Surely among the most charming—if also humbling—passages in recent art theory arises at the beginning of Douglas Crimp’s *On the Museum’s Ruins* (1993), in which the art historian tells the story of his Idaho-based grandmother asking to read one of his recent essays. Saturating her request only grudgingly, he has no idea what she could possibly glean from his specialized prose, Crimp presents her with a text on Degas and photography, which concludes with a particularly important discussion of a picture featuring the artist’s niece. This image, the scholar writes, nearly un kapital Degas’s modernist reflection about his medium by virtue of correspondences found among the picture’s lace background, the girl’s lace dress, and, significantly, the gaps in her smile—suggesting a pun in French between lace (dentelle) and tooth (dent). That provides a subtle metaphor for the photographic medium’s singular intertwining of positive and negative, presence and absence. Suffice to say, such Derridean wordplay does not capture the imagination of Crimp’s grandmother, who still makes a crucial observation: the girl is not wearing lace, she notes, but instead eyelet embroidery. And Crimp, grasping that his linguistic construction has come tumbling down through an insight provided by someone inexperienced in needlepoint, quilting, and braiding, nevertheless comes away with a realization that will pass the way from considerations of modernism to those of postmodernism and, more important, of a postmodernist conception not steeped in totalizing theories. As he famously writes, “What any of us sees depends on our individual histories, our differently constructed subjectivities.”1

What seems of particular importance about Crimp’s anecdote today—a historical moment when the field of art is widely suspected to be at an impasse—is its appearance as the scholar seeks to revisit photography’s radical reevaluation during the late 1970s.2 At that watershed moment, he observes, the medium occupied a particularly embattled place in the art world. On the one hand, it was finally recognized as being on par with its disciplin ary peers, becoming newly subject to principles of connoisseurship and increasing market values. On the other hand, its unique and continuing access as an artistic medium to the “world outside” necessarily afforded it critical perspectives within an increasingly mediated society. Significantly, questions of representation were subsequently brought to bear not only on the modernist myth of the creating artist but also on the universal human subject who would be there to behold any artwork.

Yet of the latter scenario (and the dismantling of conventional notions of artist and viewer) lends greater specificity to Crimp’s portentous for postmodernism in *On the Museum’s Ruins*, precisely this character of photography—or, more accurately, of the photographic image—as it stands in relation to the world outside suggests that another framing for Crimp’s observations might now be necessary. Indeed, looking at the current distribution and circulation of photographic images, as well as at the seemingly novel quality of our present encounters with these images, one is tempted to introduce a literal valence to Crimp’s understanding of individual history’s role in determining what any person perceives. For that role could now be said to extend not just to what one sees but also to what one encounters at all—in another kind of watershed moment for photography, its images are increasingly found online, where what is made available to different users depends ever more on what they have previously sought. What one chooses to read or see draws similar information to one’s screen as sites customize themselves to what one encounters at all: in another kind of watershed moment for photography—or, more accurately, of the photographic image—as it stands in relation to the world outside suggests a specificity to Crimp’s postulations for postmodernism in *On the Museum’s Ruins*.

1. Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 4. It bears mentioning that this passage is all the more important for underscoring the importance Crimp attributes to the work of writing in art-historical theorization that mediate the modern myths of the creating artist and the universal human subject.2. The desire among art historians and critics to posit an end for art history shifted since its reevaluation in tandem with the first utterances of postmodernism, and what productive observations can we make about the field of art in turn? 3. The desire among art historians and critics to posit an end for art history shifted since its reevaluation in tandem with the first utterances of postmodernism, and what productive observations can we make about the field of art in turn? 4. The desire among art historians and critics to posit an end for art history shifted since its reevaluation in tandem with the first utterances of postmodernism, and what productive observations can we make about the field of art in turn?
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The desire among art historians and critics to posit an end for art theory shifted since its reevaluation in tandem with the first utterances of postmodernism, and what productive observations can we make about the field of art in turn? A new discursive mode might be wanted to describe contemporary models of cultural production. The simple question is then prompted: How have conditions around photography—or, more accurately, of the photographic image—as it stands in relation to the world outside suggested other framing for Crimp’s observations might now be necessary? Indeed, looking at the current distribution and circulation of photographic images, as well as at this seemingly novel quality of our present encounters with those images, one is tempted to introduce a literal valence to Crimp’s understanding of individual history’s role in determining what any person perceives. For that role could now be said to extend not just to what one sees but also to what one encounters at all: in another kind of watershed moment for photography, its images are increasingly found online, where what is made available to different users depends ever more on what they have previously sought. What one chooses to read or see draws similar information to one’s screen as sites customize themselves.
Alhurra is a U.S. government–sponsored, Arabic-language television network. Section 501 of the U.S. Information and Education Exchange Act, passed by Congress in 1948, authorizes the U.S. government to disseminate information abroad about the U.S. and its policies. Section 501 also prohibits domestic dissemination of that same information. It is therefore illegal to broadcast abroad about the U.S. and its policies. Section 501 also prohibits domestic audience of 21 million weekly viewers in 22 Arab countries. In April 2004, the network broadcasts 24-hour, commercial-free satellite programming to an anchor Mona Atari at the Alhurra news desk.

