

## REVENANT

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Taryn Simon's *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters* is an extended meditation on the political economy of fate. It brings together those things we can not do anything about (our genetic inheritance) with those we can (its consequences). Photography is the major vehicle for this meditation, although this too is put under interrogation, having been turned here into a visual formula as much as an art form. The confrontation of science and art is also made manifest in the work's structure, which contrasts periodic tables of individual portraits with images that evoke social and political narratives, along with annotations to explain the connection of the two.

Consider, for example, the section of *A Living Man Declared Dead* simply titled *Chapter XIV*. Most prominently, it shows us a grid of photographs of every person from a particular bloodline. Each of these individuals is shown sitting in a chair, hands in lap, obediently staring straight ahead, looking blankly at the camera. Evenly lit and with the most neutral of backgrounds, the subjects of these portraits, if that is what they are, reside in some kind of non-place, having been captured with the serial dispassion of an academic experiment. There are 120 individuals represented in this particular sequence, arrayed on panels in 15 horizontal groups of eight vertical cells, to be read from left to right, in rows, from top to bottom. The regularity of the arrangement and repetition of form suggests that these portraits should be perused as collective evidence rather than for signs of personal character. Each photograph comes with identifying information: name, date of birth, profession, current place of residence. Some of the cells are empty, filling in for a body that for one reason or another could not be present at a shoot. The subjects vary widely in age and gender, from an 85-year-old man to a newborn. What they share is a common genetic inheritance: they are all related to Ribal Btaddini. An attendant number and caption tells us: Btaddini, Ribal/Btaddini, Milhem (ربال/بتديني، ملحم) 16 Mar. 1986/22 Dec. 1897 Computer engineer, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

The man has two names and two birth dates. Upon looking again you can see that his portrait also appears more than once in the sequence. As do the portraits of a number of other people in this particular line-up. The text that accompanies *Chapter XIV* tells us that Ribal Btaddini believes himself to be the reincarnation of his paternal grandfather, Milhem Btaddini. And that he belongs to a religious sect based in the Middle East called the Druze, who accept intra-community reincarnation as a matter of faith and can recall memories from their previous lives. To reiterate the point, a supplementary photograph shows Ribal Btaddini re-enacting his memory of the death of his other self in a *tableau vivant* played out on a stage. Having been mortally wounded in a bomb attack, Milhem's body is being vainly dragged to safety by his wife. The surreal quality of the image seems appropriate, given that what we are seeing is the depiction of a memory, and perhaps also of a man's desire to remember, to remember the scene of his own death. Haunted by an endless return from beyond the grave, this is truly a ghost story.

*A Living Man Declared Dead* is full of such stories, and of such ghosts. Over a four-year period, Simon has put together 18 photographic records of similarly striking bloodlines and their related stories. From feuding families in Brazil to victims of genocide in Bosnia, from human exhibitions in the United States to the living dead in India, Simon has formed a collection of genealogies that is at once bounded and arbitrary, in each case mapping the personal and social relationship between blood relations and lived experience. Each portrait sequence began with a single person from whom a bloodline was traced backward



Plastic sheet with placement marks for photographic equipment

and forward to encompass every living person in it. The one exception was the section devoted to Bosnia, where the sequence also includes individuals killed in the Srebrenica massacre, represented by photographs of their remains (DNA testing has ensured their authenticity). In another case, featuring the inhabitants of an orphanage in Ukraine, the sequence of portraits aims to make visible the consequences of the *lack* of a bloodline. One section, under the heading *Chapter VI*, depicts, not people, but three separate bloodlines of rabbits—adding up to over one hundred photographs. Each of these rabbits has been injected with a lethal disease to test its virulence on the rabbit population in Australia, where they are classified as an invasive species.

Getting permission to make all these pictures required a huge amount of preliminary research, undertaken by the artist along with her sister Shannon Simon and assistant Douglas Emery. The name, story and place of every participant in a sequence had to be determined, and then each of these people had to be located and persuaded to sit for a portrait. Translators and “fixers” had to be found who could help organize the actual portrait sessions, which often took place in more than one location. If another link in a bloodline was suddenly discovered, then a further shoot had to be organized. This was especially complicated in countries like India, where some participants had no access to telephones or the internet.

