for that? I mean, I know people make so much money on EBay.

Vera: Yeah. There are certain things that, as I'm clearing out, I will—like watches and things like that, that I plan to put on EBay, but it's time consuming, it feels like a chore—but I will.

Because at this point it's just trying to like find space in the house and as I'm preparing to move out I don't want to have to do it then. I want to just kind of—it's just too much stuff. It becomes overwhelming and it becomes unnecessary.

And it's just, you go through this process of cleaning out and then you say, "Okay, now I really would wear this, and then you come to it again three months—that, in itself, that—facing that process over and over again, is annoying and overwhelming and sometimes it just feels really silly. And so I need to clear out. So I'm kind of ready to just get rid of stuff. And there is actually—it's funny that you bring it up.

[00:01:34.04]

There's a place nearby here that is a consignment shop, so I've done that, as well. And so the more expensive stuff goes there. But even that, you make an appointment, have her go through it, you put it out for three months and then you get half of it back and then what do you do with the stuff when you get it back?

So some stuff will go on EBay, some stuff will go to the consignment shop and some will just be thrown on the lawn for $2.

Apparently people have a mentality that that's all they are willing to pay.

Q: Sure, if you're shopping at a garage sale —

Vera: I'm thinking $5 for a really nice sweater, and they just—apparently they won't hear of it. I'll try it; I'll up the price, obviously. So, you know, it will be $4, and then they'll knock it down to $2. And then they'll want it for a quarter.

Q: Do you think it's going to feel like a purging, a release, or is it going to be heartbreaking?

Vera: No, I'm past the heartbreak phase. That's interesting, because there is the struggle of not wanting to let your "stuff" go. But now, the stuff, I've let it age long enough, so that it doesn't have any—now it reminds me of, you know, just old stuff, as opposed to—I do have fur coats and things. The more expensive stuff, I have more issues parting with.

No at this point it's just kind of—save whatever money I can, salvage any kind of money from it, and then either pay the credit card or buy some new stuff. And to clear the house. To clear the space is really the major issue, because I have overrun my family's house with stuff.[2]

Q: [00:03:03.25]

Vera: There are certain things I have that I expect to pay, and I have no problem with it. With the Rolex watch, I really researched and I really paid what I wanted to pay for it, as opposed to, you know, I mean, I spent weeks roaming from jeweler to jeweler. I mean, that was—in itself that was exhausting. And I remember I took my friend—and the fact that I even wanted someone's opinion on it and all that stuff, that it seems so bizarre to sit and invest all this energy. Or just almost the fact that we're sitting here for an hour or two discussing watches. It's somewhat humiliating, you know, and I guess I could laugh at it too, but it just seems so trivial in life, but it's very much a huge reality for me, or even for you.

But with the watch, I paid what I wanted to pay and I was very lucky to do that. And I got the right jeweler who needed money. And I just happened to get lucky in a sense of finding what I wanted and paying what I want. That's how I'm comfortable now. There's certain things, a

---

[2] Simon sought Vera out after reading about Saverino in the Village Voice "Shelter" column. The Voice piece recounts how her obsessive habits shopping and accumulating items of fashion and luxury goods (and drugstore items, etc.) had overcrowded her parents Staten Island home.

luxury item that will never go on sale, if it's $700 for a bag, that's what it costs. So there's certain things I will pay.

Q: [00:04:24.03]

Vera: The key words there is self-presentation. I think it's very much about that. And not that, and again, it makes me a little uncomfortable to kind of say this, but I do believe what I'm saying and at the same time I hear myself. And it seems rather, you know, superficial. And I suppose that's my fear, is that I would be deemed superficial to hear myself say these things. And I don't really believe that I am. You know what I mean? But at the same time, sometimes you hear these things and you're like, you know, there's nothing wrong with shopping wherever it is you shop. And then there's a contradiction, you know? You shop in Kmart and you look like you shop at Kmart. And I don't know where that becomes important or not, in a sense, but I think realistically, in a society—just a silly story:

I was in Nike the other day and I was trying on a watch and I put my watch in the - I took off my watch and I said, "Can I put it in a thing," because I didn't want the sales girl to handle it and God-forbid, drop my watch. And she was just in awe of my watch. And you know, sometimes I find that bizarre, because I kind of go from one extreme to the other, and I'm like, this special care my Rolex got and she put it away and then she called her—she's like, "This is what a Rolex looks like."

