

Containing the Uncontainable *Taryn Simon: A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*

Tate Modern, London
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Review by Patricia Townsend

Moving through the suite of galleries at the Tate Modern devoted to *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, the current touring exhibition by American photographer Taryn Simon, I am confronted by a series of large framed panels, each more than two meters high, densely packed with information. The initial effect is somewhat overwhelming, the monumental scale of this work dwarfing the viewer. Yet, at the same time, I am drawn in. I begin by looking at a panel containing small portraits, numbered and arranged in a grid pattern, showing individuals of varying ages, all photographed against a plain background in a deadpan style. The grid includes some blank spaces, also numbered. I want to unlock the code of this combination of images, and I turn to the adjoining text panel for guidance. Here I find the story of Shivdutt Yadav of Uttar Pradesh in India, the “Living Man Declared Dead” of the title, a man who discovered that he and his close relatives were listed as dead in local records and that his property had been forfeited. The portraits show Yadav and the living members of his bloodline, arranged in a grid according to a set pattern, the blank portraits denoting relatives unavailable to be photographed. The text panel lists the name, age, occupation, and country of habitation of each participant and the reasons for any absences (such as women unable to take part for cultural or religious reasons). The right-hand panel contains “footnotes”—photographic images arranged in a less formal way that relate tangentially to the central story, including a haunting photograph of a dead body floating in the Ganges.

Taryn Simon’s photographic and writing projects originate from a desire to gain access to sites or people normally hidden from the general

public. The artist spends months or even years researching the material before developing the final photographs. Her process follows the tradition of photojournalism in that she seeks out compelling stories or situations, researches them meticulously, and is dogged in her determination to create the photographs to encapsulate the story. At the same time, her concerns go beyond the documentary. In addition to bringing us factual information, Simon’s work interrogates the relationship of photography to “truth,” as well as the photograph’s role in the construction of personal and collective stories. In the chapter of Shivdutt Yadav, for instance, she uses photography, “the greatest proof of life,”¹ to record images of people who are assumed not to exist. In previous works she has photographed people wrongly convicted of murder (*The Innocents* [New York: Umbrage, 2003]), documented the contraband seized by customs officials at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York (*Contraband* [Göttingen: Steidl, 2010]) and explored the borders of American society usually hidden from view (*An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* [Göttingen: Steidl, 2007]). In *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters* she has, both literally and metaphorically, gone even further. Over a period of four years, from 2008 to 2011, she traveled the globe, uncovering hidden personal and collective stories, many of them of trauma, exploitation, or infringements of human liberty. The narratives she discovers and follows are astonishingly diverse, ranging from that of the body double of Uday Hussein, to the extermination of rabbits in Australia, or the selection of young Nepalese girls to be the bodily incarnation of a goddess. Simon’s project takes these stories and attempts to find patterns, to “map the relationships between chance, blood and other components of fate.”²



Simon exposes secret stories that often include violence or oppression. These are disturbing narratives that we may prefer not to hear. The artist makes visible what was hidden, and we can draw a parallel between her exposure of stories that have been repressed in a particular society and Freud's insistence, on an individual scale, that the work of psychoanalysis is to make the unconscious conscious. But in Simon's work—as in psychoanalysis—exposure of the story is only the first step. The newly conscious material must be integrated and understood within the narrative of the individual's life. Perhaps this is one of Simon's aims in following the bloodline of one person, Shivdutt Yadav in this case. His story is no longer isolated but becomes embedded within a long familial and social history. Thus the dehumanizing narratives Simon uncovers are rendered human through her contextual photographic process.

Simon's strategy in placing the bloodline of the protagonist center stage may lend the story a human dimension, but the manner in which she presents her material has a very different effect. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this exhibition is the tension the artist sets up between the poignancy of the stories she tells and the disciplined, regimented form of her presentation. On the one hand,

Above: *Taryn Simon, A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters, 2011, Tate Modern, London, UK. © Taryn Simon. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Andrew Dunken and Marcus Leith; Tate Photography*

Opposite: *Taryn Simon, Excerpt from Chapter I, from A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters, 2011, Tate Modern, London, UK. © Taryn Simon. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery*

we are pulled into the story, perhaps affected emotionally by it. The tiny portraits and the text (too small to be read from a distance) contribute to this in a physical sense by drawing the viewer in. We have to come up close. We scan the images, perhaps seeking clues as to the experience of the sitters. However, this desire for understanding is immediately frustrated. The small images, photographed full face against a plain background in the deadpan style utilized by photographers such as Thomas Ruff and Rineke Dijkstra, betray no emotion and give few clues as to the circumstances of the sitters' lives. The text is assiduously factual, and Simon never allows herself—or her viewers—to stray from certain self-imposed rules as to the ordering and layout of both text and image. "There is an ordering principle in all of the works, where they are scientifically ordered, where it is the eldest member of a generation followed by their descen-

dants, and then their descendants, and it repeats and so on."³ Only the footnote panels allow an element of interpretation, the possibility of lateral association.

