

Access All Areas

MONOGRAPH

Taryn Simon's photographs of restricted locations reveal an unsettling side to the American Dream



White Tiger (Kenny), Selective Inbreeding, Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge and Foundation, Eureka Springs, Arkansas (2007)

'It's 3am and something is happening in the world [...] There's a phone in the White House, and it's ringing.' So began the narration of a recent television advertisement for Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, unleashing a flurry of discussion about the White House telephone and the candidate best suited to answer it in case of a global emergency. The folklore of the White House 'red phone' was, in fact, first exploited during the 1984 presidential campaign, when it represented the tenuous hotline between Washington and Moscow. It's telling that the Clinton campaign was so eager to revive this anachronistic symbol: though Barack Obama accused Clinton of exploiting 'the politics of fear', Clinton had in fact tapped into a deep-seated American fantasy about the backstage operations of the United States government and its national security apparatus, at a time when that backstage is probably more expansive and dimly lit than ever. Americans, apparently, are still intrigued by the 'red phone' as a potent symbol of national secrets and the intricate bureaucracy hidden behind them. The country operates not only on freedom and transparency, but also on things that are unseen and unknown to most of us. Perhaps that's what makes Taryn Simon's 2007 publication of her photographic series 'An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar' so timely and appealing.

Leaving behind the representational modes that used to characterize the country – the inherent optimism of Life magazine editorials or the meandering road trips of Walker Evans or Stephen Shore – Simon’s 64 images and accompanying captions penetrate places in the USA few have seen but many suspect must exist, and some places so obscure we’ve never even dreamed of them: like the Missile Control Center on the nuclear submarine USS Nevada – a claustrophobic, 1970s’-era control room dominated by a panel of large buttons, knobs and antiquated monitors. From Simon’s detailed caption we learn that the officer seated at the control panel can pull the trigger only after ‘opening a series of locked boxes’, the keys for which are kept in multiple safes, for which the combinations must be ‘called in’: ‘When the Fire Control Panel indicates “FIRE”, he pulls the trigger which ignites the gas generator and ejects the missile from its tube.’ This is the kind of Cold War-era intrigue that Salman Rushdie, in his foreword to Simon’s publication, calls ‘occult glamour’; and it is this occult glamour that Simon seizes in her meticulously composed photographs taken with a 4x5 camera, heightening their conspiratorial intrigue with encyclopaedic, matter-of-fact captions. In addition, Simon cultivates her own brand of glamour: an element Rushdie identifies as her ‘powers of persuasion’, which must play a part in the arduous, unfathomable process by which she gained access to all these places.

As a young woman of 33, Simon cuts an unlikely figure for someone who has stepped over the boundaries of Plum Island Animal Disease Center in Long Island and photographed exploding warheads on Florida’s Eglin Air Force Base with her camera’s shutter hooked up to the trigger. I remember reading that Joan Didion, as a young journalist, would sit by the phone in her hotel room when researching her stories, trying to muster the courage to call her sources; but Simon doesn’t seem crippled by any of the same fear of making contact. Working with a rotating team of producers, she spent four years researching the sites for her project on the Internet and fitting them into pre-determined categories: ‘religion’, ‘nature’, ‘science’, ‘government’, ‘security’ and ‘entertainment’. She wrote countless emails and made endless follow-up phone calls to obtain permission to take her photographic equipment inside notoriously restricted spaces such as the Church of Scientology Celebrity Centre in Hollywood and the CIA Original Headquarters Building in Langley, Virginia. She didn’t crawl under fences: doors were opened for her. (She attributes some of her success to the initial permission of Army and Homeland Security, which helped her gain access to certain government sites. She is also the first to admit that her status as a young woman made her seem to be a less threatening breach of security.) In interviews, Simon makes her process sound bureaucratic and banal, admitting that it’s ‘extremely calculated’. Yet the long paper trail that leads to the realization of the photographs, raising the issue of how Simon managed to access those locations, casts its own seductive spell.