And it's silly and yet at the same time, I can't be 100 percent innocent and that it's not kind of exactly what I want because I struggle, it makes me very uncomfortable too—because part of me knows that that doesn't matter, and then part of me believes it matters very much.[3]

And I think it's because we live in a society that rewards really impeccably dressed—you know, I went on two job interviews. And on one, the guy walked in and he was a fashion guy. He's like, "Where did you get that suit?" That was his hello. And it works with people. It's a reward. For me, it's for all the hard work I invest—I work very hard at investing energy and putting these things together, in a sense. And it's mostly for me, but not 100 percent for me. And you get rewarded for it. So it fuels the behavior.

Q: [00:06:18.14]

Vera: I totally disagree. In fact, yesterday my friend Rachel called me and she had seen my Louis Vuitton bag and wallet and she's like, "I really want one. I want to buy luxurious items now." And she said, "It's probably wearing off from you, whatever. Which was an interesting point, is

---

[3] Cynthia Chris included this quotation of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in her essay "Aspiring Objects: Three Videos by Jason Simon" on Simon's work: "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make." Chris, [get pub info]. See Bourdieu's Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984) in the Fraser's Sources for "May I Help You?" in this volume.

Alternately from black studies, Sylvia Wynter's writing envisions the present organization of knowledge in which we are trapped, locked into a directionality toward economic and material redemption, by identifying in the Western Euroethnic tradition an absolutism of patriarchy and capitalism, whose social unit and personhood, whose only perceivable subjecthood is homo oeconomicus "the virtuous breadwinner, the stable job holder, the tax payer, the savvy investor, the master of natural scarcity," (19), see Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2015): 9-89.

that we talked about the social associations with these things, which is clearly part of my drive. And she called me yesterday, it was her birthday and she goes, I got this Prada wallet from a friend, a Prada bag. And she's like, "Do you think I could return it because I can't pay my phone bill?" And we had this whole five minute conversation around that. And again, I'm the expert on these things. And I said, "They are only going to give you a store credit." And I said, "You should buy a wallet. She said, "I'll make you laugh. I bought a fake Louis Vuitton (thing? [00:06:59.24]) from Canal Street, and she said, "And it exploded in the store." And she said, "I didn't know whether to run or pick it up." And we just had this five minute giggle session on this.

And you know, if you—and I sound snobby and I don't mean to come off this way, God, I would be humiliated if it came off this way. But, you know what, the quality of that stuff is the quality of that stuff. And anybody who wants to buy the knockoff and—which I find fascinating, because the reason why you own it is because it's the authentic. People who—because it's not necessarily—you know, most people who buy these things don't love it. They want it for the social status. So it defies—I'm very passionate about this, as you can see—it defies the purpose of buying a fake Louis Vuitton wallet. And either passing it off as real or being proud that it's fake, I don't get that. If you are going to wear a fake Rolex, why are you wearing it? If you can't afford it, or you choose not to afford it, either way is fine. But I have a problem with that, because it's not the authentic designer. You cannot pass off the cheap wallet for the stitching and the hardware and the craftsmanship are very—not that they are not overly priced anyway. But the craftsmanship of all of these items—and again, I am passionate about this because I really

appreciate, in addition to the social status that comes with these things, the quality of these things, and they are not the same. They are not the same.

Q: [00:08:27.09]

Vera: It's when you are doing it, see, I think you become an artist of acquiring stuff and there's this great—for me, it's very much about, this is where it gets into like therapy sessions here, but it's very much about the manipulation of getting the item and this kind of, "getting over on," which is—you're right, that it's a contradiction, because in the end when you get the credit card bill or you've acquired years and years and years of debt, that clearly you're the looser in it, but it doesn't feel that way when you're doing it.

You know, if you can get—but years ago I used to do everything full price. I would think nothing of buying Gucci shoes for $700. Those days are over. Now, it's getting the Gucci shoes at an outlet for $260. And that's a huge score. So there's, as I say it, you can see my face light up.

