

Vogue : 'Photographer Taryn Simon on Shooting Pussy Riot and the Politics of Media',
by Sara Corbett, August 8th, 2014

Photographer Taryn Simon on Shooting Pussy Riot and the Politics of Media

AUGUST 8, 2014 4:45 PM
by SARA CORBETT



Photographed by Taryn Simon, Vogue, July 2014

For Vogue's July issue, artist Taryn Simon was asked to photograph Masha Alekhina and Nadya Tolokonnikova, formerly of Pussy Riot. Simon's portrait of Alekhina and Tolokonnikova accompanies Vogue's story about their impassioned mission to reform prisons in Russia, and their recent media tour of the United States to promote their new organization, Zona Prava, which aims to expose the inhumane conditions in Russia's massive prison system. Though she rarely shoots for editorial publications, Simon, whose work often deals with flawed governmental and social systems, was a perfect fit for the portrait. She has spent much of the past decade creating art that combines photography, text, and graphic design to explore societal ambiguities and injustices.

In one of her earliest projects, *The Innocents*, first exhibited at MoMa PS1 in 2003, Simon photographed

wrongfully accused men, released from prison, either at the alibi location or at the scenes of the crimes they did not commit. Her interest in injustice is a thread throughout her subsequent work, and can be found again in a more recent book and exhibition, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, which documents, among other stories, the saga of an Indian man who is alive but declared dead in governmental records so that his relatives can claim his property. The subjects of the series are captured against a pale beige backdrop—one of Simon's unmistakable aesthetic choices, used also in Vogue's portrait of Alekhina and Tolokonnikova.

Simon is now in the midst of working on a whirlwind of upcoming projects, but took time to speak with *Vogue.com* about her work and future possibilities for the photographic image and disorienting narratives of our time.

As a fashion publication, Vogue may not always be associated with the stories of people like Masha and Nadya. I can't help but wonder if Vogue's inclusion of work like your own, which is often politically and socially charged, has positive effects and can incite change for these subjects or situations?

Context and audience are integral elements in this equation. In my past work, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, the title chapter highlighted several men who were listed in their local village registry in Uttar Pradesh, India, as dead. According to all official paperwork, they did not exist. I spent time with them and photographed them. They were very much alive. Family members paid off officials to have them declared dead so they could interrupt the hereditary transfer of land upon their father's death. That narrative and their photographs became a representative image of the project. It was reproduced in countless magazines and newspapers as the exhibition traveled. And they still are dead.

Have you photographed in Russia before?

I've produced works in Russia and exhibited at both The Garage and the Multimedia Art Museum in Moscow. My roots lead there as well.

In your project *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, you amassed and photographed an inventory of objects and places that are hidden within the borders of the United States. What do you think a project like this would look like in Russia or similarly opaque parts of the world?

I doubt it would exist. For that matter, I'm not sure it could exist in America today either.

As human rights violations and conflict intensify in all parts of the world, what do you see for the future?

In a time capsule embedded in the grounds of the New York World's Fair in 1939 was a book published by Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing Company that listed the contents of the time capsule along with three letters from notable figures (Albert Einstein, Robert Andrews Millikan, and Thomas Mann) to the future. Thomas Mann wrote the following:

"We now know that the idea of the future as a better world was a fallacy of the doctrine of progress. The hopes we center on you, citizens of the future, are in no way exaggerated. In broad outline you resemble us very much as we resemble those who lived 1,000 or 5,000 years ago. Among you too, the spirit will fare badly. It will never fare too well on this Earth, otherwise men would need it no longer.

That optimistic conception of the future is a projection into time of an endeavor which does not belong to the temporal world, the endeavor on the part of men to approximate to his idea of himself the humanization of man.

What we, in this year of our lord 1938, understand by the term culture, a notion held in small esteem today by certain nations of the western world, is simply this endeavor. What we call the spirit is identical with this culture too. Brothers of the future, united with us in this spirit and this endeavor, we send our greetings."

My favorite section of the book is labeled, "A Key to the English Language," which attempts to describe the English language to a future in which it has disappeared—through illustrations and descriptions of sound and structure.

I have a work with this as its subject in my series Black Square based on the paintings by Kazimir Malevich.

What are you working on right now?

A performance piece.

When I type “Pussy Riot” into Image Atlas, the search engine you collaborated on with programmer Aaron Swartz, a variety of images pop up from various countries, including portraits of the members, as well as a sprinkling of cat photographs and other oddities. What is Image Atlas? And what does it reveal about communication?

Image Atlas explores the possibility of a universal language through images. People communicate more and more through abbreviated text and images. Its aim is to map cultural differences and similarities associated with different search terms. It questions whether visual language is subject to the same issues of translation that occur with the written word.

THE INNOCENTS

The Innocents documents the stories of individuals who served time in prison for violent crimes they did not commit. At issue is the question of photography's function as a credible eyewitness and arbiter of justice.

