

The Color Of A Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection 2013-2021

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The Internet—and its various search engines and apps—including Google, Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok, and so on—promises us all the world's images. Just type a word (or a few) into a search box and instantly you'll usually see an endless scroll of related images. It's beyond a doubt that the Internet is the first—and usually last—stop of almost all image searches today.

Yet before the Internet, what did we do?

Those of us who are old enough remember we “searched” in books and periodicals. We'd visit libraries and pore through whatever was available on our subject of interest to try to locate the most relevant squares and rectangles scattered throughout the text (or in the “plates” section) to get our search results, which we might then photocopy and put in folders to save for our records.

If you were lucky enough to live in New York City or nearby though, there was The New York Public Library's Picture Collection. Founded in 1915, The Picture Collection was—and still is—an unparalleled repository of images to search through. At its height, the collection contained more than 6 million images divided into 12,000 categories—many of which were user-generated through queries made to the collection staff—making it the largest collection of its kind in any public library system. And all of the images, divided into browsable folders like at a record store, could be rifled through and even borrowed by anyone possessing a library card.

During its history, and especially as postwar U.S. industry and culture called for constant innovation, The Picture Collection served as an important reference for designers, illustrators, filmmakers—and artists. Diego Rivera, Joseph Cornell, and Walker Evans were regular users, as was Andy Warhol, who infamously never returned hundreds of the images he borrowed.

Taryn Simon is a more contemporary admirer of The Picture Collection. Her admiration recently has resulted in a nine-year research project which has produced her fascinating exhibition of photographs, 'The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection', 2013–21, currently on view in The Picture Collection's home at The New York Public Library's main 42nd Street branch through May 15, 2022. Simon's exhibition has arrived at a crucial moment. In August the library announced that The Picture Collection would be archived and available only via specific request. This change would prohibit users from browsing and borrowing materials—making it much less accessible to the public. It also would change the nature of the collection as it was unclear whether it will continue to be added to. However, as of September 17th, the library reversed course and announced it would keep the collection open.

The insect-oriented title of Simon's project comes from a request the Collection's curators fielded at one point, and its randomness and unexpected beauty point towards some of the captivating themes of Simon's work, such as the Collection's inherent subjectivity, resulting from its user-generated nature, and the subtle joys this idiosyncratic analog organization has offered for thousands of people throughout its existence. Similar to, but in a different way than Simon's past project Image Atlas (which she created with programmer Aaron Swartz), the work also indirectly functions as a commentary on modern image search algorithms, which claim to be neutral, universal visual languages, but are in reality are subject to the same pressures of any human authoritative structure and thus may not be that dissimilar from The Picture Collection.

Formally, each one of Simon's photographs presents a selection of images taken from specific Picture Collection folders on neutral gray backgrounds in brushed aluminum frames. In the Salomon Room at the library—the main exhibition space for the show—we see displayed, among others, Folder: Snow - Avalanches, Folder: Police - United States, and Folder: Abandoned buildings and towns, and each photograph presents anywhere from twenty-one (Avalanches) to over one-hundred (Abandoned buildings and towns) pictures within it; and the pictures from the Collection files are usually no larger than the size of standard sheets of paper (8.5 x 11 inches). In each photograph, the folder images have been arranged in a particular way so the images overlap with each other, and in some photographs, the overlap is much more extreme than in others. Folder: Abandoned buildings and towns, for example, recalls a spread of playing cards, where you can only see around a fifth of each image. In each photograph you can also see slight shadows around certain edges of the images, highlighting that these were photographed and as such, the objecthood of the Picture Collection records.

It's clear Simon deeply admires and values the Picture Collection, based on her nine years of research and attention to its granularities, and importantly, her project has resulted in something much more extensive than just photographs. Alongside her photographs, Simon presents ephemera about the collection that she has found to be of note, such as rarely seen photographs sold to the collection by Dorothea Lange, as well as image requests from users, which could come in written and drawn form. Finally, as books have always been an integral part of Simon's projects, this is no exception. She has published a robust catalog about the project with essays by Tim Griyn and the NYPL's Joshua Chuang, and which includes over two hundred pages of correspondence and documents related to the collection, a selection of photographs removed from the collection, as well as a complete list of the subject headings. While Simon probably did not set out to save the collection when she began her project, one can't help but think she had something to do with it, and current and future creatives should be thankful for her effort (and the efforts of the community of Picture Collection supporters) to make a great work of art and sustain the Collection—which could also be considered a great work of art.