So it's about the process of acquiring—there is a sense of—I guess getting over it, but in a sense you are right. I am getting over on myself, it doesn't make any sense. But, um, intellectually, I get that. But, emotionally, when I'm doing it, although I was telling you before, I went shopping on Sunday and I'm at a phase now, or not even a phase, because that would be temporary. I'm at a place now where I realize that it's just that my body negatively reacts to—because I see myself getting out of control.

Q: [00:09:41.04]

Vera: I recently, I'm attempting a career change, or attempting a career bridge, I should say, and I recently went out and bought one suit and then I spiraled into five suits, all $600, $700 each. And shoes and pocketbooks to match. So this is where my obsessive compulsive behavior happens. And while it's in check, maybe that doesn't sound much like it's in check, but compared to where I used to be, that's in check. And then it turns out that I am interviewing and they don't really—you know, and you make this great statement with this great suit and then you know, I was telling you that you don't even get a callback or whatever. So I'm learning that you don't—whatever, that's just straying way off the topic.

Q: [00:10:24.28]

Vera: Right. I mean, years ago, I mean, it was clearly an emotional means to cope with whatever emotional problems or whatever family problems I may have been having.

And now I think, and I think that there will always be that tendency to do that. But I also think now it's just a bad habit. It's what I do. Like you said, "It's something—it's my behavior and I own it and it's natural to me, and I do it well. And it's part of my, you know, recently I've been off from work to make the transition from the spring semester into the summer, so I have a

couple of weeks off and I just—I'm bored. So I don't do it often, but I find myself, like what else am I going to do? I do other stuff, but how many movies and friends and dinners and stuff. So it's like my private time. It's my experience, and I recently learned to go to movies by myself and I love that. A couple of years ago I learned, "Wow, I don't have to compromise where I want to sit or what I want to do." So I'm trying to replace those outings with more productive things. But I'm always drawn to, you know, I love fashion, so there is a passion here of loving, since a little girl, my dream is to be editor at Vogue one day.

So I love fashion, so there's clearly a connection beyond just obsessive behaviors or things like that. The reason why it's clothes is because fashion, to me, is art. And that's part of, you know, we didn't speak about that, but there is this—I love the process of buying something and then building the outfit into something really amazing. And kind of knowing I will have the perfect shoe, the perfect bag, and there is a reward in that. It comes at a great expensive price, but there is also that. It's very much a creative experience for me to go and see something and then put it together and the make it my own. And then hang it in my closet and it's all there.

Like I will not rest easy if I have the dress, even if I am not wearing it right now, if I don't—if I buy the dress, then I have to hunt for the shoes and the bag. So that's where I become obsessive. It's always in the back of my head ticking that I need those shoes. Or everyplace I go, I'm like, I saw that dress and those shoes. So there's this completion facet that I have to achieve. I have to get it and then have the shoes, even though I may not wear it for six more months. And that's where it gets expensive. So there's this fun process to it, too.

Q: [00:12:49.13]

Vera: I think the bargain, for me, is more about, how can I still get what I want and not create so much debt? I've learned to manipulate my habit so that I can get more for my money. I think it's built in with this idea that I'm trying to learn respect for money, the dollar value. And so if I pay $200 less for something, or whatever it is, I clearly, in the last two years or so, specifically have become very interested in discounts and—even my—and I think it's a good, see I had to find some way to exist in this craziness without being ridiculously crazy. So I really, I am now, I will not pay full price for anything anymore, including shampoo. And it's not a stingy thing, it's just, you learn to track your money and your sales and like, why would I spend $3.79 on a bottle of shampoo when CVS will clearly have it for $1.89 next week. And so—and that's part of the buying many things. Like I'll buy two or three. And then, of course, obviously, my CVS bill will be $70.00 as opposed to somebody who spends $9, but you know, my friends do it. They spend $9 every other day; they are running in and out of the stores getting stuff. They spend $7 on a bag of razors. I'm like, I just paid $1.99. I had the coupon. So there's a reward for that, for me, in that it's a way for me to track progress. It's a way for me to respect the dollar value, still get what I want, but get a lot more for my money than before, because I had clearly: buy whatever at whatever cost. And that had clearly got me into debt over and over and over. And so now I'm in debt, but I feel like it's a medium for a different kind of relationship with money and stuff. And I won't spend full price unless I absolutely need it. But that's the point; I never put myself in the

situation where I absolutely need it. And that's the struggle; do I need it and want it? And I constantly always want. And so I need to work on that still: why do I want this?

