

A Refusal to Float Free of Origin or Destination

Simon Baker

In May 2011, shortly after the opening of Taryn Simon's exhibition *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* at Tate Modern, the Serbian ex-general Ratko Mladic, who had been on the run for years following accusations of war crimes, was discovered living quietly in a village in northern Serbia and was captured. This event, which was widely covered in the international press, generated a distinct and significant echo within Simon's exhibition, a chapter of which traced the bloodline of a family that lost many male members in the Srebrenica massacre, for which Mladic was believed to have been responsible. When works from the same series were subsequently exhibited in China, the authorities censored several of the images and all of the text panels for the series. Simon represented this visually in the exhibition by blacking out all of the framed panels that contained the contested content, therefore underscoring, rather than mitigating, the act of censorship.

This ability of *A Living Man Declared Dead* to absorb and generate new meanings, both internally, from one story to another, and in relation to external pressures and events, is by no means accidental however, but lays at the heart of Simon's practice over the past decade. For hers is an approach to the politics of representation that derives its energy and power not only from the production of fixed meanings but from their circulation, restriction and resignification. Simon's work draws its audience into a deep and complicit relationship with the contemporary world of images in all its complexity and contradiction, from the status and function of an historic genre like the portrait, to the apparently arbitrary nature of the organisation and use of information in the age of the internet search engine.

From the outset, Simon's work has been characterised by an abiding engagement with primary research, and consequently with revealing what have come to be known, in the face of rising public scepticism about the way information is presented and used, as both 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns'. She has brought forward

individual stories of injustice and complex inter-related webs of accumulated content – both for their own sake and for the implications that they raise – to reveal the contradictions implicit in the clash of personal and socio-political pressures to which individuals, groups and even nation states are increasingly images within the social, political, ethical and personal contexts that concern them, through the controlled use of her own texts and graphic design. In every presentation of her work, whether specifically framed for exhibition or laid out on the page for publication, Simon exerts a powerful sense of control and intense attention to detail that is as much a signal of her concern for her subject matter as the means by which these stories are presented.

Beyond the compelling nature of the research driving Simon's work, beyond the rhetorical complexity of its presentation, and beyond even the final use-value of the works themselves, there is the undeniable quality of the photographs from which her practice draws its power. For Simon's work, arguably, relies for its impact as much on the precisely articulated, deeply seductive aesthetic through which its ideas are set out visually, as on the arguments themselves. And it is important to note also, in this respect, that Simon's work is situated in the context of the long-lasting aftermath of the so-called 'de-skilling' of photography associated with conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s. But where artists of this previous generation sought to use photographic images of an impoverished technical character as the basis for works critical of both the social system and its associated politics of representation, Simon, by contrast, embraces the highest formal and technical standards of photographic practice. Her photographs of crime scenes, aberrations, and injustices are composed, calibrated and delivered with a remarkable sensitivity to the history of a medium whose politics are often directly called into question in Simon's work. With rigour, restraint and attention to both observed and technical detail, Simon has produced a stunning body of photographic work that ranges, in conventional genre terms at least, from portraits, to landscapes, to still lives, to images of actions and incidents, and even to pure abstractions, without ever deviating from their own identifiable visual signature.

Simon is a difficult artist, not because she deals with difficult subjects, but because her work resists the kinds of ambiguity so often inherent to the photographic image. She refuses to let her photographs float free of either their origins or destinations. For, as if in response to what Benjamin characterized as the absent-minded public examination common to much mass-circulation imagery, Simon expects her audience to work hard – offering many registers of material and a mass of accumulated detail, both visual and textual – as much to negate the ever-increasingly fast flow of images as to account for its existence and counteract its effects. In much of her work, Simon has reflected on the advancing effects of the post-internet age, on the ready availability of information, or, to be more accurate, its apparent availability. *A Living Man Declared Dead* is exemplary in this respect, pairing detailed, painstaking engagements with the obscure lineages of family histories with the kind of arbitrary 'footnote' facts that come out of online searches into major historical events and phenomena. This characteristic is also present in her analysis of the visual archives of the New York Public Library, *The Picture*

Collection (2013), which offers a pre-internet version of a keyword search, once again pairing determined choices with their arbitrary results.

Whether revealing unknown but affecting stories of individuals whose lives have been shaped by the actions of their forebears, or taking issue with the apparatus of state secrecy, Simon's work offers a vision of the world that is at once shockingly simple at the level of facts and impossibly complex in their implications. For beyond the individual examples of stories, histories, and traces that form the basis of her photographic installations and publications, there is a radical acceptance of the entropic nature of bringing them together. More than anything else, Simon's work is powerfully cumulative in its effect, working not by offering evidence of, or proving, one thing or another, but by suggesting that only by setting so many ideas and issues alongside one another is it possible to build a convincing and accurate picture of the complex and contradictory world that we live in.

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