Simon and her assistant travelled with a large-format view camera, a high-resolution digital camera and a substantial lighting set-up, to ensure that every image would look the same. An ivory backdrop was part of the basic equipment, along with three pieces of wood hinged together to slip over her camera case and thereby provide a seat for each subject. Another important piece of equipment was a sheet of plastic to be put on the floor, with spots marked on it for the positions of the tripod, chair, lights and so on. Wherever possible, the portraits were shot indoors in a room with a white ceiling at a standard height, allowing the same amount of light to be cast over each subject. Sometimes, such as in Tanzania, all this equipment had to be sneaked in and out of the country (through Kenya in this case), to avoid the displeasure of the authorities. Three copies of each image were then distributed in different suitcases, in case of accident or robbery. Other images—for example, the landscapes that sometimes appear among the supplementary pictures—were exposed on film in a 4 x 5-inch view camera, allowing a more lush pictorial aesthetic to prevail.

This, then, is the story behind these other stories, a saga that is almost deserving of a documentary of its own. The sheer scale of Simon’s ambition conjures *The Family of Man* exhibition, first shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955. Edward Steichen and his team spent three years winnowing down two million pictures to the 503 (from 68 countries, by 273 photographers) that were eventually shown in that exhibition.<sup>1</sup> Privileging a humanist style of black and white photography, designed to induce sentiment and empathy in the viewer, Steichen himself claimed that his exhibition “was conceived as a mirror of the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life—as a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world.”<sup>2</sup> This claim has attracted its fair share of criticism.<sup>3</sup> But still, the notion that we all share a common oneness—that the words “human condition” do have some universal meaning—remains a seductive one.

Simon’s work exploits that seduction, but only to call it into question. Her portrait photographs, for example, in their repetitious, deadpan matter-of-factness, steadfastly refuse to offer the usual artistic pleasures of affect, exoticism or even horror—all convenient escapes for a viewer from further thought. There is certainly none of that fantasy of emotional attachment we feel in front of the kind of photographs shown in *The Family of Man*. Faced with the obdurate opacity of Simon’s pictures, we are forced to seek meaning elsewhere, to look, in the first instance, to a series of texts supplied by the artist. But they too are deadpan in style, giving us information without the shading of interpretation or the welcome release of some greater didactic purpose. This sets up a distinctive viewing rhythm; you see the pictures from afar, and, intrigued, step in close to read the text, and then step back to look again, more closely and with a more informed eye.

*A Living Man Declared Dead*’s strategic co-dependence of image and text poses other challenges too. On the one hand, it seems to imply a lack of trust in the ability of these photographs on their own to do the work that Simon requires. But equally, it suggests



From top left to right, top to bottom:  
 Nukić, Nezir, 1928 (exact birth date unknown). Forester and road builder. Živinice, Bosnia and Herzegovina  
 Jin, Bei (金, 蓓), 11 June 1974. Government employee. Beijing, China  
 Bakari, Mzawa Iddi, 25 Sept. 1966. Women's division chairperson, *Tanzania Albino Society*/personal secretary, *General Military Hospital*. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania  
 (Name withheld), 17 Jan. 1994. Student. Undisclosed location, Ukraine

*A Living Man Declared Dead And Other Chapters*, Chapters VII, XV, XVI, and XVII, 2011  
 Archival inkjet prints, each 8 x 6 inches (20.32 x 15.25 cm)

that these texts may not be quite believable without the certification provided by their attendant photographs. This interactive combination of text and photograph is typical of Simon's work; it, rather than photography, is her true medium. In most cases, both text and photograph are undemonstrative in tone, as if anxious to persuade through their sheer objectivity of form. And yet the photographer's various choices can't help but intrude on this impression. She, after all, has chosen these subjects and stories over other ones, and has implemented this particular mode of presentation. Even her choice of photographic style is periodically disturbed by small idiosyncratic touches (most frequently exercised in the supplementary images on the right of each panel, like the one of Ribal Btaddini performing his own death, or the enigmatic water scene above it).

