

Taryn Simon, *Photography Between the Image & the Word*
An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar

Before the Law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country who prays for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot grant admittance at the moment. The man thinks it over and then asks if he will be allowed in later. "It is possible," says the doorkeeper, "but not at the moment." [...] "If you are so drawn to it, just try to go in despite my veto. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the most lowly of the doorkeepers. From hall to hall there is one doorkeeper after another, each more powerful than the last." [...] These are difficulties the man from the country has not expected; the Law, he thinks, should surely be accessible to all times and to everyone, but as he now takes a closer look at the doorkeeper [...] he decides that it is better to wait until he gets permission to enter. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down at one side of the door. There he sits for days and years.¹

- Kafka, 'Before the Law', 1914.

In Taryn Simon's ambitious and epic work *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, (2007), the photographer, like Kafka's unfaltering protagonist, attempts to gain access to the guarded domains of culture and knowledge, made abstract and inaccessible to the masses by the anonymous powers that be. But unlike Kafka's maddened and defeated hero, Simon achieves the impossible. After days, months, and years of intricate planning, meticulous research, endless communications and applications, she, and her camera, crossed the thresholds of America's most hidden and unfamiliar realms. These places – from nuclear waste storage facilities, magnum revolver manufacturer's and forensic anthropology research centres, to weather modification units, jury simulation rooms and cryopreservation labs – are the sites that lie *behind the scenes* of every day experience, silently regulating and defining America's social, cultural, political and military life. Simon's photography makes these once *invisible* places *visible*. Against a culturally learned myopia, she opens up remote and abstract image-worlds and discloses the discourses of the privileged, elite, expert, mythical and taboo.

Simon's images, created with a large format plate-back camera, are rigorously beautiful, stunningly precise, theatrical in lighting and composition and meticulously printed. This is such an elevated hyperreal aesthetic that it is easy to forget the conceptual and physical work that lies behind each of the pictures. The immense range of these sites of unfamiliarity – Nixon's Gift Vault; the domestic simulation space of Microsoft Home; a firework manufacturers test site; the Nasa Beach House; Dynamo III, the largest geodynamic model of the Earth's core – is testament to Simon's fecund imagination. Many of the places and objects that she depicts we did not even know existed. For every one of the sixty-two photographs that make up the series, Simon has made monumental expeditions. This is a time-consuming pursuit, sometimes taking a year to research just one picture. The photographer has undertaken lengthy investigative research and physical pilgrimages to the sites, has interviewed experts, collaborated with specialists, conducted fact-checks, and fact-checks of fact checks. Her *American Index*, like an early explorer's log, documents previously uncharted territory; revealing the hidden mechanisms defining American identity in the post-9/11 era. Clearly, the photographer's desire to capture sights never before seen is almost as old as the medium itself. And there is something archaic about Simon's project. Her work redefines that long-held quest, but in a world where everything is over-photographed and exposed. She gives photography back its lost *labour*, and its substance, by finding a *real* subject matter, which demands representation and gives a disposable medium a new visual anchor. She returns to photography the magic and mystery that enveloped the medium upon its invention – when it was celebrated as illuminating that which the human eye could not see – by revealing the unrepresented spaces of specialist knowledge, technology, medicine, and politics and the peculiar material worlds they have created. Within this process and its final culmination in 'the ideal picture' we find one of the many productive tensions which run through Simon's practice. Exactly because her subjects are so elusive, she does not know until she gets there what she will find, and the time pressures and site-specific politics and constraints of every site – far more suited to the handheld 35 m camera of the photojournalist – work against her pursuit of formal perfection. This working method means that the possibilities of failure are high, and the

prospect of preparing for a year only to find the material circumstances not conducive, is such that the possibility of coming away without a picture is a painful but integral part of her process.

However, such profound difficulties and tensions are only fitting. Simon's photography is not about being comfortable; it is about attempting the *impossible*. Simon has already accepted that photography is a fraught medium, but her work delights in the perils and dangers that define it as such. While her images appear to offer detailed and documentary representations of her subjects, seventy-five percent of her pictures are the product of her aesthetic intervention. So, for example, the rotting fruit and pig's head in the Contraband Room at JFK Airport are transformed into a Dutch baroque *vanitas* or *memento mori* painting. In some instances she was initially disappointed with the banality of a site so tabooed or enshrined in mystery, such as the transatlantic sub-marine cables that stretch across the Atlantic Ocean, which appear oddly domestic and slight. In others, Simon chances upon perfect found pictures she could never have imagined, such as the stainless steel nuclear waste capsules which appear to glow a deadly blue map of the USA.