Q: [00:14:46.28]

Vera: No. I had one girlfriend who would be my shopping buddy, in a sense, and then I learned quickly to shop by myself. I can't shop with other people. I went with my friend the other day because it was a holiday and we just spent the day. But I actually find myself, and it was very weird that you bring it up, because I was so manic, I mean I would leave my pocketbook—and this was for years, I mean, people couldn't even be around me because I would really get out of control. I would, you know, see a shirt, leave my bag, go in the dressing room, you know, bizarre behaviors. And I clearly am—I become something else, something not pleasant when I was in that mode. And so over the years I learned to go by myself so I don't have to deal with any backlash. And it's just more peaceful when I go by myself.

Like I recently stopped taking even my niece, who will have to just sit in the dressing room for three hours. It's not—I can't torture people with my behaviors. And I found myself on Sunday apologizing all day long, even though I wasn't doing anything out of line.

Q: [00:15:43.13]

Vera: I don't really remember a time where I wasn't or where I haven't been shopping all the time. Now it's calmer, but I'm still doing it, now it's just matter of one day escapades as opposed to a way of life. So I'm sure I was still shopping and collecting. And I'm sure I was far worse in being obsessive about acquiring stuff.

Q: [00:16:13.22]

Vera: Both, I think. Both is two different highs. The acquiring—I think I seem to enjoy the acquiring more. But then I have a weird association with it. For years I've always—it always gave me great satisfaction to know it's in my house, that I've got it here. That I have it, and that I own it. That among my collection I have really beautiful pocketbooks, that I have a great collection of stuff. And what I've done recently in the last five or ten years is I've really just, for the most part, acquired really good stuff, and I've spent a lot of money on it. Whereas before I would just buy stuff constantly. And then, there has always been a level of upping the stakes. You know, I went from shopping at Macy's, to Nordstrom's, to Saks. Which obviously the more you up it the more the item price goes up and stuff like that. But I'm more comfortable with it now. I'm trying to learn that if I buy more, you know, quality stuff, that it will take me, that all the bags that I've spent a lot of money on are still used, as opposed to wasting money on stupid stuff.

But it's equivalent to stuff too. I mean, I acquire anything. Again, it's changed. I told you before, I had multiple cats. I have not three, four bottles of nail polish. I have 150 bottles of nail polish

and I'm always acquiring more. Now I've learned to throw out, as opposed to keeping it all for a long time.

There's a sense of hoarding, I guess. I noticed that I've also learned that from my mother, my mother does that with food. We never run out of anything in this house, and I actually like that, there's a comfort in that. When you go to people's homes and they run out of basic necessities, I don't get that. We would never run out of soap or shampoo, where you are running off to the store. So I think I've also learned that subconsciously through my mother. Like I'm very much like that with beauty products and things. I never run out of—I'd buy three mascaras and always have them.

And I like that, you know what it does? It decreases stress in your life when you have back up for things. It becomes an art.

Q: [00:18:30.06]

Vera: Right. And something is wrong. But I think what makes it so difficult to solve that and in a way it makes it more of a slow process for me, personally, is that the bag is attainable, the house isn't. I only need $500 for the bag. I need $50,000 down payment for a house. And it also couples with a bad habit. So it seems huge all of a sudden, the house. How am I going to get there? I'm going to put $400 away a week and it's going to add up? And the answer is, yes. But you don't think that. So the bag is immediate. I feel like I can attain those things. And I do, as

opposed to the bigger life out there. And I'm working towards that. I'm working aggressively towards that in a sense. Maybe not as aggressively, maybe that's a lie, I should take that out. I don't work as aggressively as I should.

Q: [00:19:16.05]

Vera: The first time was probably about $22,000 and my father helped me with that. Then I got into probably another $20,000 something thousand which I paid off. And then it went out of control. And then when I went to the lawyer, it was, I think $76,000.

I was numb. I said, "What?" I said, "No." She's like, "Yeah."

And so I went bankrupt probably about five years ago. So I'm still climbing out of that.

