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# Art in America

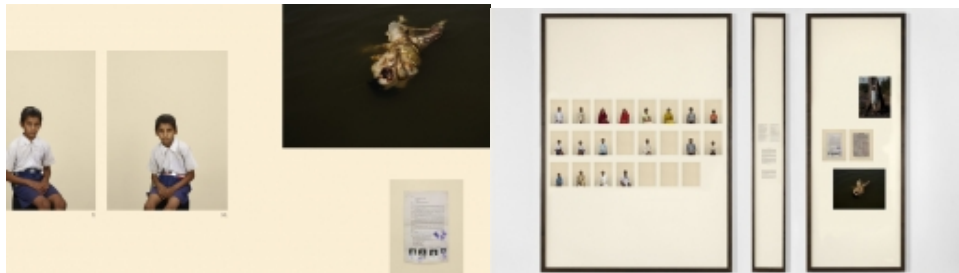
INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

### Case Studies: Taryn Simon at MoMA

by Camille Xin

Powerful repetition permeates Taryn Simon's latest work, which comprises 18 "chapters," combinations of image and text framed in varying sizes. Each chapter of "A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters" includes three segments: on the left, one to three portraits, a central text panel where the artist provides narrative details and, on the right, footnotes that include fragmentary stories and documentary evidence. Tonight, nine of those chapters get their American debut at MoMA in New York.

The works were produced in 2008–11, as the artist traveled around the world researching 18 bloodlines and recording their related stories. The subjects Simon documents include the "living dead" in India, victims of genocide in Bosnia, test rabbits infected with a lethal disease in Australia, the first woman to hijack an aircraft and participants in an active blood feud in Brazil. The collection is at once cohesive and arbitrary, mapping the relationships among chance, blood, and other components of fate.



"It is Taryn's most ambitious project to date, one that redefines photography within an expanded field, where categories of reportage, semiotics, conceptualism, and portraiture blur," says Roxana Marcoci, MoMA's curator of photography, who also organized the show in the adjacent galleries, "The Shaping of New Visions," a summary of the 100 years of experimental photography. Simon's exhibition is a worthy heir to that history.

"A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters" was exhibited last year at Tate Modern, London and Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin and will be shown at MOCA, Los Angeles, in fall 2012.

**CAMILLE XIN** Your previous projects, *The Innocents* (2003), *An American Index of the Hidden and*

*Unfamiliar* (2007) and *Contraband* (2010), have prepared me for your penchant to obstacles and your ability of getting access to things not open to the public, but I'm still awed by the complexity and the scale of difficulties of your new work. How did you start this laborious project?

**TARYN SIMON** At first I was just thinking about my tendency to catalog things that are ultimately disjointed or abstract but appear comprehensive through a determined title and structure. This led me to consider catalogues that I couldn't curate or edit—an index where I couldn't veer off in different directions. This led me to blood, representing an order that is assumed to be determined and directed. In the resulting work, I wanted to look at the collision of order and disorder—the order of blood butting up against the apparent disorder of the stories.

**XIN** The eighteen chapters explore issues of biology and destiny, survival and circumstance and double lives and identities. The story of chapter I led to the title of the project, "A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters," and set up the tone and theme of the work.

**SIMON** Chapter I highlights a bloodline in which four living members in a family are listed in the local village registry as dead. But for me, the title also functions as a metaphor in which we are all, in a way, the living dead representing the past's future and the future's past.

**XIN** How did you choose each story?

**SIMON** Each chapter is chosen for a specific reason. In Chapter I, you see a complete collapse of logic as I'm photographing people who are supposedly dead. A photograph is often used as a proof of life. Yet these men remain dead. In Chapter XIV, I highlight the idea of a relentless return through a Druze family in Lebanon in which several members are reincarnated. One individual in the bloodline has two birthdates—one in the 1800s and one in the 1900s. He is both his father's father and his father's son. Chapter IV considers the idea of living two lives at one time through a body double. He was embedded in a narrative that became his own by force.

**XIN** In that sense, these stories continue the theme of your previous project *The Innocents*: People are caught up in a narrative that is not their own. I know the largest part of your work is preparation. Can you use chapter I to describe your process?

**SIMON** I read a fictional story about somebody who was dead on paper but actually alive. During research to see if this existed, I was led to Uttar Pradesh in India. Working with translators, fixers and fact-checkers, we found a bloodline with four members listed as dead. Their relatives bribed the record officials to have them declared dead in order to redirect the hereditary transfer of land to themselves. The organizing of the bloodline and gaining permissions is a process that can often take up to two years and is constantly unfolding and mutating. There is a lot of letter writing, phone calling, researching, culling of information.

The portrait's neutral background is deceiving, as it eliminates context. For several of these works, I traveled to three or more different countries to photograph all of the individuals in one particular bloodline. On several occasions, I worked with people who didn't have telephones or access to the Internet. There was a considerable amount of invisible work.

