

## Beyond Photography

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A precarious sense of survival holds together the case studies encompassed by Taryn Simon's *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*. The notion of survival is frequently associated with what Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life", with a zero-degree existence, with a life rendered negligible and nugatory by adverse, antagonistic forces. *A Living Man Declared Dead* proposes a different ethic and aesthetic of survival. Survival here represents a life force that fails to be extinguished because it draws strength from identifying with the vulnerability of others (rather than their victories), and sees the precarious process of interdependency (rather than claims to sovereignty) as the groundwork of solidarity. We are neighbours not because we want to save the world, but because, before all else, we have to survive it.

War, violence, land appropriation, environmental abuse, the problems of cultural identity, and the expropriation of personhood – these conditions, amongst others, repeat relentlessly across the chapters. The idea of the bloodline as a narrative thread of order, continuity and seriality – an undeniable measure of relationship and descent – runs through every chapter. Yet, the diversity of geography, and the locality of cultural choice, prevent the dominance of *blood*, or any other instance of causal determinism, to be the elected vehicle of fate.

Survival, by contrast, is the art of learning how to conjure with contingency and circumstance. It is more dependent on practice and performance than on the articulation of principle. The agent of survival, whether individual or group, is fraught with an awareness of his or her own internal disjunctions, where rationality and affect cross paths, and leave anxiety and ambivalence in their wake. Such precarious conditions of life inhabit each of Simon's case studies and speak of the profound polarities of a dire modernity, where "opposites touch".<sup>1</sup>

Two chapters are particularly effective in articulating the sense of precariousness that haunts this book. It is the extremity of such precariousness that sets the stage

upon which the human drama of survival unfolds. Hans Frank, Hitler's governor-general to Poland, played a deadly role in the Third Reich, which requires no further elaboration. However, certain of Simon's photographs in *Chapter XI* shed a different light on his character. Frank had either an extremely sophisticated artistic sensibility or a desire to possess art of great value. He surrounded himself with the very finest works appropriated from the Czartoryski Museum – Leonardo, Rembrandt, Rubens. His choice of Leonardo's sublime *The Lady with an Ermine* to adorn his home suggests a conflict, a person whose love of human artistry could hardly be at peace with his barbarism towards human beings.

In *Chapter X* Simon illustrates the practice in the early decades of the twentieth century where tribals, aboriginals, and colonial "natives" were put on public display to entertain and instruct the metropolitan visitors to the various World Fairs. The narrative is devoted to Cabrera Antero, a member of the Filipino Igorot peoples, who was exhibited at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. The *Louisiana Purchase Exposition* drew special attention to the U.S.'s acquisition of the Philippines, while celebrating, in the spirit of the World's Fairs of that time, the triumph of Western Imperial progress and conquest. One of the signs of such progress, at the cost of the de-humanisation of the colonised, was to insist that the Igorot entertain the crowds by eating dogs. Dog eating amongst the Igorots was primarily a ritual practice; the fair organisers, however, compelled the Igorots to eat approximately 20 dogs a week to keep the crowds amused.

Under the eye of Leonardo's ethereal *Lady* and other master works, Hans Frank meticulously administered a diabolical, fascist regime. A world away in terms of the scale and quotient of evil is the demonstration of America's industrial and cultural modernity that required Antero to be on display in an anthropological exhibition designed to instruct the public on theories of evolution and racial hierarchy in the midst of the modern garden of Progress. There is an important lesson to be learnt from the dramatic disproportion between these two instances. It lies in the fact that the propinquity of barbarism and civility, its precarious proximity, makes it difficult to discern at what point in time some small and apparently innocuous forms of evil will surreptitiously turn into an unmanageable monstrosity. Simon turns the reader of images into a conceptual and speculative agent involved in the fate of photography as it confronts history.