As a total ensemble, *A Living Man Declared Dead* locates the photograph's capacity to record exactly what is seen within the classification processes of the archive, a system of knowing that feigns neutrality while quietly imposing a framing decided in advance.<sup>4</sup> Hundreds of individuals have been photographed for this particular archive in exactly the same way (note again the imposed order of hands held in lap and the absence of smiles). The individuality of each person depicted is thereby simultaneously affirmed and denied. Everywhere one looks, Simon shows objectivity and subjectivity to be indivisible entities, a visual analogue for the similarly complex interrelationship of biology and destiny—*A Living Man Declared Dead*'s central concern.

This interrelationship is represented in Simon's work as a weave of certitude, chance and choice. The first two seem straightforward enough, but the last is more problematic. We like to think that choice is something available to all of us, a simple enough matter of exercising our free will. However, this myth of Western liberalism is constantly refuted in these panels. Mediated by circumstance, human agency in *A Living Man Declared Dead* is shown to be already shaped by cultural, social and political context, the context that makes any thought or action possible in the first place.<sup>5</sup> As Simon documents how, for example, someone born with the genetically determined condition of albinism, resulting in a lack of pigmentation in skin or hair, faces a much more limited set of options in Tanzania than if they'd been born in the United States or Europe. To recognize this difference—to see that fate is a situated discourse, to be able to separate it from the wanton will of the gods—is to make "the human condition" a politically navigable term rather than a mere platitude.

Roland Barthes says something similar in his trenchant response to the showing of *The Family of Man* in Paris:

Birth, death? Yes, these are facts of nature, universal facts. But if one removes History from them, then there is nothing more to be said about them; any comment about them becomes tautological. The failure of photography seems to me to be flagrant in this connection: to reproduce death or birth tells us, literally, nothing. For these natural facts to gain access to a true language, they must be inserted into a category of knowledge which means postulating that one can transform them, and precisely subject their naturalism to your human criticism. For however universal, they are the signs of an historical writing.<sup>6</sup>

This, then, is the challenge taken up by Taryn Simon—to give the apparent transparency of the photograph a social thickness and make the natural read as historical. Walter Benjamin argues for a similar outcome in his 1931 essay, "Little History of Photography". Written as a surrogate critique of the social effects of capitalism, Benjamin's essay surveys the history of photography up to that point and finds most of it wanting:

As Bertolt Brecht says, "The situation is complicated by the fact that less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations—the factory, say—means that they are no longer explicit. So something must in fact be built up, something artificial, posed."<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, one of the photographers Benjamin recommends in this context is August Sander—an artist whose work was also chosen for inclusion in *The Family of Man*. "Photography is like a mosaic that becomes a synthesis only when it is presented en masse."



Larry Mayes

*Scene of arrest, The Royal Inn, Gary, Indiana*

Police found Mayes hiding beneath a mattress in this room  
Served 18.5 years of an 80-year sentence for rape, robbery and unlawful deviate conduct

*The Innocents, 2002*

Chromogenic color print, 48 ¼ x 62 ¼ inches (122.6 x 158.1 cm)

declared Sander, as if he were speaking about Simon's work as much as his own.<sup>8</sup> Producing thousands of likenesses between 1924 and 1933, Sander planned a comprehensive social register of the German people, to be titled *Citizens of the Twentieth Century: A Cultural History in Photographs*. At one point he proposed organizing it under seven sections, arranged by cities, comprising about 45 portfolios, each of which would contain 12 photographs. This imposed order is what gave his otherwise varied images the heft of a social science; as Benjamin puts it: "one will have to get used to being looked at in terms of one's provenance... Sander's work is more than a picture book. It is a training manual."<sup>9</sup>