The primary cause of wrongful conviction is mistaken identification. A victim or eyewitness identifies a suspected perpetrator through law enforcement's use of photographs and lineups. This procedure relies on the assumption of precise visual memory. But, through exposure to composite sketches, mugshots, Polaroids, and lineups, eyewitness memory can change. In the history of these cases, photography offered the criminal justice system a tool that transformed innocent citizens into criminals. Photographs assisted officers in obtaining eyewitness identifications and aided prosecutors in securing convictions.

Simon photographed these men at sites that had particular significance to their illegitimate conviction: the scene of misidentification, the scene of arrest, the scene of the crime or the scene of the alibi. All of these locations hold contradictory meanings for the subjects. The scene of arrest marks the starting point of a reality based in fiction. The scene of the crime is at once arbitrary and crucial: this place, to which they have never been, changed their lives forever. In these photographs Simon confronts photography's ability to blur truth and fiction-an ambiguity that can have severe, even lethal consequences.



Larry Mayes, 2002



Troy Webb, 2002



Charles Irvin Fain, 2002

AN AMERICAN INDEX OF THE HIDDEN AND UNFAMILIAR

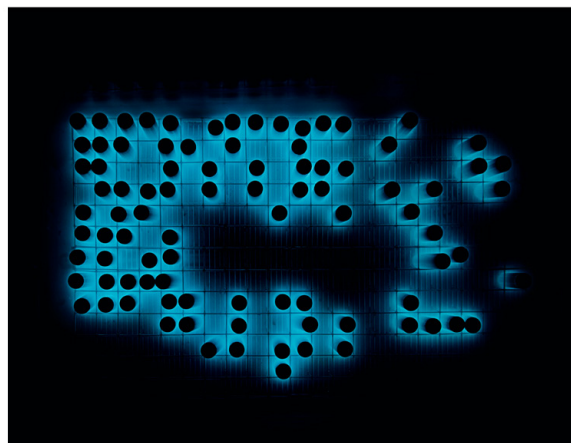
In *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* artist Taryn Simon compiles an inventory of what lies hidden and out-of-view within the borders of the United States. She examines a culture through documentation of subjects from domains including: science, government, medicine, entertainment, nature, security, and religion. Confronting the divide between those with and without the privileges of access, Simon's collection reflects and reveals that which is intergal to America's foundation, mythology and daily functioning.



Hymenoplasty, Cosmetic Surgery, P.A., Fort Lauderdale, Florida 2007



Cryopreservation Unit, Cryonics Institute, Clinton Township, Michigan



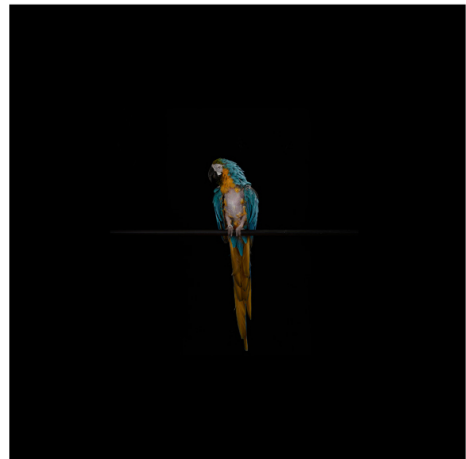
Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility, Cherenkov Radiation, Hanford Site, U.S. Department of Energy, Southeastern Washington State, 2007

BLACK SQUARE

Black Square (2006 – 2014) is an ongoing project in which Simon collects objects, documents, and individuals within a black field that has precisely the same measurements as Kazimir Malevich's 1915 Suprematist work of the same name.



Black Square X, 2006-2014



Black Square XI, 2006-2014

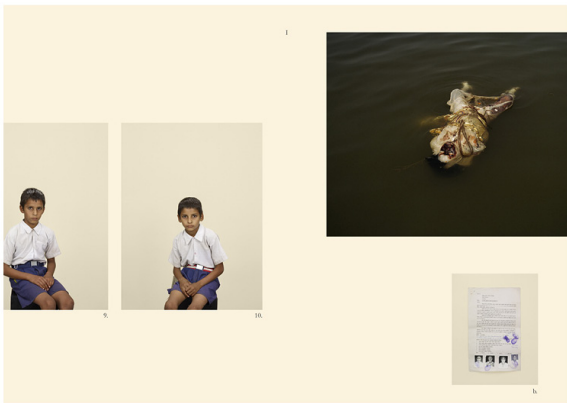
A LIVING MAN DECLARED DEAD AND OTHER CHAPTERS I–XVIII

A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII was produced over a four-year period (2008–11), during which the artist, Taryn Simon, travelled around the world researching and recording bloodlines and their related stories. In each of the eighteen 'chapters' that make up the work, the external forces of territory, power, circumstance or religion collide with the internal forces of psychological and physical inheritance. The subjects documented by Simon include feuding families in Brazil, victims of genocide in Bosnia, the body double of Saddam Hussein's son Uday, and the living dead in India. Her collection is at once cohesive and arbitrary, mapping the relationships among chance, blood, and other components of fate.