An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar

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Alhurra is Arabic for ‘the free one.’ This U.S. government–sponsored, Arabic-language television network broadcasts 24-hour, commercial-free satellite programming to an audience of 21 million mostly Muslim states. In August 2004, a second high-definition channel, Alhurra Iraq, was launched. Section 501 of the U.S. Information and Education Exchange Act, signed by Congress in 1948, authorizes the U.S. government to disseminate information abroad about the U.S. and its policies. Section 501 also prohibits domestic dissemination of that same information. It is therefore illegal to broadcast abroad about the U.S. and its policies. Section 501 also prohibits domestic dissemination of that same information. It is therefore illegal to broadcast

Fig. 2
An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar, 2007
Framed archival inkjet print and Letterman on wall, 37⅞ x 44 in (96 x 113.7 cm)

Anchor Mona Atari at the Alhurra news desk.

Alhurra TV, Broadcast Studio Springfield, Virginia
37 ¼ x 44 ¾ inches (94.6 x 113.7 cm)

An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar (2007), a work arising through her interest in discovering how the politics of aesthetics, with its vast wars of fact and fiction, operate parallel in culture. The Alhurra broadcast is legal for distribution abroad, such that the artist’s image gives sight to blindness at home regarding a program that unmistakably gives sight—with geopolitical consequences—to those who would be blind.

But in The Picture Collection such matters of presentation and classification take on a different quality along the axis of history, purely by virtue of the sheer idiocyncrasy of its display. Simon’s individual images feature numerous pictures of seemingly banal origins, with, say, an early-twentieth-century, fine-art photographic plate placed alongside an illustration from a recent fashion periodical, while the actual names of the various picture tiles seem rather be-locked in rational, organized under headings such as ‘Alley,’ ‘Beards,’ ‘Mustaches,’ and ‘Rue Vios.’ Simon takes the contents of this found in the Collection and arranges them for her artists, never changing the tile’s title. Similarly, the artist’s photographs immerse the viewer on ambiguous ground in relation to these images, as Simon places each of her works in wire-hung frames more associated with the era of photography’s inception than with the museum or gallery environment today (pp. 22-23). In fact, although so many of the images she depicts conjure a sense of the past—featuring the styles and events of generations long passed—such narratives seem oriented toward the future. However many pictures are available to be seen, the focus of her individual project, as in Palast: Abandoned Buildings & Towns (p. 40), whose images are almost entirely occluded—and yet so familiar as to make it all too easy for audiences to fill in the blanks.7

6. As Rancière writes: “The distribution of the sensible worlds which one has is what one can constitute or create, based on what they are and on the time and space in which this action is performed . . . it defines what is visible or not in a common space, inscribed with a common language, or with a specific one.” In this respect, one must note that Simon is unique among her peers for frequently negotiating a kind of interface between different contemporary notions of representation and, more precisely, of what may be seen philosopher Friedrich Schiller’s polemical authorship, or, as mentioned previously, through Jacques Rancière’s formulation of “the distribution of the sensible,” in “taken up in tandem with the bureaucratic administration and control of photography that legibly determines its actual access and resource to pictures.” To wit, consider Simon’s An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar (2007), a work arising through her interest in discovering how for a private citizen can go on obtaining access to observe and document areas and objects restricted from view—whether a nuclear waste facility, a contraband room, or the broadcast studio of Alhurra TV, a United States government–sponsored, Arabic-language television station that is not rendered visible within the popular consciousness of American society (fig. 2). This last example is especially significant for showing Simon’s ability to give the politics of aesthetics, with its vast wars of fact and fiction, operate parallel in culture. The Alhurra broadcast is legal for distribution abroad, such that the artist’s image gives sight to blindness at home regarding a program that unmistakably gives sight—with geopolitical consequences—to those who would be blind.

7. Simon has touched briefly on this idea in a recent essay considering the paradox that subtly courses through Taryn Simon’s work. As the artist frequently does in her various projects, Simon presents this material in the dialogue and exchange in art, and ask for a reconsideration of the politics of aesthetics, with its vast wars of fact and fiction, operate parallel in culture. The Alhurra broadcast is legal for distribution abroad, such that the artist’s image gives sight to blindness at home regarding a program that unmistakably gives sight—with geopolitical consequences—to those who would be blind.
To grasp this anachronism as it plays out in Simon’s project, however, one must first grapple with the history of this often-overlooked department of The New York Public Library, the Picture Collection itself, which has a Borgesian, false-like feel to it in its dwelling attempt to create an exhaustive catalog of the living world—a project that is manifesting in light of the Collection’s encyclopedic path and yet strangely prophetic of image resources and licensing today.