The people depicted by Sander are named as generic social identities ("The Master Tiler", "Beggar", "Society Lady", "The Artist") and placed in his taxonomy to represent this identity, rather than themselves. One consequence is that the same person can fill different taxonomic categories; the Dada artist provocateur Raoul Hausman, for example, appears in a number of different guises in different sections.<sup>10</sup> Sander reduces even himself to a type, "The Photographer", methodically making pictures that eschew artistic personality or style, aiming, as he put it, "to see things as they are and not as they should or might be."<sup>11</sup> As in Simon's presentation, each individual in Sander's archive only takes on meaning in relation to the entire taxonomy, thus calling any distinction between the individual and their social milieu into question. Simultaneously, the taxonomy itself is made visible as "something artificial, posed", as something ideological.

Simon's project reiterates several aspects of Sander's, offering us, perhaps, one possible version of a *Citizens of the Twenty-First Century*. If anything, she takes the logic of his project to a hyperbolic extreme, making her images more numerous and seemingly mechanical than his and inscribing the conceptual architecture of ethnography (the national types, the comparative grid of images, the disinterested informational caption) directly onto the wall, where we can see it for what it is. Even the space of exhibition has been turned into a kind of laboratory, with the walls repainted Super White rather than their usual cream, and the lighting turned up, at the artist's insistence, to seven times its normal level. But whereas Sander devotes his energies to a depiction of his own society, and thus of himself as a social being, Simon's gaze encompasses the whole globe and seems, at first glance, to look only at the lives of others. And where his choices of subjects and their arrangement were decided on the basis of presumed social hierarchies, hers have been stratified by such categories as blood, ethnicity and nation. This difference deserves some reflection. Indeed, it seems to mark a significant departure for Simon, whose previous bodies of work have always concentrated on the social systems of her own culture, of the United States.

Her first book, *The Innocents* (2003), comprised interviews with and photographs of Americans convicted of violent crimes they did not commit.<sup>12</sup> A powerful condemnation of the American justice system, this project was also a critical commentary on the power of the photograph to distort memories and facilitate mistaken identifications. Many of these men had been convicted after eyewitnesses, having been shown portraits of suspects by the police, thought they recognized them. Simon photographed her subjects at sites that had particular significance to their illegitimate conviction: the scene of a misidentification, the scene of an arrest, the scene of a crime or the scene of an ignored alibi. These are pictures, then, that return us and them to the starting points of a brutal reality based on a fiction. Simon's own photographs share this ability to blur truth and fiction. They sometimes show her subjects posing self-consciously at the scene of the crime they didn't commit, as if to demonstrate their ability to trump the fiction of the police charge with the non-fiction of Simon's photograph. Once again, we encounter role play substituting for reality.

This uneasy play of fiction and non-fiction is repeated in a more recent project, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007).<sup>13</sup> Once again a telling symbiosis of image and text, this work compiles an inventory of what lies hidden and out of view within the borders of the United States. Connecting the realms of science, government, medicine, entertainment, nature, security and religion, the 57 subjects Simon photographed ranged from the C.I.A.'s abstract art collection to a woman about to undergo a hymenoplasty operation in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, so that she could adhere to traditional cultural expectations regarding virginity and marriage. Simon's project exploits the several meanings of the word "index", from its association with a comprehensive cataloguing of a particular



Cryopreservation Unit  
Cryonics Institute  
Clinton Township, Michigan

This cryopreservation unit holds the bodies of Rhea and Elaine Ettinger, the mother and first wife of cryonics pioneer, Robert Ettinger. Robert, author of *The Prospect of Immortality* and *Man into Superman* is still alive.

The Cryonics Institute offers cryostasis (freezing) services for individuals and pets upon death. Cryostasis is practiced with the hope that lives will ultimately be extended through future developments in science, technology, and medicine. When, and if, these developments occur, Institute members hope to awake to an extended life in good health, free from disease or the aging process. Cryostasis must begin immediately upon legal death. A person or pet is infused with ice-preventive substances and quickly cooled to a temperature where physical decay virtually stops. The Cryonics Institute charges \$28,000 for cryostasis if it is planned well in advance of legal death and \$35,000 on shorter notice.

