

Taryn Simon in China

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In 2013, the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing mounted an exhibition of Taryn Simon's *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I – XVIII*. I first encountered this body of work at Tate Modern in 2011, one of the many major international venues at which it appeared. At first glance, its combination of investigative and methodological rigor with subject matter that unearthed histories on every continent made me think it was urgent to show this work in China. I was most interested in how, structurally, the string of chapters is able to create an entire discursive system; it seemed that that would allow the work to be seen, read, and interpreted in a radically different context. The biggest issue, in that early assessment, was how we would go about translating into Chinese the texts that form an integral part of this work. In reality, we were embarking on a much larger and more fraught process of modulating an existing body of work to fit a very particular set of social and political circumstances.

Dealing with the government is as much a part of running a museum in China as preparing sponsorship proposals or signing loan agreements. Any art that is legally imported into the country for public display must be submitted to the Ministry of Culture or its local subsidiaries for approval. Without the permits they issue, works simply cannot clear customs. (There is a parallel process with China Customs for the actual importation of work; this focuses more on guaranteeing that the work in question will not be sold or remain permanently in China without having paid the necessary duties. Even for temporary imports, a deposit or guarantee in the amount of the tax putatively owed on the work's sale must be put down.) Heeding the censors is not a matter of acquiescence or compromise, it is simply a precondition of working in the People's Republic. As a foreign-backed not-for-profit institution with an annual viewership of more than half a million visitors, UCCA enjoys something of a special status in relation to the Beijing cultural authorities—both watched more keenly than commercial galleries, yet

often free to show work that would never find its way into more orthodox government-run museums.

In advance of any exhibition we do with work coming from abroad, we prepare detailed dossiers for the Ministry of Culture (or the Beijing municipal Cultural Bureau, depending on the overall number of works in the exhibition) with images, caption information, and translations into Chinese of any text which appears as part of a work. The officials then comb through these applications and issue verdicts in the form of *piwen*, or exhibition permits, which effectively cannot be appealed. The decisions which come down are fascinating for what they reveal about the sensitivities of the Chinese state at any given time. In advance of a 2012 exhibition of photographs from *The New Yorker*, a 2008 Platon image of Elsheba Khan at the grave of her son Kareem Rashad Sultan Khan, an American soldier killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom and buried in Arlington National Cemetery, was denied. One doubts the censors understood the distinctly American complexities of the underlying situation—they instead saw a woman embracing a tombstone bearing a crescent moon and thought of suicide bombers or the Arab Spring. A Platon portrait of the late Gaddafi was similarly withheld. In an exhibition of Indian contemporary art later that year, an oversized Bharti Kher sculpture of an anatomical heart covered in bindis was denied, on the grounds that it looked like a giant penis. No amount of additional images of the heart from different angles could convince the Ministry to overturn that decision.

In the case of Simon's *A Living Man Declared Dead*, the calculations were even more subtle and interesting, particularly because the chapter touching on China was realized with the support of (or rather under the orchestration of) the State Council Information Office, the highest-ranking government news/propaganda office in the land. In the footnote panel for that chapter, Simon included just two images: one of the paper bag distributed at all SCIO press conferences and bearing an image of the winged stone columns in front of the Tiananmen rostrum that symbolize imperial authority, the other of the utterly unremarkable Beijing Television Tower (not Rem Koolhaas's CCTV Tower, but an unloved Alexanderplatz-like antenna on the far west side of town), which was where they pointed her when she asked deadpan for a site that could "represent Beijing." The former image was censored. It must have proven sensitive to the Ministry of Culture, which despite being part of the central government, still ranks well below the SCIO in proximity to the highest leaders. Owing to the physical nature of the work, having one image in a multi-image panel censored means that the entire panel must be excluded, as single photograph cannot be removed or blacked out. The other censored images were a corpse from the titular chapter about an Indian land dispute, and the entirety of another chapter about a South Korean seaman abducted by North Korea in 1977. That latter instance was the most explicit and complete, the only chapter to be denied in full.

In addition to the panels eliminated by outright censorship, we made a tactical decision when preparing the application to the Ministry of Culture not to apply for

import of the text panels as artwork. Would we have done this, I strongly believe that many more of the images from throughout the cycle would have become controversial in the eyes of the officials—take for example the images of human remains that serve as portraits of individuals killed in the Srebrenica massacre, which came through the censorship process unscathed. When installing the exhibition, in place of all the panels that were not ultimately present in the exhibition, we painted black blocks onto the walls in their exact proportions and positions. The device, which Simon conceived after long discussions about how to account for the missing panels, does several things at once, referring to abstract painting even as it echoes the moments in the work where individuals who cannot be photographed are represented by blank backgrounds. The effect in the space was chilling, beautiful, and extremely strong.

In order to restore the substantive integrity of the work on view despite these physical and visual lacunae, we produced a special booklet, about the size of a magazine, which reproduced the full text of each chapter in English, accompanied by a Chinese translation. It also included images of all works, even those which were censored. This substantial publication mirrors the design of the massive book Simon published when the series was first completed. It was subsidized by UCCA and distributed to every member of the public who purchased a ticket for RMB 10 (about \$1.60). It is an unofficial publication, without a Chinese ISBN number, which means it did not have to go through any censorship process at all. Ironically there were no issues with this arrangement, and it created an intriguing scenario wherein the galleries were filled with viewers, noses are buried in the booklet, reading the texts that would have otherwise appeared on the wall. Such a publication would have been necessary even had the panels been physically present, as a way to contain the Chinese translations.

The exhibition managed to transcend itself, creating a public discussion and generating public accounts in media including the *Financial Times* about how cultural censorship works in China. In the end, what interests me most in this story is not the absoluteness of censorship but rather the way this particular system provides a set of constraints which, like most constraints, can be short-circuited to different effect. Certain panels may not have entered China, but the images and information they contain could not be kept out. We were not so brash as to even mention the blackout blocks or the questionably legal booklet on our website, and some viewers were surely confused by the absences. Many more, however, were able to piece together an understanding of the work every bit as complete as those who encountered it in London, Berlin, New York, or Los Angeles. For our institution, positioned precisely at the brink between a local Chinese context and the international conversation surrounding contemporary art, it is these moments when the limits become palpable, and yet art is still able to function aesthetically, that compel.



Installation view. Chapter V, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I – XVIII*
Ullens Center for Contemporary Arts, Beijing, 2013

Many of the works in A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I – XVIII were refused entry for exhibition in China, including: the text panels for all 13 chapters on view, Chapter V (South Korea) in its entirety, Chapter I (India) footnote panel, and Chapter XV (China) footnote panel.