As told by successors of The New York Public Library, the Collection was conceived when, immediately after the opening of the library’s main branch in 1911, the institution’s Print Room found itself overwhelmed by requests for images “strictly from a subject point of view.” This development was driven by an exponential expansion of New York’s printing industries, both in terms of capacity and, given the day’s influx of immigrants, demand, and, equally significant, publishers’ graphic component in printing processes evolved to allow for photographic reproduction and color. Designers and illustrators were thus in need of source material on which to base and design their own work. With such an expansion also came the requirement among other industries—ranging to remain space with the terms—to generate graphic material, such that the library’s Print Room was approached by leagues of professionals in not only the realm of publishing but also advertising, motion, theater, architecture, and fashion. “Such demands could not possibly be satisfied by the faculty’s archive, which in any case were organized by an artist’s, in opposition to subject. And so, in 1914, the library began saving plates, posters, postcards, and photographs for the new sort of ‘reader,’” who was just as literate in pictures as in language—perhaps even more so.

Thousands of donations of material quickly followed at word of mouth spread, and the Picture Collection opened its doors the following year with roughly 30,000 different images in a broad spectrum of media, from postcards to magazine clippings, and an equally diverse range of genres, from fine art to the sciences. This trove would expand rapidly and exponentially, out time; it was estimated by the 1950s that, in addition to donations from benefactors, images clipped from more than sixty publications were being added to the Collection each week by library staff (the Collection now includes roughly 1.5 million images). As Romana Javitz, legendary curator of the Collection during its crucial period of development between 1929 and 1968, would write, “The entire panorama of the history of the world, its architecture, science, people, apparel, art, and everything that has been recorded graphically make up this collection.”

Javitz’s writing on the Picture Collection is invaluable regarding its conception and, over time, its changing complexion. But her accounts are most resonant within the larger expanse of photography’s history for a fundamental bond she posits between the medium’s indexicality and its instrumentalization by those who visit the Collection. In this respect, Javitz goes so far as to say in a 1940 essay that the Collection is a “comprehensive, unbiased record of the visual aspects of human knowledge...consulted and borrowed for information, to answer specific search[es] for facts.” All questions of the Collection’s ontology aside, there is, in truth, some entertainment to be found in this perspective. “Was Cleopatra beautiful?” Javitz asks rhetorically in a magazine piece. “[W]e’ll never know, she says, because the ancient Egyptians had no cameras!” And how would the New York Central Railroad ever have arrived at the correct yellow for its coach seats, if not for a picture of forsythia?

The picture collection has thus become a complex, architectonic, and artificial library of knowledge, a testament to the various, often-contingent, forces that have contributed to its expansive growth. The Collection’s vast holdings, which range from letters, spaces, and punctuation—meaning, by extension, that they thought by Borges’s narrator, must contain all possible combinations of letters, spaces, and punctuation—meaning, by extension, that they contain every possible permutation of such book and, moreover, contain every possible verbal construction, including permutations of the letters. Borges’s thought experiment was influenced for many artists at the beginning of professionalism—consider the examples, Richard Prince’s appropriation of thousands of snowflakes and the Collection’s—creating potentially referable to this seminal condition at the very threshold of the digital revolution. The image here is more than an image of the known world and, as such, there is no readily, unencumbered distinction between truth and fiction. There is no ready, unencumbered distinction between truth and fiction.
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4. Originally published in 1941, Jorge Luis Borges’s story “The Library of Babel” describes a vast library made up of interlocking hexagonal rooms containing
innumerable books. Apparently organized at random (and mostly composed of pure gibberish), these volumes nevertheless, it is
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and The New York Public Library’s Picture Collection,” originally
published in Biblion: The Bulletin of The New York Public Library
1, no. 1 (fall 1995). Available at www.nypl.org/node/62019.

10. The Picture Collection curator Romana Javitz herself points to the Collection’s role in the design of jewelry, clothes, watch
models, and fabrics, noting “American designs are influ-
enced by this picture service.” See Romana Javitz, “The PICTURE
COLLECTION of The New York Public Library,” 8, no. 1


13. Ibid.

Public Library. An Encyclopedia of New York City History, 1609-1969

Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York
Public Library.
Fig. 4.