*An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, 2007  
Chromogenic color print, 37 ¼ x 44 ¾ inches (94.6 x 113.7 cm)

subject, to what is often considered photography's own most distinctive pictorial attribute, the fact that, through the chemical agency of photography, the world gets to make its own visual imprints. The exposure of these particular subjects came at a time when the United States government looked for secret sites outside its own borders (caches of unfound weapons, hideouts of wanted enemies, foreign jails that would allow torture, unsupervised nuclear facilities). Simon turned this national paranoia inwards, producing a collective portrait of the American psyche through a documentation of its repressed places.

Repression shifts to exclusion in *Contraband* (2010), a book and exhibition consisting of 1,075 photographs Simon took continuously over five days from November 16 through November 20, 2009, in the Customs and Postal areas of John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York.<sup>14</sup> These photographs, presented like forensic evidence with neither aesthetic embellishment nor editorial comment, documented the items detained or seized from passengers or express mail entering the United States from abroad during that period. These items included animal parts, fake handbags, recreational drugs and drug paraphernalia, pirated movies, Cuban cigars, firearms, gold dust, plants, sausages, cow dung toothpaste, and sexual stimulants. This miscellany of prohibited objects—from the everyday to the illegal to the unexpected—attests to a growing worldwide traffic in counterfeit goods and natural exotica. More importantly, and in line with the aspirations of *An American Index*, the project offered a sidelong snapshot of the United States as seen through its fears and desires.

There is an echo of some of these strategies in *A Living Man Declared Dead*'s combination of a prescribed conceptual structure with a photographic style and mode of presentation that gives Simon's images the authority of documents. Each photograph is exhibited in a specially designed frame that allows them to fit together like a minimalist jigsaw puzzle. The panels they create are as large as any of the current crop of celebrated art photographs, and yet each of the individual images remains small and intimate. The texts are treated in similar fashion, having been given the visual form of a list and turned into a slim, tall art object to be looked at as well as read. The regulated tables of portraits are punctuated with empty cells, creating a pattern of absence and presence that, from a distance, might be mistaken for a sample of scientific code. The order of this layout contrasts with the random and disorienting arrangement of images in the supplementary panels, again suggesting two very different discursive modes and offering two very different visual experiences.

The stories being conveyed by this armature obey this same oscillation between order and disorder. Indeed, every aspect of *A Living Man Declared Dead* is fraught with a tension that Simon's installation can only temporarily hold in suspension. Think, for example, of how the predictable rhythms of the portrait panels deny the tales of violence, corruption, survival and duplicity that these bloodlines often embody. At first, Simon's choice of subjects and topics seems serendipitous, ranging widely in place and date and seemingly having no connection with one another. The stories are often extreme, fantastic, hard to believe. But they're also somehow familiar, as if their narrative structures have been plucked from the myths of the ancient Greeks or a lost Shakespearean play, or perhaps from a contemporary parallel, a melodramatic soap opera or newscast. This notion is underlined by Simon's choice of title and by the use of numbered chapters as section headings, suggesting a gigantic book that has fallen open to these random pages, or a vast catalogue of which only these fragments have survived. Soon we begin to see a pattern in Simon's choices; in fact, we begin to see pattern itself, a persistent logic of repetition and return, as evident in the stories as in the infrastructure she has used to convey them.