The frailty of the art of photography is its tendency to fetishise what is seen as foreign, exotic, alien, or other. Photography's voyeurism becomes exacerbated in the face of racial, cultural or sexual differences. Prejudice and desire, fear and pleasure are frequently projected onto "subjects of difference", turning them into alien and anomalous objects whose identities, nonetheless, provide perverse excitations. Simon avoids such problems by activating a more primitive desire to appear both *in* and *as* a photograph, as is often experienced in fair-ground photo booths where the backdrop represents a scenario – the Taj Mahal or Versailles – that is quite out of keeping with the lives of those posing in the foreground of the image. *A Living Man Declared Dead* creates something of

the same effect by throwing the spectator, time after time, into the midst of a world that is alien and unsettling. The *mise-en-scène* is even more complicated than that suggests, because Simon's chapter has several sections that abut each other and foreground different forms of signification: the bloodline photograph with the unchanging blank background, a kind of neutral non-place; the narrative that makes a more direct address to the spectator; and the footnote photographs that are, in a sense, metonymic materials that belong to both other sections. The spectator is at once located *within* the work and, as a result of its shifting scenes, displaced from it.

This non-naturalistic *mise-en-scène*, with its long history in the annals of photography, has generated little theoretical interest. But it may just serve as an antidote to the voyeurism/fetishism paradigm because those who are photographed, quite out of context, are also spectators of themselves. By placing themselves in such a surreal situation they are subjects of a fantasy of displacement and aspiration. They know they do not belong *there* – it is only a painted backdrop anyway – but strangely, at the level of fantasy, they are seen to *be* there. They participate in the ambiguity of their photographic representations – no doubt with irony and humour. And yet, in a simple sense, once your shadow has fallen on a place – be it a page, a photographic print, a real location – you become part of its mystery and ambiguity, its fantasy and its history. It is in this way that Simon's photographs capture us. They make us part of her world of the hidden or secret; they make us part of the lives of others we will never encounter nor fully understand. Our shadows, however, have fallen on these peoples and places; and in our attempt to understand and interpret their complex circumstances, our own dark outlines develop new and unfamiliar profiles. Or such is the hope.

### *Against Realism*

The majority of the critical writing on Simon's work places her art within one or another mode of realism – the hyperreal or aestheticised realism.<sup>2</sup> The critical response to her work – the story people tell about its aesthetic address and intentionality – is frequently a description of a visual practice committed to the revelation of secret places or the disclosure of unfamiliar things.

For instance:

She gives photography back to its lost labour, and its substance, by finding a real subject matter, which demands representation and gives a disposable medium a new visual anchor.<sup>3</sup>

Or:

A desire to uncover unknowns, understand their purpose, and display their majesty motivates much of Simon's work.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the sophistications of different styles of realism, they are founded on a hermeneutic of “stop and search” where the referent, which is concealed on the body of the text or image *in any number of ways*, can and must be found before the “whole thing” falls into place. The visual anchor of realism is an epistemological process of *making visible* or *bringing to light* an object which is accompanied by an ethical and political commitment to a “liberatory spirit”.<sup>5</sup> A representative reading of Simon's political vision commends her for “transforming that which is off-limits or under-the-radar into a visible and intelligible form, [confronting] the divide between the privileged access of the few and the limited access of the public.”<sup>6</sup> True as this is, it is not the end of the story. The resonance of her work does not fade into the virtuous visibility of aesthetic realism.

In one of Simon's hyperreal images in *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* we enter one of the least visible and most mythical places in the American psyche, the C.I.A. Headquarters Building. Simon's tableau-format photograph of the main entrance hall is a study in formal symmetry and spatial balance. If the image were vertically divided into two sections, each would look like a mirror reflection of the other. There is indeed a central line embedded in the tiled floor, visible in the foreground of the photograph, which cuts the image in two. It is this line that *aligns* the viewer within the frame, prescribing the correct depth, from back to front, and providing a fine balance between the symmetric halves, from side to side. From this viewing position the hyper-realist perspective prevails, a visual anchor is provided, and the rightly-angled viewing subject is awed, as Salman Rushdie beautifully puts it, “by the black beauty which she so brightly, and brilliantly, reveals.”<sup>7</sup>