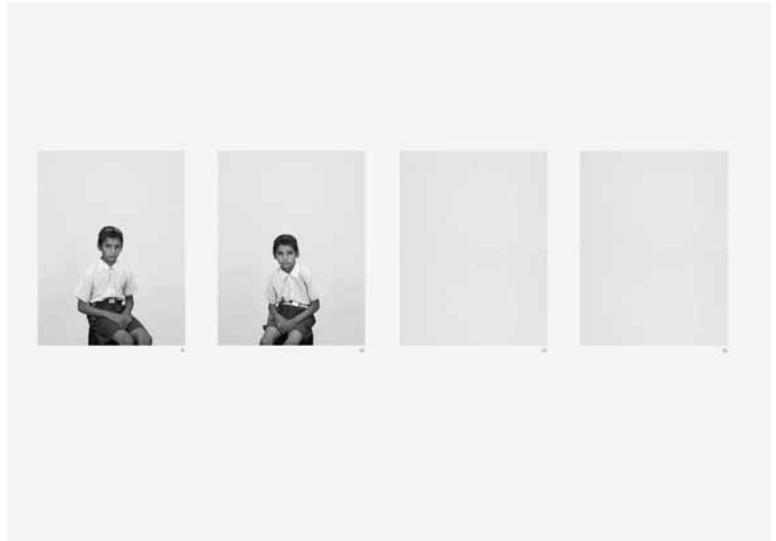
This disciplined ordering of images and text is one of a series of framing devices used by Simon. The portraits are arranged in a grid framed by a neutral background and then reframed within the massive panels that make up the triptychs. Beyond these strategies, the gallery itself, specially painted in brilliant white, acts as a frame for the exhibition as a whole, lending it a clinical air. These physical frames are augmented by conceptual ones: the strict rules governing the contents of the text and portrait panels, and the structure of the eighteen chapters with their reference to the book form. Simon constructs containers within containers. The psychoanalyst and author Marion Milner, who has written about her own attempts to paint,⁴ emphasizes the importance of the frame (in its widest sense) for both artist and audience in that it "marks off what's inside it from what's outside it."⁵ The frame acts as a container both for the work itself and as a point of reference for the viewer. It separates the work from everyday life and so allows us to enter a particular space of mind as we experience it.

Following Milner, we can see Simon's framing devices as creating a space within which the work can be experienced both by the artist and her audience. We might then ask why the artist has chosen to use so many frames within frames? One answer might be that this ordering and classifying serves her purpose of seeking a logic to effectively yoke a vast range of material. But I suggest that there is a further function at work here too. Simon has stated, "I guess a lot of what I

do is underpinned by anxiety. But I am also anxious about photography and its role. I try to keep a clear distance from the subject. I never want to say that I understand or somehow know the subject. In fact, it's more that I don't know."⁶ The cumulative effect of the details of so many emotive stories (and the use of photography in their telling) might provoke anxiety, but Simon attempts to manage and control this anxiety through her rules and structuring systems. Her framing not only creates a space within which we can experience the work but also separates us from the people whose lives we glimpse. The stories are neatly packaged within their containing frames, allowing us, perhaps, to stand outside the narratives and so to tolerate and think about them without feeling too overwhelmed. Nevertheless, in the quotation above, Simon acknowledges how she ultimately surrenders to the very anxiety she attempts to master.

Moreover, in some of the chapters Simon's contained mode of presentation aggravates our reading of the stories. For example, *Chapter VIII* depicts the bloodline of Dorothy Gallagher, a woman who gave birth to triplets after having taken the drug thalidomide during pregnancy. I found myself uncomfortably scanning the portraits looking for signs of a disability. Searching for "clues," I thought of the photographs of August Sander in *Citizens of the Twentieth Century: A Cultural History in Photographs*, in which he depicts citizens as exemplars of particular social roles or occupations rather than as unique individuals. Simon's portraits read like specimens, displayed for public view in a disturbing parallel with another one of the stories she tells: that of Cabrera Antero who was among members of the Igarot community of Filipino farmers and miners who were literally put on display at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Thus Simon enacts another kind of photographic and psychological doubling, turning her viewers into voyeurs who are implicated in the visual exploitation that she exposes.

Simon meticulously builds up one classificatory system upon another. It is as if, by ordering in this way, some underlying pattern can be discerned, the codes of blood and fate can be unlocked and, perhaps, the anxiety provoked by the stories can be contained. However, her method involves the imposition of order on very disparate material, implying a uniformity that belies the diverse experiences of those whom she photographs. Perhaps this dynamic returns us to the recurring question of the relationship between photography and "truth." Despite the documentary qualities of the medium and its apparent truth claims, the photograph itself can never provide more than fragmentary clues to the conditions it references. Simon's seem-



ingly factual images and texts are structured and contained within systems of her making. Ultimately what they reflect is her particular point of view, her fiction. We are left to wonder whether or not this imposed order points to an underlying "truth" outside her system. Can any legitimate pattern be found, or has Simon attempted to contain the uncontainable? As she herself says, "I don't know that there is an answer."⁷

Taryn Simon: *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters* was also on view at the *Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 2 through September 3, 2012.*

Patricia Townsend is an artist and a psychoanalytic psychotherapist. She has published a number of papers and book chapters, most recently "Making Space" in Little Madnesses: Winnicott, Transitional Phenomena, and Cultural Experience (I.B.Tauris, forthcoming). She is currently engaged in a doctoral program at the Slade School of Fine Art, London, where her project is to explore the artistic process from a psychoanalytic standpoint. Her artwork can be seen at www.patriciatownsend.co.uk. patriciatownsend@btinternet.com

1. Taryn Simon, *TateShots*, <http://channel.tate.org.uk/media/974388916001> (accessed March 22, 2011).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).
5. Marion Milner, *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men* (London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1987), 80.
6. Taryn Simon interview with Sean O'Hagan, *The Observer*, Sunday, May 22, 2011.