**XIN** Which chapter was the most difficult case and what was the most dangerous situation you faced during the shooting?

**SIMON** In Tanzania, our camera equipment was seized and held for days with demands for money. In the Philippines, we encountered dangerous weather conditions and landslides in the mountain province. But the most complex situation was in Northeastern Brazil. I was documenting two bloodlines that have been in an active blood feud over the past decade, involving the deaths of several family members, associated individuals and innocent bystanders. To get both families to agree to participate in this project and to get everyone to sit for their portraits in a safe environment was not easy. For this I traveled with four military escorts. One woman received a death threat while I was photographing her, and we had to shut down the shoot.

**XIN** Presenting such violent and dramatic stories, why did you decide to use a plain and taxonomic presentation?

**SIMON** I was struggling to suggest that the chaos, violence and survival that surround us are somehow as patterned or coded as blood itself.

**XIN** I heard some people in the bloodlines died after their photos were taken.

**SIMON** Of course. The bloodlines are constantly changing and moving with time's continuum. People continue to be born and die. A photograph freezes time and takes something out of its before and after. This is often referred to as violence. My interpretation is the opposite. Time's continuum is violent and the photograph is the removal and the breath.

**XIN** Why did you frame text and juxtapose it with the photographs, thus giving it equal standing with the images?

**SIMON** In my mind, text always had an equal standing with the images, but in my early works, I didn't quite pull it off in the presentation.

**XIN** Do you think photography alone is inadequate in terms of what you want to convey?

**SIMON** It's not that it's inadequate. It's just my medium is a combination of text, graphic design and photography, and my interest lies in issues of translation, interpretation and exchange. That's why this work itself is divided into three different segments: The very ordered portraits panels, the long and narrow text panel resembling a scroll, and the fragmented footnote images designed to resemble how we receive information on the internet or in conversation in an entropic form with no clear linear path.

**XIN** The presentation of your deadpan portraits reminds me of the accumulative, almost hypnotic repetition in Avro Part's music or Pina Bausch's dance. In turn, the footnote panel serves as the tone modification following the repetition: the disruption of the line or the order. I notice text is integrated in all of your projects. Why are you so interested in words?

**SIMON** My father and grandfather were both photographers, and as a kid I was introduced to the outside world through slideshows accompanied by data or stories. I guess that's the root of a tradition I continue to operate within.

**XIN** Truth and ambiguity are related in your work like double blades. When you photographed people in a uniform format, and arrange them in plain grids, do you think you risk eliminating their context and

their identities?

**SIMON** I think the individuality of each person is both affirmed and denied. The neutral background in each photograph highlights the individual through isolation. On the other hand, the design of the work, with these portraits placed in massive grids, negates individuality.

**XIN** Why did you decide to withhold pictorial pleasure and aesthetic embellishment that are present in your previous works?

**SIMON** In my early years as a photographer, I was very much committed to the seductive qualities of lighting, geometry, narrative structure, composition, etc. Over the years, the progression of my work has involved shedding style and embellishment. I'm still committed to all of the above pursuits but in a barer, machinelike form. In this particular work, I'm not only thinking about the single image but the cumulative effect and appearance. Having said that, in the footnote panel, the design and photography are personal and arbitrary and play around with pictorial pleasure.

**XIN** Much of the impact of this project lies in the invisible space between images and text. What do you invite viewers to find there?

**SIMON** That's up to their participation and interpretation. They either find something or get lost. I'm interested in how images are transformed by text and text by the images.

**XIN** I agree with Homi Bhabha that you successfully "prevent the project from becoming a sentimental catalogue of victims and disasters." And with this austere and rigid presentation, you also reduce the notion of photography's exoticism and voyeurism. Do you think it might help to resolve the conflict between looking and seeing?

**SIMON** I don't know. I intentionally steer clear of any overt sympathy and intimacy, and present a position of "not knowing." By maintaining a clear visual distance from the subjects and withholding emotional triggers, I hope to frustrate people's viewing habits.

**XIN** In this project you employ many contradictory elements and forms, such as a desire for alterity vs. a curatorial reserve; an intention to uncover and reveal vs. a preference for bare and restrained representation that doesn't give much; an extreme order and repetitiveness in the portrait panel vs. a randomness in the footnote panel; an interest in mind-boggling dramas vs. a refusal of tearjerker presentation.

**SIMON** I'm always working with a fractured brain—trying to keep different aspects of the work alive at one time.

**XIN** Your work eludes easy categorization by blurring the boundary between documentary photography and conceptual photography. How do you define your work?

**SIMON** It definitely touches pre-existing traditions. At best, I hope it bridges lots of disciplines and reaches a less familiar and interdisciplinary territory.

**XIN** It seems to me that you use photography as a test of its own power, ambiguity and limits as much as of your own.

**SIMON** I don't know. It seems like human nature to seek purpose. I guess I may also explore the possibility of purposelessness. When you try to find the center of control or power, you're often confronted with its absence.