However, the dazzling light that reveals, also conceals. The dark symmetry of spaced columns makes for repetitious surfaces of reflection; the *mise en abyme* of ceiling lights disappear into a seamless distance of mirrored images; sections of blinding light spill over like a wash of paint blurring the sharp symmetry of the image and creating areas of *white out*. Too much light creates its own blindness. The viewing subject is now displaced from the stable, centered position at the mid-point of the photograph, no longer monarch of all she surveys. Her view of Langley is impeded by a pattern of *blind spots* created by the excessive lighting. It is almost as if these white outs and blind spots create a new invisibility that causes the image to lose its visual anchor and its real subject matter. Suddenly, instead of revelation or disclosure, we are confronted with darkness at noon. Simon's subtle and crucial insistence on the emergence of occlusion or obscurity at the point at which we expect to experience full, unfettered visibility – to discover the secret of things – takes various forms.

Simon's *Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility* is another example of a *factual* photograph coming to assume a spectral, surreal presence. The blue radioactive glow creates a pattern strangely reminiscent of a map of the United

States. As the image emerges to meet the eye, the blind spots (electromagnetic radiation emanating through stainless steel capsules), submerged in water, create the structural pattern of the photograph. The blind spots appear as if they are controlling the light and emitting it, at the same time. It is this movement of the image – its dynamic of displacement – that somehow prefigures its danger even before we read that “it is amongst the most contaminated sites in the United States.”<sup>8</sup>

The political semiotic of these photographs suggests that what is widely known and feared in the public sphere can rarely be seen in the public realm. Strategically blocking our sight lines with blind spots and white outs, Simon mobilises the viewer’s attention by *displacing* it, even disorienting it. Something similar to this dynamic of displacement between the two surfaces of the image has been well described by Michael Fried as an “internal division [between antitheatrical absorption and the ‘stagedness’ or ‘to-be-seeness’ of the image] characteristic of advanced photographic or pictorial art in the present moment.”<sup>9</sup>

### *Blind Spot*

Blind spots resist the logic of the main frame and go beyond the viewer’s need *to see* (what is secret or foreign). Their provocation lies in creating a desire *to know and to act* in a way that both *reads* the photograph and resists its way of looking. The desire that the photograph evokes in the viewer – and the desire that shapes photography’s work of representation, its apparatus of attractions – surpasses the demand to disclose the real thing as image (however magical) or object (however indexical).

What I have detected as the blind spot in Simon’s work is close to what Roland Barthes describes in *Camera Lucida* as the obscure “blind field” of the “punctum”.<sup>10</sup> The punctum is Barthes’s version of what I have called the dynamic of displacement. An errant or marginal element within the main frame of the photograph, the blind spot (or blind field) turns viewers from passive recipients of the *truth* of the image, to active agents involved in various kinds of critical interventions: reading the picture against the grain; questioning the *framing* of the truth; interrogating the representational limits of the photographic medium. Displacing the viewer’s angle of vision, the blind spot (blind field) creates desires for new knowledges, experiences and affects with which to reconstruct (or deconstruct) the image. The blind field, Barthes writes, exposes the *liminal* nature of photography; and in that breach of the frame – a moment of negation – the spectator takes on an interactive and interrogative role:

The presence of this blind field ... takes the spectator outside its [the photograph’s] frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and it animates me. The punctum, then, is a kind of subtle beyond – as if the image launched desire *beyond* what it permits us to see. ...<sup>11</sup> [my emphasis]

Stare long enough at a photograph and you will see its historical past almost touching its technological future – that missing link is the present tense of photography. On the one side of photography lies the history of painting; on the other side, the adventure of cinema; a third side faces the complications of literature; and a fourth confronts the story of everyday life. Wandering like a ghost, back and forth across this transitional terrain, is it a surprise that the desire of photography (as Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes suggest) leads the image beyond its frames and frontiers?