Q: [00:19:46.16]

Vera: I don't know if wealthy is the right word, because it's really not appropriate. But I come from a middle class family and yet I went to private schools where you had the rich girls there, and stuff was not an object, acquiring stuff was a way of life. And one of my best friends, in fact, was very wealthy growing up and it clearly set the standards for me, that why would you carry a Rainbow pocketbook when you can carry a Fendi bag. And it made sense. And yet I couldn't be

part of that team of girls.[4] I never could until I hit high school and then, in fact, I got my first job and the first thing I bought which was like $380, which was a huge amount of money then. I bought my first Fendi bag. I remember buying it in Macy's, it was the most thrilling experience. So you know to be part of that, I don't like being excluded from things in life and money is equally one of them.

And I came from a family who we had money, you know, normal amounts of money, but we came from a family where, why would I buy you designer jeans when you are going to outgrow them?

And you know it does create a—it sounds so cliché, but it does keep you as an outsider, and that's not a good feeling for a kid, when everybody's wearing Sergio Velente jeans and I'm wearing Sergio Sorrento jeans. Seriously, I do not joke about that. And that was, I want to say the word brutal, but that seems overly dramatic. But at the time, you know, it's not a good place to be.

We had dress-down days. I went to Catholic schools, which, thank God, we eliminated the dressing problem because of uniforms. But we had dress-down days on Fridays and I would really have the same three outfits. And it wasn't for lack of money, in a sense, it was a mentality. You know, my mother was the shopper. And it really kind of shaped the—I refuse to ever be in

---

[4] In discussions about Simon's presentation of Vera for an Orchard show, Gareth James made the suggestion of showing Jean-Luc Godard's and Jean-Pierre Gorin's Letter to Jane (1972, 51 mins.) with Vera, for it's vision of how gender roles gender and categorize images of consumption. James noted how each filmmaker "organizes subjective and objective knowledge." James in Quaytman, "Orchard Schlusselroman," manuscript, 2006. n.p.

that position again. And I've never been since, although I've acquired much debt, but I will never ever be in that position and I will never ever put my children in that position, never.

Q: [00:21:38.15]

Vera: In a sense, and you know that raises some serious issues in terms of emotional habits that, you know, once I leave the house, and this is me being honest and vulnerable in a sense, but this is where I grew up, this is my house, and once I leave my parents will move and sell it. Once I leave my parents I will not have this—and not that it's all positive, anyway, but I will lose—I'm not a big fan of change in dramatic ways. And when I leave, my parents are older, my father just turned 70, this is precious time to me. And so it fosters, it creates a relationship in which I am here and we are present in each other's lives. And there's, you know, difficult circumstances as a result of that.

But yeah, it's clearly, anybody who is watching this and may deem this as: give me a break at a life??) [00:22:25.21] it runs much more deeply. Obviously it does come from an emotional, any bad behavior, any crippling behavior. I think it's more glamorous because it's clothing, but if this was a drug conversation: it's the same thing. It's just not as damaging, in a sense. I could recover from this as opposed to recovering from drugs without having to harm my body, or anybody who does anything abusively.

So what…I live at home I don't pay any rent I mean I have expenses, I have very adult expenses, like health insurance and those, but they're all paid from my salary but I can't really…I lived out on my own once, and even though it works on paper it never works in life, and in terms of you know you think you have enough money to cover it, so that's one of the reasons I can't ultimately go yet is that I have to learn to manage my money better, before I…I know I would pay my rent, it would never be where I couldn't pay my rent, but I don't know if I'm quite comfortable with not being able to have the things that are part of who I am, like, it's going to be great sacrifices that await me, so I'm trying to establish a career that will enable me to bring in more money before I make a leap into…I swore I would never be into, you know I have friends who steal toilet paper from work, like, never! They can't afford…There's no food in their refrigerators because they can't afford it. I just will never live like that. I'm trying to learn that if I have less, just more quality stuff, less stuff but just be…it's very complicated in all the different ways I have to think about this, how I have to control my behavior so that I could live a fuller life. So in that sense, that's where the exhaustion and the energy issues come in. Most people don't have to think about this. They move out and they make do and they live a happy life and they buy stuff on occasion when they have the extra money. I don't even know what that's like. And it's a very serious issue in that respect. I have to get that all together. And I've made tremendous progress, and that's a big deal for me to be able to say that. The fact that I have money in a bank account, you know.

End