Troy Webb
Some of the cities, The Fens, Virginia Beach, Virginia
Served 7 years of a 47-year sentence for Rape, Kidnapping and Robbery
By maintaining such a strict delineation of the photograph as a document—on something pointing to the outside-world—the Collection began to strain the kind of photographic quality as its own right, insofar as it offers fleeting portraits of its living content and assumes sociological dimensions, in both its content and its use. Javitz writes in 1933:

As in other years, requests kept pace with newspaper headlines. In the wake of Repeal, came search for images of whiskey flasks and Burroughs labels . . . Mae West brought requests for mustache caps . . . Picture requests for pogroms, burning of books in other days, revolutions . . . round out the year’s interests.

By 1942, the promissory laid out by her last notes on such “interests” become manifest in the United States military’s requests for images of the Japanese landscape. The current again lean on the promise of photographic factuality in her assessments, writing:

Since a soldier is taught to betray the enemy and not some undefined abstraction, he must learn to recognize that enemy, he must go into battle armed with visual knowledge of the face of the enemy and the contour of his lands.

Taking into consideration such developments, one sees that the shift and flow of image requests—in sheer scale and administration—temporally reflect larger societal forces, as when, for example, the Collection decided during World War II to sequence its geographic file, which was being heavily used by the military, for government need only so as to leave no trace of its searches in case they might reveal wartime strategy.

Or when, during the early 1950s, there was a nearly 43 percent increase in image requests, arising almost exclusively from the needs of artists newly hired by the Works Progress Administration to decorate buildings under construction and renovation throughout the city. Notably, in response, Javitz hired dozens of Works Progress Administration artists to assist in the organization and circulation of pictures in the library. And this move, over time, would have the added effect of introducing works by such artists as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange into the Collection as just as many more documents alongside mass-produced illustrations. Brought into contact with the Collection through the WPA, Roy Stryker of the Farm Security Administration donated approximately 40,000 such prints, repeatedly fearing their destruction by a Congress that might not approve of the images’ content.

Only during the mid-1950s were these pictures reclassified by The New York Public Library as photographs, and handed over to the Photography Department in direct response to rising market prices for the artists. As Simon notes, in a statement that has significance for its arrangement of picture from the Collection files. These works that later became “valued” were mined out of this public collection and relegated to an exclusive space, despite the artists’ express wish for their images to be democratically available.

Ironically, it is perhaps this last detail—a change in terminology prompted by societal causes from without—that best underscores a fundamental stress point within the Picture Collection pertaining to its internal organization. Or, more specifically, to a relationship forged there between image and text. For this relationship is tenuous at best, given that Javitz herself seems deeply doubtful of language’s capacity, to say nothing of its organization. Or, more specifically, to a relationship forged there between image and text. For this relationship is tenuous at best, given that Javitz herself seems deeply doubtful of language’s capacity, to say nothing of its organization. Or, more specifically, to a relationship forged there between image and text. For this relationship is tenuous at best, given that Javitz herself seems deeply doubtful of language’s capacity, to say nothing of its organization. Or, more specifically, to a relationship forged there between image and text. For this relationship is tenuous at best, given that Javitz herself seems deeply doubtful of language’s capacity, to say nothing of its organization. Or, more specifically, to a relationship forged there between image and text. For this relationship is tenuous at best, given that Javitz herself seems deeply doubtful of language’s capacity, to say nothing of its organization. Or, more specifically, to a relationship forged there between image and text. For this relationship is tenuous at best, given that Javitz herself seems deeply doubtful of language’s capacity, to say nothing of its organization. Or, more specifically, to a relationship forged there between image and text. For this relationship is tenuous at best, given that Javitz herself seems deeply doubtful of language’s capacity, to say nothing of its organization. Or, more specifically, to a relationship forged there between image and text. For this relationship is tenuous at best, given that Javitz herself seems deeply doubtful of language’s capacity, to say nothing of its organization.
In captivity, many birds develop Feather Destructive Behavior as a result of conditions including lack of psychological and emotional stimulation, stress, lack of companionship, and limited freedom. ‘Amiga’ is a blue and gold macaw suffering from this condition.
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conditions including lack of psychological and emotional stimulation, stress, and, currently, 'LIVE, see also Leap year.' Time and again, the
categories fail to contain.