Fifty years before Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, Walter Benjamin had also grappled with “something that goes *beyond* the testimony to the photographer’s art ...” [my emphasis] in *The Little History of Photography*. This is how he saw the problem:

With photography, however, we encounter something new and strange: In Hill’s Newhaven fishwife, her eyes cast down in such indolent, seductive modesty, there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer’s art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in ‘art’ ... Immerse yourself in such a picture long enough and you realise to what extent opposites touch, here too: the most precise technology can give its products a magical value. ...<sup>12</sup>

The unruly desire incited by the fishwife’s veiled, yet winsome, eyes is not simply an appeal for greater biographical detail or historical specificity to establish her living presence. The question is not *Who is she?* It is a desire for a story; a desire to ensure the survival of those eyes, that image – “who even now is still real ...” – with all the ambiguity of times and tenses that this simple phrase allows, prolonging the long lost past into the present (“even now”), and giving the image a veracity beyond its half-acknowledged artefactuality (“is it still real”). The question is *What has become of her?* This demand for narrative is an acknowledgment of two things. First, that outside the frame of photography there is a temporal desire to extend the moment of the *shot* in terms of a narrative both speculative and specific. As significant, however, is the ethical nature of the desire that extends *beyond* the testimony of photography, which is a desire for *alterity*, not simply continuity or closure.

The desire for alterity – the contradictory movement in which “opposites touch” – opens photography into the realm of inter-textual and inter-mediatic translation. Translation, as Benjamin describes it in *The Task of the Translator*, is not so much resemblance as re-location or displacement.

Instead of resembling the meaning of the original, [a translation] must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s *mode of signification*, thus making both the original and the translation recognisable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.<sup>13</sup>

What is *within* photography that reaches *beyond* its limits in order to animate other

desires – of alterity – as well as the desire of the Other, is its mode of signification, not its mimetic resemblance as image. By re-situating or re-locating photography in yet another representational or narrative medium – be it history, fiction, literary narrative, cinematic form, biography – the subject gains another life, and the photographic image survives as itself, in a different form. It is the on-going measure of meaning and value *in transition*, as translation, that transfers modes of signification across cultural media, and that represents the culminating move of the dynamic of displacement.

### *Text and Image*

It is, indeed, such an “unruly desire” that governs Simon’s coupling of text and image – a moment when “opposites touch”. Her profound ambivalence towards the testimony of photography’s *truth* prevents her from being, in Benjamin’s terms, wholly absorbed in *art*. This doesn’t mean that she opposes art to some naïve, empirical notion of reality; nor should her case studies of individuals, geographic locations and local histories, be taken at face value as anchors in history, politics, or the lives of peoples and things. Difficult though it may be to imagine this process, image and text develop their conjoined meanings because they are both articulated through that virtual, contradictory space that opens up in-between the fading of photography and the emergence of the written text.

This is the space of displacement where opposites touch; this is the time of the liminal and the *beyond* that stages photography’s desire for translation. Invisible yet articulate, virtual yet material, what does it take to make concrete this concept of an interstitial, *negative* space which is the connective tissue that articulates image and text in Simon’s art?

Simon juxtaposes the visual and the textual in a kind of montage which is neither totalising nor teleological. Her critique of progressivism leads her to describe her concatenation of image and text in the following way:

There is no end result. There is only disorientation or the unknown. It’s an equation that folds out on itself again and again. X+Y does not equal something. It doesn’t equal infinity either. It just mutates into another question.<sup>14</sup>

Such a statement is difficult to reconcile with an art that has demonstrated a sustained formal interest in lists, catalogues, indexes, collections, case studies and assemblages.<sup>15</sup> Can these modes of mustering lead to an extreme indeterminacy of form, or the dereliction of order, to which Simon declares her allegiance? The dynamic of displacement emphasises the importance of the iterative and interstitial.

