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Between the Image and the Word

Photographs and annotations by Taryn Simon
Interview by Roxana Marcoci

ARTIST'S PROJECT

The following interview between Taryn Simon and curator Roxana Marcoci took place earlier this year, on the occasion of Simon's exhibition *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters* at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The design and layout of these pages were conceived by Simon. —The Editors

ROXANA MARCOCI: Your work came to international attention in 2003 with *The Innocents*, an exhibition organized by MoMA PS1. The show consisted of a series of photographs of Americans wrongly convicted of violent crimes and later exonerated through DNA evidence. Ethical and social-justice issues play a significant role in your work. How do you decide what to photograph?

TARYN SIMON: *The Innocents* resulted from a long conversation with an individual who had been wrongfully convicted of a crime he did not commit. He walked me through the conviction process, all of which centered on memory and its relationship to photography. He had been misidentified by the victim of the crime. The police had used photography in the identification process and, for the victim, the photograph replaced the memory of the actual perpetrator (if there ever was one). Following that conversation, I began researching the process of misidentification and photography's use in the criminal justice system. For all the men and one woman in *The Innocents*, photographs and other visual material, including composite sketches and live lineups, had initiated and provided evidence for a blurring of truth and fiction. In this particular blur, the stakes were too high. The power of a photograph to unleash both ambiguity and certainty is one of its most compelling qualities. But in this study, interpretations of visual material had the potential to allow an innocent human being to lose his or her life on death row. It was this space of translation and disorientation that interested me.

RM: I think it's worth mentioning that at Brown University you studied semiotics while also taking photography classes at the Rhode Island School of Design. Significantly, the combination of text and photograph is a crux of your practice. Is this mode of representation a way of critically addressing the relationship between truth and fiction? Is it a model of bringing a conceptual perspective to the documentary photographic style?

TS: I'm not sure what it is. I've always seen my medium as graphic design and photography and text, together. It's what I do. I am interested in the invisible space between text and image—the space where multiple truths and fantasies are constructed—and a space where definition is continually transforming and mutating.

RM: For *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007) you traveled from the C.I.A. Headquarters in Langley, Virginia, to the Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility Cherenkov Radiation in southeastern Washington State. Geoffrey Batchen refers to this work as “a collective portrait of the American psyche through a documentation of its repressed places.” The concept of transparency is central to the idea of democratic governance. How difficult was it to gain access to these least-visible sites, and what does this “portrait” say about America?

TS: I wanted to confront the divide between public and expert access—to see how far I could get as an individual citizen, or outsider—with permission. I never reached a core—just a closer distance from which to observe. The difficulties in gaining access varied. Some photographs required permissions from the U.S. Army, the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the Centers for Disease Control, the Church of Scientology . . . while in others the hurdle was not so clear, but psychologically complicated—like entering a bear cave during hibernation season. There was no formula for gaining these permissions. Many of them took years to obtain.

As for any resulting statement about America—it’s not a body of work that functions like an equation. There’s no answer at the end of it all. There’s an entropy in the collection—as it jumps from security to religion to entertainment to governance to science. . . . It’s an exploration of America’s mythology and daily functioning that twists and turns and isn’t intended to land. The thing that is American about the process of making the work is that, as a woman outside any power structure or umbrella, I was able to enter these sites and record my experiences.

I guess ultimately any entry into that which is hidden or unexplored reveals vulnerabilities. Rarely does the forbidden actually look like its fantasy form. Fantasy keeps the mold: the cracks and vulnerabilities are well covered.

RM: While your earlier work dealt with the United States, your most recent projects have taken you farther afield. What accounts for your decision to move across U.S. borders?



Larry Mayes
Scene of arrest, The Royal Inn, Gary, Indiana
Police found Mayes hiding beneath a mattress in this room
Served 18.5 years of an eighty-year sentence
for rape, robbery and unlawful deviate conduct
From *The Innocents*, 2003.

TS: I was thinking about fate and its relationship to chance, blood, and circumstance. I was looking at the collision of the external forces of governance, power, religion, and territory with the internal forces of psychological and physical inheritance. This has forced me beyond borders—to more than twenty different countries. Power and power structures are increasingly difficult to locate. It's no longer top-down—we now have asymmetric warfare, global economies, global environment, dispersed rebellions. . . .

RM: Along these lines, let's talk about *Contraband* (2010), an archive of over a thousand images of items that were seized from passengers entering the United States from abroad at John F. Kennedy International Airport. During a period of five days, from November 16 to 20, 2009, you documented a very contemporary phenomenon—worldwide trafficking in counterfeit and prohibited goods. Do you think of image making as a reflection on globalized culture?

TS: *Contraband* was a performance. I moved into JFK and documented items seized over one full working week (with very little sleep). I worked at the pace of the goods entering into the United States from abroad. One would imagine guns, heroin, animals—and they were there—but the overwhelming bulk of seizures were counterfeit goods. The collection reflects an economic battle—one that involves the preservation of the original that Western economies rely upon. Photography itself produces a copy of what's before the lens. In this project I was making copies of copies—photographs of counterfeit pharmaceuticals, counterfeit Louis Vuitton bags, counterfeit Disney merchandise, pirated Hollywood films. The counterfeit goods couldn't pass customs, but the photograph could, and the photograph could be entered into yet another economy—the art economy. Image making is part of the game.

RM: Within the economy of image making, could you talk about what I consider to be your magnum opus, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters* (2008–11)? The Museum of Modern Art, New York, has premiered in the United States the exhibition of this project, featuring nine of the eighteen “chapters” that comprise this poignant work. The subjects you record here include victims of genocide in Bosnia, test rabbits infected with a lethal disease in



Contraband, 2010 (details).
Bird corpse, labeled as home décor, Indonesia to Miami, Florida (prohibited)
Cigarettes, Shuangxi, China (prohibited)
Handbag, Louis Vuitton (disguised) (counterfeit)
Oxalis tuberosa, Peru (7CFR) (prohibited)

Australia, the first woman to hijack an aircraft, and the “living dead” in India, to name a few. Terrorism, violence, war, expropriation of land, and lack of civic rights are some of the themes that you bring into play in the various chapters. Can you speak about the structure of this work and how it defines the relationship between genetic heritage and geopolitical governance?

TS: The work struggles to look at the numbing persistence of birth and death and the unending pile of stories and repetitions that accumulate. Many of the stories read as archetypal episodes or ghosts of the past and future—like a skipping record. Its design signals patterns or codes in the chaos it highlights. Each of the eighteen “chapters” in the work is divided into three segments. The first is a portrait panel where I systematically order the members of a specific bloodline. The second is a text panel, designed in a scroll-like shape, where I construct the narrative at stake and list census-like information about each individual I photographed, including reasons for absences. The third is what I call the “footnote panel,” in which I present fragments of the story and beginnings of other stories. The disorder of the footnote panel is in direct contrast to the undeniable order of blood represented in the portrait panel.

RM: With *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, you locate photography’s capacity simultaneously to probe complex narratives in societies today and to organize this material in archive-style classification processes—a system that connects identity, genealogy, history, and memory. In your view, what does this record of society say of our contemporary condition?

TS: Archives often exist because there is something that is difficult to understand, accurately recorded and articulated. In the spaces between all the accumulated information something is spoken—but not in a language I know. This is the space I want to touch.



Installation view, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, 2008–11.
Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin.
Photograph by David Von Becker
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