

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



How artist Taryn Simon and curator Philip Tinari are tackling censorship in China

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Images from 'A Living Man Declared Dead' in a gallery at the Ullens Center in Beijing, with black areas clearly visible

English-language websites in Beijing are talking of a new exhibition by Taryn Simon, recently opened in the city's Ullens Center for Contemporary Art. In *A Living Man Declared Dead*, the New York photographer presents 12 photographic "chapters" from around the world, depicting ordinary people caught up in geopolitical storms whose damage has rippled into the lives of those around them.

Yet none mentions one of the most striking details about the show: that among Simon's works are numerous black painted oblongs and squares. These represent works either too sensitive to be shown or ones that were refused entry into China by state censors. The black areas are highly conspicuous, especially those indicating the absence of Simon's three-panel "chapter" on South Korea: a black triptych, pulling the eye towards it like a colour-field painting, and yet, to local media, apparently as invisible as a black hole.

What for Simon has been an experience verging on the surreal is for Ullens' director Philip Tinari "nothing unexpected". The way in which *A Living Man Declared Dead* took its current, redacted form is an everyday story of the tussle with Chinese cultural censorship. Even so, with

these black spaces, both curator and artist seem to have hit on an intriguing tactic: compliance vying with defiance.

The title for Simon's latest project is taken from her chapter on India. This depicts an elderly farmer who discovers that he has been "declared dead" to the authorities by family members, so that they can seize his land. In each "chapter", set in countries as varied as Spain, Lebanon and Australia, Simon presents small portraits of relatives in her chosen subject's "bloodline". A second panel, showing text, builds up the chapter's narrative, while a third – the "footnote" panel – contains images of objects or documents that deepen our understanding of the chapter as a whole.

Images of fragments abound in these displays, whether human remains from Srebrenica, or a fragment of the aircraft blown up by the Palestinian hijacker Leila Khaled. These metonyms, or parts by which we recognise a whole, are one way of understanding the show's complex cross-currents. While Simon nods to the prevailing orthodoxy of the "impossibility of completeness", the fragmentation imposed on her work in China takes on an unexpected new level of meaning. Simon's first encounter with the Chinese authorities took place during an earlier phase of making *A Living Man Declared Dead*, when she accepted that state censors themselves would find the subject for her China chapter. She explains how they never gave any reasons as to why they offered her the particular family she ended up photographing. In just one detail in a case brimming with irony, parts of precisely this chapter were later denied entry into China: the censors censoring the censors. Simon's unusually passive role in its construction, she says, "makes me see the China chapter almost as a piece of performance art". Tinari, meanwhile, with years of experience on China's art scene, casts a jaded eye over the events that led up to the painting of blackened patches on his gallery wall. "I don't really see what has happened as an 'incident', so much as a way of laying bare the way this type of cultural regulation works," he explains.

Tinari is well placed to know about these mystifying workings. In 2011, Ai Weiwei cancelled a much-awaited retrospective at the Ullens Center in protest over pressure from the authorities to delay its opening. This autumn, along with Simon's show, the gallery is mounting a retrospective of sculptor Wang Keping, a fellow participant with Ai in the famous impromptu *Stars* exhibition of 1979.

One piece by Wang that is conspicuous in its absence is "Silence", his sculpture of a man's mouth stuffed with a plug. Tinari explains how there are inevitably certain lines that cannot be crossed: "Even as someone who has been here for years, as an outsider you sometimes don't know what you are up against," he admits candidly. He talks of operating constantly in a grey area, the grounds for what is acceptable constantly shifting.

By June, Tinari sensed how difficult it was going to be to get certain pieces into the country. He took a decision not to submit the text panels, as artwork, to the censors at all. "If you put the text next to the images, you make them decipherable. I felt this would jeopardise the exhibition, almost certainly leading to more of the visual material being refused . . . So we decided to import the portrait panels and the footnote panels only."

While waiting for news on what would not be allowed in, both Tinari and Simon had to tackle the problem of mounting the exhibition without text panels. In the end, it was Simon who had the idea of black painted fields to show the absences (whether because of direct censorship, or

material not submitted to the censors). It turned out to be a solution that satisfies both logistics and principles: “The public was going to see it in this fragmented form, and I wanted to make sure that they understood why,” she explains.

It was only well into September, with the show a matter of weeks away, that they finally learnt what the authorities had deemed unacceptable: images from the India and China chapters, as well as the entire South Korea chapter, whose theme of people abducted by North Korea clearly hit too close to home. Yet Tinari hit on a way of restoring Simon’s explanatory material. Although they are not hung as artworks, the texts can be consulted by gallery-goers in an internally produced booklet distributed with every ticket, all translated into Chinese.

Artistic censorship may be a bane but curator and artist have discovered intriguing, unforeseen interpretations. Tinari refers to the whole process as a curatorial experiment: “It’s like putting trace elements in something: you run it through the system and see what happens.”

Simon sees the exhibition’s metamorphosis as a comment on its earlier self. She points out how the show’s new black “absences” set off echoes, particularly in her Germany chapter. This depicts the descendants of the Nazi-era governor of Poland, Hans Frank, who owned priceless looted art. Some of it has never been recovered, and among the objects Simon photographed is a print of Raphael’s “Portrait of a Youth”, stolen from Krakow’s Czartoryski Museum, where the empty frame still hangs as a reminder of its absence.

“Normally at this stage I feel a work is finished,” Simon says. “But with new resonances like these emerging, this exhibition still feels very alive.”

‘A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII’, to January 5, ucca.org.cn