There is no closure to Simon’s coupling of image and text – and hence “X+Y *does not equal something*.” This liminal, signifying space, in between the *edge* of photography and the emergence of other representational forms, is open to the desire for translation.



Empty portrait. *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I – XVIII*, 2011  
Archival inkjet print, 8 x 6 inches (20.32 x 15.25 cm)

And in disseminating photography’s mode of signification across other aesthetic media and cultural practices, translation ensures the survival of the *image*. Simon is right to suggest that it is the nature of photography to mutate into other questions and discourses.

### *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I – XVIII*

Survival, be it aesthetic or political, is the issue at the heart of Simon’s *A Living Man Declared Dead*. If *American Index* exposed the secret *topoi* of America’s mythic and mundane life, *A Living Man Declared Dead* is a log of the artist’s wayward *Wanderjahre* on a global scale, unearthing case studies of injustice, violence, disease, exploitation, oppression, religious devotion and reincarnation. Simon’s acute awareness of cultural differences and normative anomalies, coupled with her ethnographic intelligence, prevents the project from becoming a sentimental catalogue of victims and disasters. Her culling of case studies has a curatorial reserve that avoids delivering value

judgments, or repeating the platitudes of cultural relativism.

Simon's case studies are meditations on the touching of opposites – order and disorder, civility and barbarism, violence and aspiration – in the inscription of the human condition. Each chapter is a triptych to be read sequentially from left to right. The panels containing portraits of individuals belonging to a bloodline are by far the largest component of the installation. These portraits are plain, face-on photographs taken in the same style against the same background. Their insistent formal equivalence, and the repeated rhythm of the appearance and disappearance of individual faces, creates a pattern of descent and inheritance that follows the structure of the bloodline.

What is significant, however, given Simon's penchant for the catalogue, is the strict order of descent to which she has to adhere. This means that members of the bloodline who are absent or missing are represented by blanks – blank screens on which one can, and must, project the circumstances of loss. The large panels of portraits are a curious, paradoxical thing. In spatial terms, it is a paragon of order, sequence and descent. However, the temporality of the bloodline is a continual looping of the past-in-present, while the future nests in the moment of shooting the portrait. The relentless surge and ebb of the bloodline is fixed, at the moment of making the image, in a particular face at a particular time. And yet, the fixity of the photograph, as Benjamin proposes, is an illusory thing:

[N]o matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has, so to speak, seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment, the future, subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may discover it.<sup>16</sup>

It is within the second panel of the installation that the “tiny spark of contingency” becomes visible, or readable, as Simon narrates the circumstances that led her to choose her subject of study. The contingency does not merely lie in the narrative. Contingency is also a formal condition of the relationship of image and text; their conjunction in that interstitial space that opens up in between the photograph and the narrative and prepares the ground for a translation of image *into* text, and *vice versa*.

The second text panel is the place in which Simon's thematic and political concerns become visible. It is here that the bloodline becomes flesh and blood. In India, the living are certified as dead in the pursuit of agricultural land; in Kenya, the practice of polygamy as an alternative to infidelity is seen both as preventing HIV/Aids and encouraging it; in Nepal, young girls are cultivated to become nubile goddesses until they are replaced by others and sent back to their humble homes; in Ukraine, children from orphanages are targeted for human trafficking, prostitution and child pornography; in Tanzania, albinos are hunted for their body parts because they are believed to bring good luck and good health. It could be argued that Simon's interest lies in the banality of evil, but even that is a simplification. Each chapter may seem

arbitrary and incidental and yet it leaves you with an unmistakable sense that this is a work about the fragility of human fate, and happenstance; but it is also a work that has been fortunate in finding the hidden signs that slowly bring to life the image of an age.