By contrast, Javitz is willing to make the bold claim, ‘Pictures are now a universal form of communica-
tion.’ Yet, one notes, the form taken by such communication is decidedly contingent, determined, in other
words, entirely by use. In fact, explicating the Collection's changing classification scheme, Javitz states plainly
as a matter of fact that the Collection's subject headings should follow demands—an assertion that suggests what
is, in fact, most protrusive about the Collection and its conception of photography. For if the pictures retained
here are intended to circulate—such that they effectively anticipate their continuous recontextualization through
time—the same may well be said of the Picture Collection itself. Just as the meaning of any of its images is yet
to be formed, so the Collection awaits meaning in reception, with the terms set by reception itself reflected in the
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It should hardly come as a surprise that the very notion of classification here should meet as often as haphazard
and overdetermined in both presentation and reception, even while the photograph ostensibly retains its manda-
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Notably, Rivera would also express his belief that the scope and limits of the Collection might shape contempo-
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Notably, Rivera would also express his belief that the scope and limits of the Collection might shape contempo-
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It should hardly come as a surprise that the very notion of classification here should meet as often as haphazard
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Indeed, the question of projection also provides a significant thematic thread through Simon’s oeuvre, most literally, perhaps, in her Black Square pictures (2006– ) for which the series individual images within black frames and backgrounds matching the dimensions of Kazimir Malevich’s famous work. Often her subjects are troubling in nature—a book falsely purported to contain the minutes of a meeting among Jews planning to take over the world, male mosquitoes engineered to kill their offspring by passing along a lethal gene; Ethel and Julius Rosenberg’s final letter to their children, written the day of their execution. But these subjects are taken out of context and, in fact, framed by a work reading at the borders of representation. In other words, they reside in a space devoid of direction or, more precisely, devoid of options beyond the most basic categorizations offered by Simon’s titles. (The one instance where a picture and text meet—fully “developed,” as it were, with internal and external conditions finding explicit correlation—is in the image of a parent suffering from Peachy Destructive Behavior, wherein depression is made visible in the form of plucked feathers [fig. 5].) Given Simon’s gesture to Malevich, one might usefully compare her maneuver to that of another artist at the inception of modernism, Wassily Kandinsky, who once asserted that he liked to leave a part of every canvas blank, or unfinished. As art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh explains:

“That ‘empty space’ . . . was conceived of as . . . negating aesthetic imposition, functioning as a spatial nature that allowed the viewer to situate himself or herself in a relationship of mutual dependence with the ‘open’ artistic construct. The empty space functioned equally as a space of hermetic resistance, rejecting the assignment of ideological meaning and the false comfort of convenient readings alike.”

The potential implications—and precise nature—of such a “mutual dependence” today seem especially relevant for Simon’s engagement with the Picture Collection. To what extent, in other words, do these images announce their classifications—and to what extent do we project our preexisting ones upon them? Partly this question revolves around recognition. And true enough, one is bound to recognize a few images throughout her various compositions—in Folder: Costume—Veil (p. 72), for instance, where a famous Edward Steichen photograph appears in a book falsely purported to contain the minutes of a meeting among Jews planning to take over the world, male mosquitoes engineered to kill their offspring by passing along a lethal gene; Ethel and Julius Rosenberg’s final letter to their children, written the day of their execution. But these subjects are taken out of context and, in fact, framed by a work reading at the borders of representation. In other words, they reside in a space devoid of direction or, more precisely, devoid of options beyond the most basic categorizations offered by Simon’s titles. (The one instance where a picture and text meet—fully “developed,” as it were, with internal and external conditions finding explicit correlation—is in the image of a parent suffering from Peachy Destructive Behavior, wherein depression is made visible in the form of plucked feathers [fig. 5].) Given Simon’s gesture to Malevich, one might usefully compare her maneuver to that of another artist at the inception of modernism, Wassily Kandinsky, who once asserted that he liked to leave a part of every canvas blank, or unfinished. As art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh explains:

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But Simon seems to reanimate such a tension of hierarchies ever so lightly by marking our historical remoteness from representation and reality that is tenuous at best. And yet, taking into account Simon’s exploration of the Picture Collection, one notices that the instability of the image even here is incessantly bound up with its reception. In fact, the question of representation is of less concern to Simon than its relationship to memory and, more precisely, to how “the photographs replaced the memory of the actual perpetrator.” The status of the image is contingent not only on circumstance, but also on subjectivity and projection, such that the pictures may take on the ambiguous role of placeholders—providing the viewing subject with a sense of history where it is, in fact, absent. If Crimp writes that what each of us sees is necessarily one’s own history, the basic desirability of “mutual dependence” today seems especially relevant for Simon’s engagement with the Picture Collection. To what extent, in other words, do these images announce their own incommensurability, or, more precisely, do these projections beyond the most basic communicative stream by Simon’s titles. (The one instance where a picture and text meet—fully “developed,” as it were, with internal and external conditions finding explicit correlation—is in the image of a patent surmounting from Parody, forwards, wherein depression is made visible in the form of a phallophoric theater.)
... from this earlier moment. For if the discourse of High and Low seems largely settled today, the contours of the Picture Collection exceed such categorizations—but notably before the discourse ever took place. And so audiences inevitably recognize themselves in the Collection’s disorder even while seeking to differentiate themselves from it. Surveying chronologies in art, one typically imagines oneself at a natural end point or culmination of a continuous trajectory, but the Picture Collection shows any such comfortable perspective lines by which the present might inevitably recognize themselves in the Collection’s disorder even while seeking to differentiate themselves from it. And so audiences...
from this earlier moment. Or if the discourse of High and Low seems largely settled today, the contours of the Picture Collection exceed such categorizations—but notably before the discourse ever took place. And as audiences inevitably recognize themselves in the Collection’s disorder even while seeking to differentiate themselves from it. Surveying chronologies in art, one typically imagines oneself at a natural end point or culmination of a continuous trajectory, but the Picture Collection shows any such comfortable perspectival lines by which the present might be seen in relation to a distant past. Even with respect to critical techniques, the Collection seems to figure in advance artistic innovations that developed only generations after the department’s inception. It can seem as though a Baldessari-like figure had already passed through the files to erase the images’ instantaneous functionality.

