

# Taryn Simon

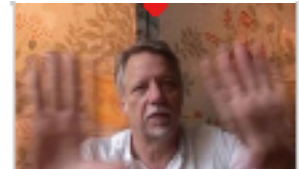
A video interview by Alessia Glaviano with artist Taryn Simon whose work is deeply linked to political and social questions and matters of current relevance

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I met Taryn Simon in New York, the city where she was born in 1975 and where she currently lives and works. **Taryn Simon came in touch with photography at an early age being fascinated by the images that her father would show her upon returning from his travelling to little know and often dangerous places** and by the photographs shot by her grandfather, an avid collection of macrophotography with an interest in insects, stars and plants. After studying environmental sciences at Brown University, Taryn pursued art semiotics. As well as studying photography at the Rhode Island School of Design during her university years, once she graduated Simon decided to refine her technical knowledge by working as an assistant for several photographers.

**Although imagery had undoubtedly an important role in directing Taryn Simon's artistic journey, to call her a photographer would not do her justice.** Photography is, in fact, only one of the means of expression she uses: apart of working in sculpture and performance as well, her photographic works also include texts and displays an almost obsessive attention to positioning and placement. To Simon, images have an instrumental role and fulfill their full semantic potential only when analyzed against their overall context in which we can read and follow Taryn's crystalline thinking: at the basis of each one of her works is indeed a strong and clearly defined concept that is taken to its extreme consequences with robust and sharp logic.

I have long been pondering about how little interesting the majority of contemporary art has become as a result of showing little pertinence to day-to-day life: I feel much closer to an artistic approach that uses photography, perhaps due to the fact that, in order to exist, this requires using real, material subjects. In this sense, **Taryn Simon is, in my opinion, a complete artist whose work is sophisticated and radically contemporary whilst still maintaining a strong link with the issues of the real world.**



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Glaviano with Canadian  
photographer Edward  
Burtynsky

The topics explored by Simon are linked to political and social questions and matters of current relevance that are not locked inside a ground of sterile self-referencing: "My process is influenced by what's going on in my life and in politics and the social landscape [...] I have always tried to keep myself out of my work and have the work exists in a space that's not about its author. I think that's also a decision I made thinking about being a woman working in the art world. Thinking about the history of that, the role in which women have often held within that world - often related to identity and exploration of their personal narrative. **I really don't want that to be a part of my work and I think I've worked hard to create a distance between myself and the work as a result.**"

Simon's identifiable and distinctive trait can be traced in the type of topics she chooses rather than the method she uses to investigate them: they are projects lasting years, most of which requiring a meticulous and accurate research and preparation phase. **Her method can be defined as authentically obsessive**, not only during the research stage but also in the way she presents her work, which shows a clear penchant for precision and the seriality typical of cataloguing and taxonomy.

I believe that all the greatest art is born out of obsession interpreted in a different way according to the artist's mind. In Simon's case, her obsessions seems to lie in the unachievable goal of finding an order that is capable of controlling the rampant entropy, of creating something certain, complete, closed and self-sufficient. **A desire for completeness that can be discerned also in the type of format chosen by Simon to present her projects: books.**

Simon's works are always complex; they present several layers of meaning and incorporate intellectual, social and aesthetic aspects that were partly already present - though in an embryonic form - in her first work - "**The Innocents**". **Published as a book in 2003, that project explored the meaning of right and wrong, true and false and referenced that desperate, and somehow always unfulfilled, attempt to define, clarify, establish clear boundaries that is present in all of Simon's works.**

Consisting of impeccably accomplished large format portraits accompanied by long explicatory notes, "The Innocents" seeks to identify such boundaries within the ethical-existential field: the subjects are American citizens who served time in prison for crimes they did not commit; people that were arrested and charged with a conviction due to mistaken identification as a result of the law enforcement's use of photographs and line-ups. **The question that each one of these images asks us is: can photography truly be given the status of evidence?** Can it be considered incontrovertible evidence? With "The Innocents", Simon portrays the contradictions that are indissolubly linked to the ontological status of the image, a representation that can never replace reality and therefore is, in some way, always a simulation. By photographing the subjects on the scene of the crimes they did not commit, places which they have never been to, Simon lays bare all the difficulties of the too often taken for granted relation between photography and truth.

**Even if the core around which Taryn Simon's artistic search has remained fundamentally the same, her aesthetic approach has, through time, undergone a radical change:** the stylistic preoccupation of the beginning has been replaced with a bare style of photography, the cold aesthetics of scientific photography that cleanses the framing of any element that is not necessary; a photography that is born out of an almost mechanic use of the camera, though this choice is, once again, a reaction to the contemporary status of the image and to his loss of power.

**The theme of what is real and of meaning is a recurrent one in Taryn Simon's works:** as well as portraying events that never occurred, facts that officially do not exist and/or cannot be seen, her images seek to materialize the unbridgeable empty space that is there between words and their interpretation. The "map is not the territory" after all and the language, though necessary, will always be limiting compared to experience and will be likely to generate misunderstanding, incommunicability and solitude.

Such themes are also addressed in the group work "Image Atlas" (2012), in which Taryn shows the communication difficulties of verbal communication applied to imagery. In a historic moment when photography appears to have become the universal language par excellence, Simon demonstrates the fallibility of such assumption: created by Simon in collaboration with programmer Aaron Swartz, "Image Atlas" clearly displays the differences and cultural affinities conjured by images through a simple search of the same word in different languages: the difference in the outcome is profound. With disarming simplicity, **Simon's work seems to constantly tell us that there is no absolute understanding - like there is no absolute truth after all - and that the resulting isolation is a condition innate to existence.**

*Taryn Simon's work is currently exhibited at the 56th Venice Biennale and at the Whitney Museum; it will be part of the inaugural show of the Garage Contemporary museum in Russia on June 12 and of the Guggenheim show "Storylines: Contemporary Art at the Guggenheim", opening June 5. In September Tate Publishing will release "Rear Views, A Star-Forming Nebula, and the Department of Foreign Propaganda", the first book to draw together Taryn Simon's diverse and complex range of projects, produced since 2002. With new and published essays by amongst others Salman Rushdie, Homi Bhabha, Daniel Baumann, Tim Griffin, Tina Kuklieski, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Elisabeth Sussman. With an introduction by Simon Baker, Curator of Photography at Tate Modern.*

*Taryn Simon (b. 1975) is a multidisciplinary artist who has worked in photography, text, sculpture and performance. Her practice involves extensive research, in projects guided by an interest in systems of categorization and classification. Simon's works have been the subject of monographic exhibitions at Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2013); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012); Tate Modern, London (2011); Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin (2011); and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2007). Permanent collections include Metropolitan Museum of Art, Tate Modern, Whitney Museum of American Art, Centre Georges Pompidou, and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Her work is included in the 56th Venice Biennale (2015). She is a graduate of Brown University and a Guggenheim Fellow. Simon lives and works in New York.*

di Alessia Glaviano