Under *Chapter XII*, for example, we are told about a blood feud between the Novaes and Ferraz families in Pernambuco, Brazil, that has claimed the lives of more than 40 people since 1991. This particular feud is one of a number from this part of northeast Brazil that has engulfed generations of participants, pointing to an absence or corruption of state justice in the region. Simon accompanies the usual array of stoic portraits with a group of images that elucidate this story, some of them reproductions of historic pictures, some of them showing the scenes of shootings, some of them enigmatic still lifes. One of them even shows a marked man—the next in line to be killed, according to the internal logic of the feud. The portraits imply the certainty of a science, a genetically determined tabulation



From top left to right, top to bottom:  
Bird corpse, labeled as home décor, Indonesia to Miami, Florida (prohibited)  
Steroids, *Testosterone & Sustanon*, Pakistan (illegal)  
Cigarettes, *Shuangxi*, China (prohibited)  
*Oxalis tuberosa*, Peru (7CFR) (prohibited)

*Contraband*, 2010  
Archival inkjet prints, each 6 ¼ x 6 ¼ inches (15.9 x 15.9 cm)

of a particular bloodline. These other images offer the subjective, partial, untrustworthy view of an oral history, or perhaps mimic the partial, sensationalized version of such stories we tend to get in the mass media. Neither approach seems capable of explaining how these subjects came to live such lives, but together they at least give us a parallax view, as if we are simultaneously looking at the situation along two different lines of sight.

This kind of juxtaposition is repeated in the section titled *Chapter X*. This chapter's story centers on the display of over 1,100 Filipinos at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, where they were required to eat dogs on a regular basis for the entertainment of passersby. This spectacle of the primitive was staged in part to justify the violent annexation of the islands of the Philippines by the United States in 1902, the advent of an era of American preeminence now, one might argue, finally drawing to its close. Having photographed all the living descendants of Cabrera Antero, one of the men placed on display, Simon again adds a group of related images, as if to underline the force of her tale with further evidence. A photograph of a skull taken from a slain enemy by a headhunting Filipino, the ground plan for the Fair's Ethnological Exhibits, a group of photographs of people put on display as part of those exhibits, a view of Cabrera Antero's home village, and finally a group portrait of Antero and his companions as exhibited at another World's Fair, this time in Seattle in 1909: the selection suggests the careful accumulation and preservation of information, such as one expects from an archive. But this archive remains enigmatic, piecemeal, elusive, detached from the living history represented by Antero's descendants.

What becomes clear, as one moves from panel to panel, is that these tales have been very carefully selected, with each group of portraits being representative of a particular social situation, or a particular historical scenario or political crisis. It turns out, in fact, that the second of Sander's titles—*A Cultural History in Photographs*—is as pertinent to Simon's project as the first. But whereas Sander sought to document the German people in all their diversity, Simon sets out to record the peculiar ways in which history comes to repeat itself, like a record on skip. The temporal experience offered by *A Living Man Declared Dead* is in this sense a peculiarly photographic one. A photograph we see in the present is always of the past, making the passing of time between past and present this medium's constant subliminal message. We witness time's passing while looking at any particular photograph and can't help but shudder at an imaginary future where we too will have passed on. In this context it is worth noting that a number of the people depicted in *A Living Man Declared Dead* have died since they were photographed, making these panels a freeze frame of a moment in each bloodline that has already come and gone.

If *A Living Man Declared Dead* shows that the present is continually haunted by the past, it also reveals the degree to which the nation state has become a porous, perhaps even illusory entity. The 158 individuals represented in *Chapter X*, for example, reside not only in the Philippines but also in the United States, Canada, Vietnam, England, Saudi Arabia, Guam, Australia and Kuwait. A tracing of this one bloodline, therefore, also tells a story about global immigration patterns and economic opportunity (or the lack of it), with these expatriates joining the eleven million other Filipinos who currently work outside their home country.

It is striking how often Simon finds herself tracking down a portrait subject in a place far removed from the story he or she embodies. Latif Yahia, for example, now lives in Ireland, after surviving a period spent in Iraq as a body double for Saddam Hussein's son Uday. His portrait is joined by three supplementary images of him posing in character as Uday, another one of these bizarre role-playing episodes that punctuate the solemnity of Simon's work. The rabbits photographed in Australia exemplify this flow of bodies in reverse, with these animals introduced by English settlers in 1859 for sporting purposes and now regarded as a threat to both native ecology and prosperous farming. Ironically, these animals represent another survival story, having quickly developed various levels of resistance to every disease they have so far been exposed to. Other portrait series touch on Cold War conflicts (the abduction of South Korean citizens by North Korea), terrorism (Leila Khaled, who hijacked her first airplane on behalf of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in 1969), genocide (explicitly in the killing of approximately 8,000 Muslims in Bosnia by Bosnian Serb soldiers in 1995 and implicitly in the story of Hans