The density of information in the captions that accompany Simon’s photographs opens each work up again, like unlocking a Pandora’s box.

Though she battles with some of the same restrictions as a photojournalist, Simon describes her project as the ‘aesthetic antithesis of photojournalism’. She claims she’s not interested in ‘stolen’ images, but considers each work to be a ‘collaboration’. Her aim is not only to expose her subjects but also to seduce her viewer: ‘Set design’, she admits, ‘is a big part of my project [...] I look for something that is going to be seductive’;

even if this means rearranging a pig's head and maggot-infested fruit in the contraband foods area of New York's JFK airport to make it look more like a Dutch still life, or revisiting the Imperial Office of the World Knights of the Ku Klux Klan after she wasn't satisfied with her first shoot.

While her photographs are so frank and tightly composed that there is little room for abstraction or interpretation, the density of information in the texts that accompany them opens each one up again, like unlocking a Pandora's box. An image of a handgun frame being poured from molten metal allows for a caption concerning handgun statistics in the USA, while the caption beside an image of four apprehended Mexicans at the US/Mexican border provides data about the number of times each of the four men had attempted to cross illegally. But Simon skirts a definitive position or agenda. The texts maintain a consistently objective voice, like that of an instruction manual, offering details almost ad absurdum. Her command of arcane statistics and terminology such as 'Exotic Newcastle Disease' or 'Cryostasis' adds to the intrigue of an image rather than explaining it away. She hasn't just photographed these sites, she has become an expert on each one, and we trust her expertise implicitly: what we see and what we read make for a complete, authoritative package. Without the captions, we wouldn't know the difference between a controlled avalanche blast and the blast of nuclear weapons testing.

According to Simon, the text and image format for 'An American Index...' was inspired by the logs and journals of early explorers of the New World, who hand-drew pictures and labelled them with a cold recording of data. Her body of work attempts to forge a new valuation of the American landscape, but I wonder whether some of the borders Simon crosses would be better left intact, just as those lands 'found' by explorers might have been better left 'undiscovered'. Images such as one depicting a woman awaiting an operation to repair her hymen, whose straddled legs on a surgical table are shielded only by a white sheet, verge on the pornographic; I feel uncomfortable that such an intimate, personal procedure is being exposed in the same context as the disposal of medical waste. The caption is even more revealing: the patient is receiving the procedure from 'a plastic surgeon she located on the Internet' who 'charges \$3,500 for a hymenoplasty [and] also performs labiaplasty and vaginal rejuvenation'. Simon also photographed Don James, who suffered from terminal cancer, sitting in his pyjamas in a wheelchair after he had filled his prescription for a lethal dose of Nembutal.

Even with permission, Simon often puts herself in danger to get her shot. We can picture her asking a room full of KKK members to pose, or hovering with her camera over a hibernating black bear and her cubs. If the danger is not obvious from the photo, the captions remind us of the procedures she has had to follow to enter places such as 'a biosafety level 2 plus lab which requires, among other things, controlled access, decontamination of all waste, decontamination of lab clothing before laundering and that air must be exhausted, not recirculated'. Or a Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility, where 'a human standing one foot from an unshielded capsule would receive a lethal dose of radiation in less than ten seconds'. As tempting as it may be to read the photographs as an implicit leftist comment on the enhanced security measures implemented since 9/11, their captions make it apparent that access to such places is restricted not to service paranoia, but to shield us from danger.

Simon's photographs expose a terrifying and sometimes revolting side of the USA and its wrong-turns on its unfettered bearing toward progress. One of the most disturbing images is of a white tiger named Kenny, confined inside a wire cage. At first glance Kenny resembles a fierce and exotic cat from a Las Vegas spectacle, but closer up his face looks strangely like that of a harmless rabbit or a small teddy bear. He confronts the camera looking unexpectedly vulnerable and deformed. We learn from the caption that his 'mental retardation and significant physical limitations' are due to the inbreeding necessary to create white tigers. This is perhaps the most literal translation of the tenets of progress gone wrong - not only the questionable activities that take place behind America's closed doors, but the retardation and permutations of those activities - the new situations and hidden disasters that our so-called advances have spawned.