For our own times, there is a cluster around the question of identity that is of particular interest to the art of photography. If the photograph often has a double exposure – the main frame and the blind spot – then it is significant to see how circumstances create double lives for individuals who have to live uneasily between them. A double life is then no literary trope or symbolic image. It is often a matter of survival; at times a matter of life and death. Shivdutt Yadav, from Uttar Pradesh, and several members of his family, were listed as dead in official records. As a result of an act of bribery, his ancestral land was transferred to his father's other heirs. A living man declared dead cannot get himself registered as the rightful owner of his land. Neither living nor dead, occupying his own land without owning it, the double man lives a half-life. Another kind of half-life was the fate of Latif Yahia who was chosen by Iraqi security forces to be the “body double” of Saddam Hussein's son, Uday. Threatened with imprisonment and the rape of his sister if he refused, Yahia had to undergo reconstructive surgery in order to credibly impersonate Uday Hussein. Do you have a life if you are the shadow of another person, the mask of another's life?

There are others who share something of the same shadow existence: Ribal Btaddini who is believed to be the reincarnation of his paternal grandfather; or Leila Khaled, the Palestinian hijacker who had plastic surgery to disguise herself before her second hijack. However, Yadav and Yahia most clearly show how “opposites touch” when the most intimate part of one's person – one's identity, one's being – is stolen by the powers of the state. In Yadav's case it is India's endemic corruption that declares a live man dead while the courts collude in the living death; in Yahia's case, as has been said through the ages, despots are blind to all but themselves, the people do not exist.

It is the third section of the installation – the footnote images – that plays a marginal and translational role, all at once. This third space is arranged with a kind of randomness that falls somewhere between digital accumulation and a family photograph album. It occupies a liminal, dis-ordered space in the triptych; a repository of displaced materials that frustrates any attempt at creating a comprehensive archive. Here you will find, for instance, a photograph of the record of land ownership that lists Yadav as being dead; it is here that you will see photographs of Yahia impersonating Uday Hussein. It is not the content of this marginal space that is its most significant feature. It is the role it plays in relation to the conjunction of image and text that makes its marginality the pivot on which the whole work turns.

The footnote column inserts itself in the interstitial space established by the bloodline portraits and the narrative texts. It confronts the sanguine seriality of the bloodline with random and contingent events, accidents and violence. The disorder of the footnote photographs stands in contrast to the ineluctable order of the bloodline;

but the truth is that the visible messiness of life stands up quite well to the blind authority of the bloodline. In relation to the narrative text, the footnote photographs reference events and objects mentioned in the story, and lend them some evidentiary proof. However, their randomness contests the linearity of the prose, and opens it up to further interpretation and interrogation.

The fragmented footnotes graphically represent the dynamic of displacement that enlivens Simon's entire work. Their fragmented and partial form may not add up to a total image or a whole story. A deeper truth is conveyed in their partial presences. They signify the bits and pieces, the presences and absences, the fading in and fading out, that mark the memory of man. Footnotes emerge from the past, broken and bedraggled, to claim their place in the present. These fragments will establish other stories, images and bloodlines.

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1999) 510.
2. Hans Ulrich Obrist's lively and inventive essay, "Ever Airport" (London Heathrow, May 2010), is an exception to this tendency, in Taryn Simon, *Contraband* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2010).
3. Dr Sarah Edith James, "Taryn Simon, Photography Between the Image and the Word," *The Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2009*, ed. Stefanie Braun (London: The Photographers' Gallery, 2009) 134.
4. Elisabeth Sussman and Tina Kukizelski, "Foreword," Taryn Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007) 11.
5. *Ibid.*, 13.
6. *Ibid.*, 15.
7. Salman Rushdie, "Introduction," *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, 7.
8. *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, 19.
9. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 246.
10. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 55-59.
11. *Ibid.*, 59.
12. Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," 510.
13. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 78.
14. Private correspondence between Homi K. Bhabha and Taryn Simon.
15. Obrist, "Ever Airport."
16. Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," 510.

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