But that artistic Conceptualism was shaped in structures of signification—how the meaning of an image or object shifts according to context—most important here is the impact of time on that operation. Simon suggests as much with her purposeful inclusion of Fisher Art (fig. 3). The title “Cats” likely seemed little more than another heading when the Picture Collection was created, but today it is all but impossible not to view it through the prism of search engines and cats as an online craze. One might again consider Simon’s Black Square works, in particular the image in Chapter X of a manual for learning the English language, buried in a time capsule during the 1936 World’s Fair, made with the intent of teaching people centuries from now who will have never read or heard the language. But the work most illustrating for the Picture Collection is another project that Simon developed contemporaneously—and, one suspects, in reply to the library’s collection—with the late programmer Aaron Swartz. For this project entwines any relationship of mutual dependence between viewer and image with the question of use. Titled Image Atlas (2012), the work consists of an algorithm that harnesses local search engines throughout the world in order to compare search results from different countries including Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Iran, New Zealand, North Korea, Russia, and the United States. (An atlas key enables searches in still other countries.) Users enter keywords of their choice, which are then translated into the relevant languages by Google Translate; the regional algorithms subsequently present the top image results from local search engines around the world. Regarding these images, Simon and Swartz indicated their desire to reintroduce a sense of difference into contemporary understandings of the global—manifesting, in effect, a concrete sense of gaps into the brave new highways of digital communication. Accordingly, searches might well give rise to similarities, but they will just as often generate highly divergent results for even the most basal of terms. For example, gatto will summon pictures of a four-tailed Puss in Boots, a bag of wheat in Korea, and, strangely, a robot in Iran, while North Korea offers no image whatsoever. The term evolution in perhaps even more telling, with political parties across the centuries arising in Chinese and Russian search engines, while the top picture in the United States comes from an appointment book program about the end of organized society (fig. 6). In their brief mission statement for the project, Simon and Swartz accordingly employ language far different from that used by Janis decades ago, saying that Image Atlas “interrogates the possibility of a universal language and questions the supposed innocence and neutrality of the algorithms upon which search engines rely.”

In this regard, Simon is quick to outline the subtle administration (intentional and not) of photographic images by every society, and, for that matter, by every online corporation, as is rendered apparent in their project. Among the various components the direct attention to are such factors as the actual languages available for translation by Google—a tacit judgment of relevance on the global stage regarding any region—and, of course, the accuracy of such translations. (As she says, again touching on the “empty space” between work and user: “I’m interested in the invisible space between people in communication, the space guided by translation and misinterpretation.”) The term evolution is perhaps even more telling, with political parties across the centuries arising in Chinese and Russian search engines, while the top picture in the United States comes from an appointment book program about the end of organized society (fig. 6).

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above, the algorithms themselves guide users to different results, frequently giving visible form—almost a kind of purgatorio—belief systems formed within specific locales. If words have different meanings in different geopolitical areas, such values are often at the service of governing systems, to say nothing of prevailing manners and custom. Indeed, whereas Roland Barthes’s deconstructions of myth in culture during the 1950s revolved around the identification of visual signs, today this could be called so many notions embedded in code. (Surmising a photograph of a politician looking into the distance, Barthes might call attention to the signs of futurity and progress that had been choreographed for instant recognition within the collective, mediated-consciousness. Now, such shared codes are redoubled in tags, and meshed by algorithm. As Simon notes in An Occupation of Loss, the “top results” for any search often grow more powerful as more new users are guided to top results.) Alternatively, with search engine optimization, the very notion of searching in rendered nautical, one gains only a false sense of discovery with any given user’s bio images, since these are often tailored to anticipated fashion. Accordingly, in Image Atlas, deconstruction as a critical model gives way to the passage of time, allowing users to see how the same search renders different results from day to day, as an interplay among users and algorithms unfolds globally.  