Installation view. *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, Chapter IV, 2011  
84 x 118 1/2 inches (213.4 x 301.7 cm)

Frank, Hitler's personal legal advisor and the governor-general of Nazi-occupied Poland), pharmaceutical disasters (the effects of thalidomide on children born under its influence), and Zionism (in the person of Arthur Ruppin, a key figure in the establishment of the Israeli state).

This otherwise overwhelming cavalcade of history is given an illusory order and coherence by the imposed discipline of Simon's photography and her mode of presentation. The photography too is a repetition of a sort. Debates about the artistic potential of photography in the nineteenth century often contrasted a desirable picturesqueness with a frontal and therefore unthinkingly mechanical symmetry; in short, a creatively subjective picture was preferred over a mere document.<sup>15</sup> However, in more recent years this binary has been reversed, with artists as diverse in ambition as Bernd and Hilla Becher, Ed Ruscha, Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler, Rineke Dijkstra and Waalid Raad deliberately eschewing pictorial variation in their photography in favor of rigorous serial form and deadpan images.<sup>16</sup> Simon joins them in this preference, consistently placing her camera lens parallel to her subject and offering us flat, frontal pictures with no particular aesthetic elaboration; as a consequence, she transforms her portraiture into a form of still life. The systematic reiterations and semiotic concerns of Conceptual art are thereby married to the documentary photographic style pioneered by Walker Evans in the 1930s.

The end result is a photography that proffers transparency, a utopian promise of liberal democracy, but then renders that transparency opaque, even reflective. This makes both documentary photography and the American liberalism it manifests two more of the subjects of Simon's work. We are asked to see them as things, as historical objects within a taxonomy of other such objects. We look for the truth of that taxonomy within her photographs but are continually turned back on ourselves by Simon's dogged refusal to provide either cause or meaning. Among other effects, this kind of refusal shifts the burden of assigning that meaning from the artist to a viewer, making us all complicit in the act of signification, and indeed in the histories we are asked to witness. Individuals are never autonomous in these histories, appearing always in terms of their imbricated relations with others. Otherness itself is given a diminished status within a world conflated by the internet and a global economy but also by an increasingly shared heritage, genetic and otherwise. *A Living Man Declared Dead* may seem to be about others, but is equally about us.

Although refusing to give us what we want—to tell us what it all means, to explain the vicissitudes of fate—Simon nevertheless succeeds in making visible what is otherwise not able to be seen: the lived traces of history, power and desire. The real substance of Simon's work is therefore to be found, not in any of these particular pictures or texts, but in the spacing that simultaneously separates and joins them, first to each other, and then to the larger political economy of which they, and we, are all a part. It was Susan Sontag who called photography “a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing.”<sup>17</sup> Taryn Simon's work pursues both these aspects of photography with equal rigor. Indeed, in so many respects her work exemplifies the ambivalent character of much of today's more interesting photographic art. She is, at one and the same time, overtly skeptical about the medium's capacity for revealing truth, while nevertheless totally dedicating herself to this same possibility.

The ramifications of *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters* reverberate far beyond the confines of the art world. Its complex, sometimes even contradictory dissemination of form and content recalls the equally troubling historical discourse that Michel Foucault once called *genealogy*: “gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary”, recording “the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality”, “a profusion of entangled events”, demanding “relentless erudition”, seeking “not the anticipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations”.<sup>18</sup> Like Foucault's work, *A Living Man Declared Dead* offers us an experience “situated within the articulation of the body and history”.<sup>19</sup> Simon's assembled subjects, inscribed here between word and image, are the embodied manifestation of this articulation. They have been made to appear before us as flesh and blood but also as “the signs of an historical writing”, displacing any hard and fast distinction between the two.<sup>20</sup> This displacement may well be Taryn Simon's greatest achievement, challenging us all to consider what is preordained in our own lives and what is still to be determined.

