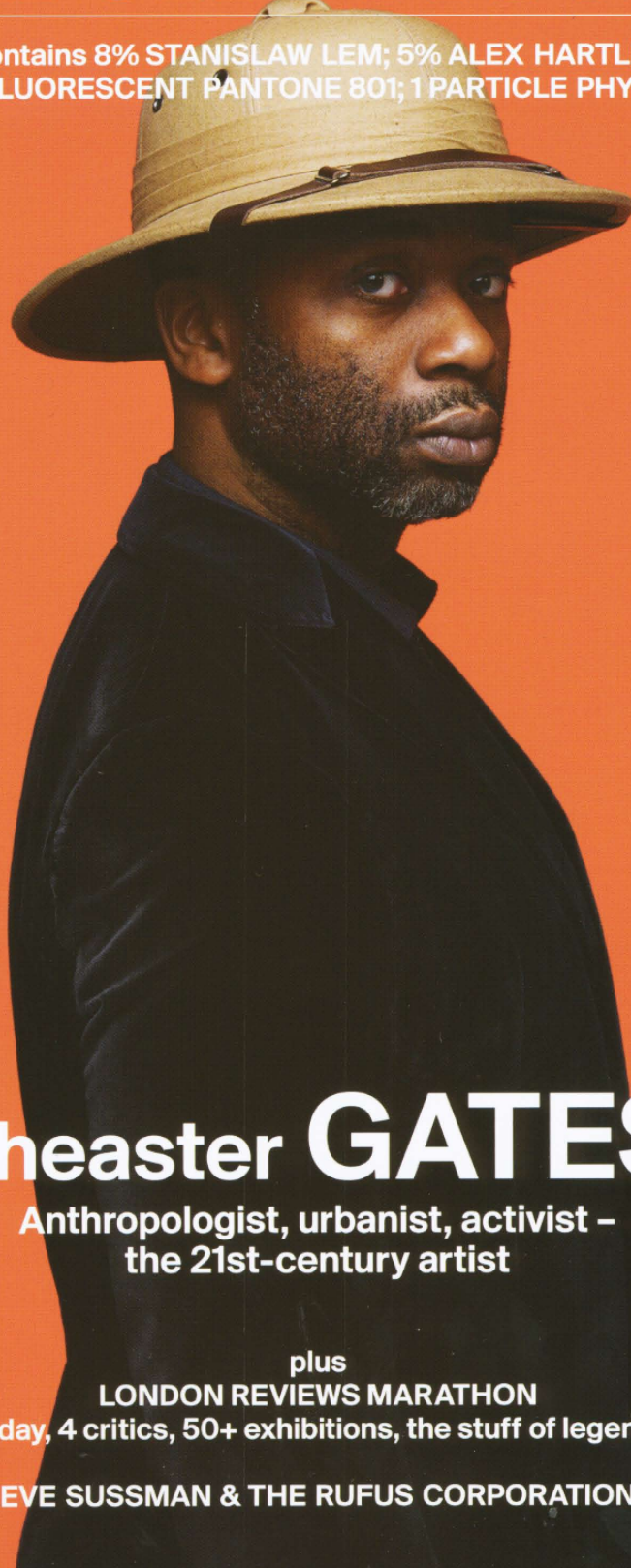


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Art Review:

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TARYN SIMON

Taryn Simon: *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*
Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin
22 September – 1 January

Bloodlines are the focus of American photographer Taryn Simon's project *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters* (2008–11). But what exactly does she understand by this far from risk-free concept, with its connotations of racism? Her show is billed as a documentation of 18 groups, each of which has suffered its own tragic fate – groups such as the victims of the genocide perpetrated against Bosnian Muslims in 1995, albinos in Tanzania murdered for their body parts and homosexuals in Spain persecuted by Franco's regime. Simon is generally presenting us with victims – and is interpreting 'bloodline' in the widest sense, from the connection through shared religious beliefs to skin colour to sexuality. And the object of her artistic enquiry is instances of what might be described as politically motivated mass murder. However, in an apparent effort to take this notion of racism to an absurd extreme, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters* also includes the well-known story of rabbits illegally imported to Australia in 1859 and their subsequent slaughter.

Unfortunately this cynical comparison of the murder of men and the hunting of animals strips the content of Simon's concept of any real seriousness. Or might she have done this to turn our attention to the formal structure of her work?

The 'fates' of her subjects – dramatically, rather than critically, politicised by the artist – are documented in high-quality triptychs. Solid wooden frames and generous amounts of glass give the images an auratic air, which is further reinforced in the Berlin presentation by the rather awe-inspiring nature of the displays in which the 'bloodlines' are set out. After all the cosy, very often noisily social-event-related relational crossovers of the 1990s, in the new millennium we are supposed to lapse back into silence in art exhibitions. On the left side of the triptychs are photographic portraits depicting the genealogy of the bloodline: starting with immediate predecessors, then the 'main person', followed by their offspring and descendants. A central text-

based panel tells the story of each bloodline via a written narrative and picture captions. To the right of this is a final panel with photographs that serve as documentary 'footnotes' – in the case of said rabbits, for instance, an image of a mass grave of culled rabbits. Both the structure of the triptychs and the conventional nature of the image selection more or less conform to the practices of documentation with which we are already familiar from museums and other cultural institutions.

Naturally this aesthetic procedure is founded on a supposedly persuasive and seemingly theoretically grounded concept, for Simon has said that her work is about investigating the codes and structures underpinning these stories, about showing that they are all variations on archetypal sequences of past, present and future. However, this endeavour does not succeed, partly because the structure of *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters* merely apes other all-too-conventional modes of documentation, and partly because any such endeavour is highly questionable: what are these 'archetypal sequences' supposed to be? Sequences that are impervious to temporal, intellectual and technological change? Eternally the same and eternally valid?

RAIMAR STANGE

translated from the German by Fiona Elliott