Such a postulation resonates strongly with another recent project by Simon, A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I – XVIII (2011), for which she traced different bloodlines throughout the world—effectively diagramming how the stories of individuals are continually meshed as they come into contact with larger cultural narratives and societal currents (fig. 7). What becomes palpable here are the various gaps—the people who could not be purchased, the states that fail off, the estrades that rise to the surface in a given historical context—all of them subject to contingency. And Simon’s group of such conditions for visibility—to say nothing of commun-ications, or fundamental legibility and shared understanding—in all the more evident in her An Occupation of Loss (2016), an installation that appeared at Park Avenue Armory, in New York (2016) and at Artangel, Islington, London (2018), within which professional mourners perform individual lamentations, from Viet’s Silence to Ecuadorian Jorales (fig. 8). While the piece posed questions regarding the limits (and potential articles) of personal expression in the public sphere, it revolved around the administration of society. All the performers invited to take part in the New York performance had to file with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and local consulates to obtain P-3 visas, which are reserved for artists considered “culturally unique.” Likewise, all performers invited to take part in the London performance had to file petitions with UK Visas & Immigration (Home Office) and local visa application centers to obtain Tier 2 (“Creative & Sporting”) visas. Simply put, however quips the songs of lamentation may or may not have been for audiences in New York, those who were not recognized by the governing systems of cultural exchange—and whose visa applications were therefore rejected—did not even have the opportunity to speak. In this regard, Simon is remarkably aware in her selection of the Picture Collection as a subject, since it mirrors her own oeuvre to date—providing evidence of inevitably failed attempts to organize the world in images and text—while at the same time being rich with implications for the organization of society more generally. If the Picture Collection has assumed sociological dimensions, so here does Simon’s own methodology. As Hal Foster writes in “An Archival Impulse,” conjecturing on various artists’ desires to delve into the idiosyncratic histories of modern art and philosophy, seeking our new ways of ordering both civilization and experience: “Perhaps, like the Library of Alexandria, any archive is founded on disaster (or its threat), pledged against a ruin that it cannot forestall.”

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40. As Simon observed in her interview with Cornell, among the Jakob [jew’s] woes, she declares: “But really, ‘top’ images represent an image at a given moment that is inevitably shaped by political and cultural events, trends, etc.” Her Cornell, “Image Atlas: An Interview with Taryn Simon.”

Simon invited thirty individuals to the Park Avenue Armory, New York, 2016 installation. Fig. 8. An Occupation of Loss online is to consider a conflation of two senses of the term. Perhaps a better way to articulate the tautology of searching and cultural events, trends, etc. See Cornell, “On Image Atlas: An Occupation of Loss” (2016), an installation that appeared at Park Avenue Armory, in New York (2016) and at Artangel, Islington, London (2018), within which professional mourners perform individual laments, from Yezidi deaths to Ecuadorian jade. While the piece posed questions regarding the limits (and potential artifice) of personal expression in the public sphere, it revolved around the administration of society. All the performers invited to take part in the New York performance had to file with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and local consulates to obtain P-3 visas, which are reserved for artists considered “culturally unique.” Likewise, all performers invited to take part in the London performance had to file petitions with UK Visas & Immigration (Home Office) and local visa application centers to obtain Tier 2 (“Creative & Sporting”) visas. Simply put, however opaque the songs of lamentation may or may not have been for audiences in New York, although those who were not recognized by the governing systems of cultural exchange—and whose visa applications were therefore rejected—did not even have the opportunity to speak. Likewise, all performers invited to take part in the London performance had to file petitions with UK Visas & Immigration (Home Office) and local visa application centers to obtain Tier 2 (“Creative & Sporting”) visas. Simply put, however opaque the songs of lamentation may or may not have been for audiences in New York, though those who were not recognized by the governing systems of cultural exchange—and whose visa applications were therefore rejected—did not even have the opportunity to speak. In this regard, Simon is remarkably astute in her selection of the Picture Collection as a subject, since it mirrors her oeuvre to date—providing an interior correlative in another usage: “to look through, examine some object.” Some fifty years later, such explorations would find additional ways of ordering both civilization and experience: “Perhaps, like the Library of Alexandria, any archive is founded on disaster (or its threat), pledged against a ruin that it cannot forestall.”

Such a postulation resonates strongly with another recent project by Simon, A Living Man Declared Dead and His Effects (2011), for which she traced different bloodlines throughout the world—effectively diasporic. As Hal Foster writes in “An Archival Impulse,” “the very notion of searching is rendered tautological; one gains only a false sense of discovery with any given search for images, since these are often tailored in anticipatory fashion. According to Image Atlas, deconstruction as a critical model gives way to the passage of time, allowing users to see how the same search renders different results from day to day, as an interplay among users and algorithms unfold globally.”