#### Notes

1. See the exhibition's catalogue: Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Simon and Schuster, 1955). For detailed descriptions of, and commentaries on, the exhibition, see also Eric Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); John Szarkowski, "The Family of Man", in *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: At Home and Abroad* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 12–37; and Eric Sandeen, "The Show You See With Your Heart: *The Family of Man* on Tour in the Cold War World" (2004), in Jorge Ribalta (ed.), *Public Photographic Spaces: Exhibitions of Propaganda, from Pressa to The Family of Man 1928–55* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani Barcelona, 2008), 471–486.
2. Edward Steichen, "Introduction", *The Family of Man*, 4. See also Edward Steichen, "Photography at the Museum of Modern Art" (1952) and "Photography: Witness and Recorder" (1958), from Peninah R. Petruck (ed.), *The Camera Viewed: Writings on Twentieth-Century Photography* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979), 1–10.
3. See, for example, Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs" (1981), *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983* (Nova Scotia: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 77–101: "*The Family of Man* universalizes the bourgeois nuclear family, suggesting a globalised, utopian family album, a family romance imposed on every corner of the earth."
4. Simon's engagement with the form and functions of the archive makes her work very much of its moment and links it to a particular artistic genealogy. See, for example, Charles Merewether, *The Archive (Documents of Contemporary Art)* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), and Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008).
5. See Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), as reproduced in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx–Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 595. "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living."
6. Roland Barthes, "The Great Family of Man" (c.1955), *Mythologies*, trans Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 101.
7. Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" (1931) in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and other writings on media*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigit Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 293.
8. August Sander (1951), as quoted in Graham Clarke, "Public Faces, Private Lives: August Sander and the Social Typology of the Portrait Photograph", in Graham Clarke (ed.), *The Portrait in Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), 72.
9. Benjamin, "Little History of Photography", 287.
10. "Armed with a letter of recommendation from Franz Wilhelm Seiwert—one of the chief initiators of the progressive artists circle who had been a friend of the photographer since the early 1920s—Sander approached the Dadaist painter Raoul Hausmann in Berlin and took several portraits of him. He assigned these photographs to various portfolios of his work *People of the 20th Century*. Hausmann is included in Group VI, 'The City', in the pose of a dancer, whereas, in Group III, in the 'Woman and Man' portfolio, he is pictured with his wife and girlfriend (Hedwig Mankiewicz and Vera Broido). A third photograph, which August Sander assigned to Portfolio 12, 'The Technician and Inventor', portrays him as 'Inventor and Dadaist'. This portrait differs from the others in that they predominantly embody the classic type of the engineer or related occupations." See Susanne Lange and Gabriele Conrath-Scholl, *August Sander's People of the 20th Century: II The Skilled Tradesman* (New York: Harry N Abrams, Inc., 2002), 16–18. Thanks go to Cory Rice and Gabi Conrath-Scholl for their assistance with this commentary on Sander.
11. August Sander (1927), as reproduced in Christopher Phillips (ed.), *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 107.
12. Taryn Simon, *The Innocents* (New York: Umbrage Editions, 2003).
13. Taryn Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007).
14. Taryn Simon, *Contraband* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2010).
15. See Steve Edwards, *The Making of English Photography: Allegories* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 241–244.
16. According to Charlotte Cotton's book *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), "the deadpan aesthetic became popular [in art photography] in the 1990s, especially with landscape and architectural subjects." Cotton describes it as "the most prominent, and probably most frequently used, style ... a cool, detached and keenly sharp type of photography." For more examples, see her chapter titled "Deadpan", 81–112.
17. Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave", *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 3.
18. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1971) *Language Counter-Memory, Practice*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139–140.
19. *Ibid.*, 148.
20. Barthes, "The Great Family of Man", 101.