Well aware of the inherent conflicts of documentary photography and the politics of its textual appendage, the relationship between text and image is central to *An American Index*. Every image is accompanied by a detailed text, thoroughly researched and written in a very objective and unbiased tone, an 'uncentred universal voice', like a scientific atlas. However, *An American Index* is not an atlas or archive. It is not based on any positivist will to construct a complete and representative picture of American life. Nor is it bent by any didactic objectives. Simon's photographs do not endeavour to reveal invisible essences. Instead they culture a productive distance, clinically depicting the materials of American mythology. Just as in the novels of that other great chronicler of the obscurities and cultural detritus of American society, Thomas Pynchon, in Simon's epic project *entropy* (the measure of disorganisation which operates within a closed system) asserts itself as a central motif. Like Pynchon's encyclopaedic, sprawling novels charting ancient, secret and conspiratorial worlds, the subjects in Simon's *Index*, and the order in which they are approached, offer no formula; they are disjointed and unexplained. We shift from a flask of live HIV to the Imperial Office of the Ku Klux Klan. The monumental proportions of the project meant that Simon had to try to keep hold of her multiple stories and narratives, and also learn to let go of each one as she worked.

While there is no extreme political framing in Simon's *American Index*, it is intrinsically political. As Fran Lloyd and Catherine O'Brien have suggested, the secret and forbidden intersect, and are constructed through and against the regulatory social systems embedded in such accepted notions as private and public, interior and exterior, male and female.² Power is continuously negotiated and controlled across boundaries and margins by the policing of the secret and hidden. Simon's photography transgresses such boundaries. She documents the Prisoner of War Resistance Programme in Pennsylvania run by the private organisation Team Delta, an image which is impossible to look at without thinking of that other explosively contentious site of American history, Guantánamo Bay. Often the images depicting human subjects, as opposed to the depopulated interior worlds of science, emerge as the most politicised. We see four detainees at the United States-Mexico Border Control and learn about the plight of Mexican immigrants forced to cross the Sonora Desert's 'corridor of death'. In another image, Simon pictures six children from the 'Girl Scouts Beyond Bars' visitation programme, designed to enable incarcerated mothers access to their daughters. Religion and gender politics colour the *Index*, as a twenty one year old American girl of Palestinian descent is shown undergoing the procedure of hymenoplasty; reconstructing the ruptured hymen to its 'virginal' state. But moments such as this, of intensely intimate revelation, are juxtaposed with representations of more abstract public systems of value, such as the stacks of freshly printed, uncut \$100 and \$20 notes at the U.S Treasury, totaling \$20020 million dollars.

Simon's *Index*, like Kafka's short story, can be interpreted as a sustained exploration of the problems of interpretation and semantic origin. It is a work about knowledge and about *labour*. In the process of making, Simon translates elitist and privileged forms of knowing into the realm of

the popular imagination. For Kafka the inaccessible demesne of the law is presented as an abstract textual notion. As both Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida would later write of Kafka's story, *the text is the law* and *the law is the text*.³ Meaning the barrier to interpretation, to reading, to writing, to any discursive space, is 'not knowing' the way to enter. We cannot understand until we have taught ourselves how to initiate ourselves into a practical or discursive space. Simon's *Index* gives the viewer this knowledge, and demands that her newly empowered neophyte acknowledge each new act of *knowing*. Every time the series is installed, Simon insists that the images are accompanied with painfully tiny texts. The result is that one is forced first to interpret each spectacularly seductive picture with no explanation of its subject-matter, and then, only on physically crouching and stooping, can you read the miniscule texts which reveal the image anew, radically transformed by this informed perspective. Simon's photography of the hidden and unfamiliar operates at this secret place between the image and the word. It provides us with an architecture of seeing and reading. Her work teaches us photography's most valuable lesson: *To look differently*.

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(Alexander von Humboldt Fellow, Berlin, 2009.)

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Notes

¹ Franz Kafka, 'Before the Law', in *Kafka, The Complete Short Stories*, Nahum N. Glatzer ed., Vintage Books, London, p. 3.

² Fran Lloyd and Catherine O'Brien, *Secret Spaces, Forbidden Places: Rethinking Culture*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2001, p. xvi.

³ See Hélène Cixous, *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, pp.1-27 and Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, Routledge, London, 1991, pp. 181-220.