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42. For A Living Man Declared Dead and His Effects, Simon worked with Taryn Simon to create an installation consisting of a semi-circle of concrete pipes designed by Taryn Simon in collaboration with Shohei Shigematsu of the Office of Metropolitan Architecture.


See A Living Man Declared Dead and His Effects, Simon in collaboration with Shohei Shigematsu of the Office of Metropolitan Architecture.
Paperwork and the Will of Capital

Framed text and archival inkjet prints

85 × 73

Bratislava Declaration

Fig. 9.

Page 1 of 4
it is precisely such ruin, or erasures, that might be most intriguing. As Simon has said regarding her work with archives, “Something is said in the gaps and shifts among all the information that’s collected.”

And, in fact, Simon surveys an institution that is perpetually being reimagined, continually giving new meaning to the context of photography and, moreover, of that medium’s evolving status as a document. For what, after all, is a library? Perhaps no public institution is so fundamentally paradoxical in its constitution. It is ostensibly devoted to the preservation of cultural materials across the centuries, but only in tandem with the tenet of accessibility and the continuous distribution or circulation of these contents. And the latter makes this reservoir for knowledge (and, indeed, this basis for knowledge itself) uniquely subject to the whims of history, standing at a perpetually renegotiated interstice of governance, technology, and, most important, actual use. Even the modern library’s roots in the singular constitution of circumstances around the Enlightenment suggest such delicate contingency or, better, an acute sensitivity to special shifts in society. The august institution as we know it has emerged only when the principle of rationalist egalitarianism—according to which the library was a sphere sustained with the possibility of reference and research—coincided with technical innovations in publishing that altered the fundamental character of books as precious objects collected privately, to say nothing of the emergence of copyright laws that provided a formal basis for information’s more widespread dissemination and exchange. In this light, it might come as no surprise that Simon’s subsequent projects have often revolved around the historical specificity of institutions—and, by extension, the relative transience of the social structures that they provide. For example, in Paperwork and the Will of Capital (2016), Simon engages the dawn of postwar globalism: recreating and then photographing the formal counterparts for signings of accords and other agreements penned in recent decades by national powers at the 1944 United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference, in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire (fig. 9).

Each picture becomes a cipher of modern capitalism—a network of exchange offering a corollary, perhaps, of photography’s circulatory system—at the same time that it is, after all, a kind of nature morte, whereby the postwar order might itself eventually be seen a figure of history.

And again, Simon points such shifts in local and personal terms. Accordingly, and closer to home, one need look just at the continuing evolution of The New York Public Library—a relatively youthful institution, by any historical measure—on order to grasp the provisional character of any such entity. A little more than a hundred years after opening its doors, the library became embroiled in a controversy surrounding a proposed configuration called the Central Library Plan. Implicitly acknowledging the absence of civic funding to preserve aging volumes in existing facilities, the library proposed to demolish its historic stacks, whose contents would ultimately be relocated further away, including to a site outside the city. At the same time, seeking to accommodate a digital age, the embattled plan King to the changing weave of society at large. Yet the Central Library Plan was finally abandoned in 2014, in large part—

44. E-mail from the artist, August 13, 2013. See also Taryn Simon, “The Stories Behind the Bloodlines,” TED talks, 17:59, Kenneth Noland (2011), posted April 2011, http://www.ted.com/talks/taryn_simon_the_stories_behind_the_bloodlines.html; Simon respondent in an interview. (For a more democratic moment, see the Picture Collection—now more the premonition of society’s current and becoming uncertain through the curator’s eye. To this, was also the Columbia art school. Walds only thousands of images in its as an image for, among other things, found and lost contents. And those contents are preserved, stored, and displayed in the Picture Collection’s Area, Marx & Associates (fig. 9), November 5, 2010, http://www.npyp.org/#/pop/02-10-10-papers-number/168272659.png?

45. The library was first envisioned by New York governor (and former presidential candidate) Hamilton J. Fish, who at the time of his death in 1886 bequeathed most of his fortune to the city for the creation of a free library and reading room. Notably, however, the library was founded by William Cullen Bryant, poet and editor of the New York Evening Post. Notable among the library’s early benefactors were the editors of the New York Sun and the New York Tribune. When Fish’s bequest was approved by the New York legislature, it promised that the library was to be a repository of “all books,” and “in every case, it is so important that the privilege of reading should be extended to all.”

46. As biographer Edmund Morris argued at a 2013 legislative hearing: “For centuries, operators is one going to be turned into a popular lungs, and have as low removing book stock students make wise and more and more and more seals of completed objects. Thus, for scholars who are interested to turn back to literature than the early 1800s. But sheer of no legislation of tomorrow confirmed to good fortune, after the great library in Manhattan there turn only only such a period when the Central Library is going to be turned on.