Each work in *A Living Man Declared Dead* is comprised of three segments. On the left of each chapter are one or more large portrait panels systematically ordering a number of individuals directly related by blood. The sequence of portraits is structured to include the living ascendants and descendants of a single individual. The portraits are followed by a central text panel in which the artist constructs narratives and collects details. On the right are Simon's 'footnote images' representing fragmented pieces of the established narratives and providing photographic evidence.

The empty portraits represent living members of a bloodline who could not be photographed. The reasons for these absences are included in the text panels and include imprisonment, military service, dengue fever and women not granted permission to be photographed for religious and social reasons.

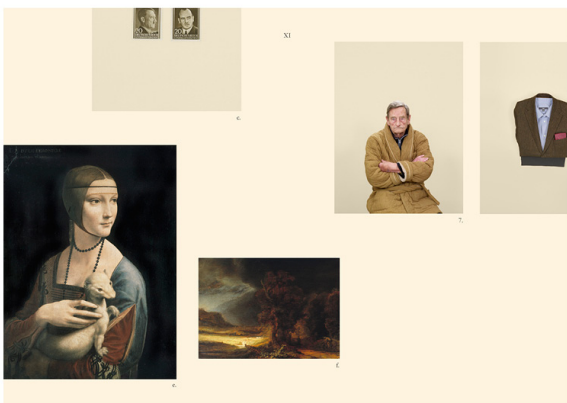
Simon's presentation explores the struggle to determine codes and patterns embedded in the narratives she documents, making them recognizable as variations (versions, renderings, adaptations) of archetypal episodes from the present, past, and future. In contrast to the methodical ordering of a bloodline, the central elements of the stories – violence, resilience, corruption, and survival – disorient the highly structured appearance of the work. *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* highlights the space between text and image, absence and presence, and order and disorder.



Excerpt from Chapter 1, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII*, 2012



Installation view of Chapter I, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII*, 2012



Excerpt from Chapter XI, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII*

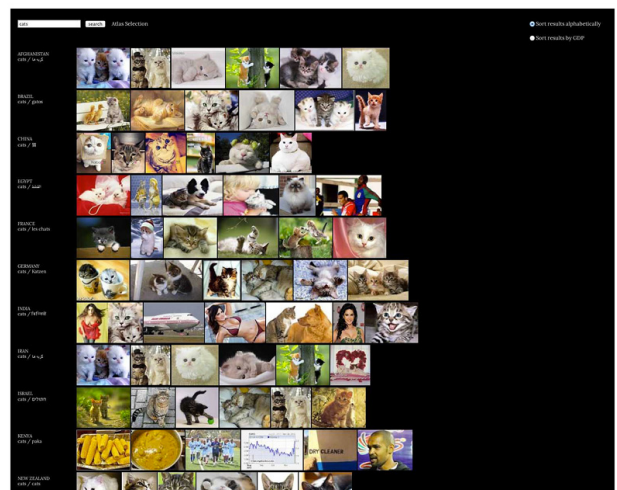


Installation view of Chapter I, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII*, 2012

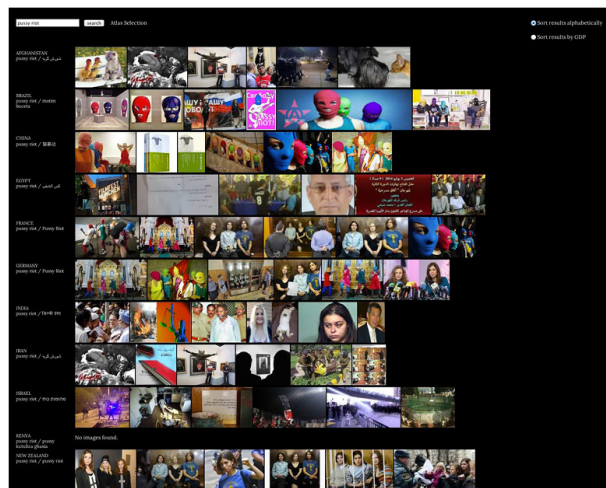
IMAGE ATLAS

Created by artist Taryn Simon in collaboration with programmer Aaron Swartz, Image Atlas investigates cultural differences and similarities by indexing top image results for given search terms across local engines throughout the world. Visitors can refine or expand their comparisons from the 57 countries currently available, and sort by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or alphabetical order.

Image Atlas interrogates the possibility of a universal visual language and questions the supposed innocence and neutrality of the algorithms upon which search engines rely.



Revolution, 8/12/2013, 5:08 PM (Eastern Standard Time) Cats, 1/4/2013, 11:21 AM (Eastern Standard Time)



Pussy Riot, 8/4/2014, 6:34 PM (Eastern Standard Time)