One discomfiting effect of 'An American Index...' is the sense that it renders all these sites - both hidden and unfamiliar - as equivalent, and therefore implies that there may be something sinister about all of them. While some indeed might be frightening, there are plenty of others that fulfil a nerdy curiosity, rather than a morbid one. George Lucas' model of Death Star II, photographed at his workplace, Skywalker Ranch, in its 'true orientation' (as opposed to the mirror image of it that was shown in the film Return of the Jedi, 1983), for instance, or the Hoh Rain Forest, the wettest spot in the continental US, where ingredients for cancer treatments occur naturally. By casting an aura of mystery over all of them, does Simon misrepresent them? Can the simulation of a 'Prisoner of War Interrogation Resistance Program' be compared to the simulated exam that helps medical students identify physical abuse? This uncomfortable friction between images is especially apparent in the artist's portraits of religious practitioners, which, through their inclusion here, run the risk of being implicated in something secretive or sinister. Can members of the Lakota tribe performing a sacred ritual be compared to anti-Zionist rabbis or serpent handlers? Doesn't this give them all a cult-like aura?

Simon's work forms an inventory of the fading patriotic fantasies of the USA, of places that look so locked in time that they are dream crushing.

It's common to think that the darkest secrets are those that are hidden from view or can never be seen or represented, but that is not necessarily always true, and some of Simon's photographs may be trying too hard to seduce us into believing it. According to the artist: 'The work is not meant to be didactic at all; if anything, it should lead to more confusion.' But in some instances, her objectives seem so easily encapsulated in one photograph and her grip on the background information so tight, that we have little chance to think otherwise. We can't know if she's telling the truth, but we trust the privileged access she's been given. This might be why the pictures seem to sit so uncomfortably on the walls of a museum, or even on the pages of a contemporary art magazine. They aren't obvious fictions, nor do they fit the mould of photojournalism. Taken together, they create the impression that everything has been thoroughly, even overly, prepared for her viewers. However, Simon is so well-versed in the history of photography - effortlessly gathering references from Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Joel Sternfeld and the Center for Land Use Interpretation without mimicking or imitating any of them - that she even sidesteps the potential pitfalls of her project in the eyes of an art audience.

For all the unwelcome surprises 'An American Index...' reveals about the USA, as an American I can't help feeling a twinge of patriotism looking at it; after all, these are some of the places where the American Dream is made - places that represent, or once represented, our country's ethnic diversity, freedom of religion, and scientific advances, like the 'cloud-seeding' aircraft that can actually change the weather or the telescope at the Kitt Peak National Observatory which can photograph the 'Pac-Man' Nebula 9,500 light years away. Simon's subjects also play into the tradition of movies from my childhood (and presumably hers too) such as War Games (1983), Top Gun (1986) or The Hunt for Red October (1990) - finger-on-the-trigger thrillers born in and left over from the Cold War. An image of the members of The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation can elicit the same breathless feeling I get when I see Jack Bauer interrogating a suspected traitor on 24 (2001-ongoing). Simon keeps an inventory of our fading patriotic fantasies, places that she admits looked so 'locked in time' they were 'dream crushing': the NASA Beach House - built in 1962 to accommodate the families of astronauts quarantined before launch - which we never got to glimpse when we watched the shuttle taking off on television in school; the underground basketball court in the thermonuclear bunker at the Cheyenne Mountain Directorate, which has something in common with the absurd banality of the red phone. These places do hold secrets, but Simon's photographs humanize them. Freedom's opposite may be lurking behind closed doors, but this also where the fiction of the American Dream is being constantly resuscitated.

The red phone will have to remain the stuff of folklore, however, as the White House was one of the few places that patently refused to grant Simon any access. But a little of my own research unearthed a question-and-answer session on the White House official website that asserts: 'There is no red phone in the Oval Office'. It doesn't mention whether there might be one hidden somewhere else.

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