

An Unlikely Futurity:  
Taryn Simon and The Picture Collection

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Surely among the most charming—if also humbling—passages in recent art theory arises at the beginning of Douglas Crimp's *On the Museum's Ruins* (1993), in which the art historian tells the story of his Idaho-based grandmother asking to read one of his recent essays. Satisfying her request only grudgingly, because he has no idea what she could possibly glean from his specialized prose, Crimp presents her with a text on Degas and photography, which concludes with a particularly important discussion of a picture featuring the artist's niece. This image, the scholar writes, neatly encapsulates Degas's modernist reflexivity about his medium by virtue of correspondences found among the picture's lace background, the girl's lace dress, and, significantly, the gaps in her smile—suggesting a pun in French between lace (*dentelle*) and tooth (*dent*) that provides a subtle metaphor for the photographic medium's singular intertwining of positive and negative, presence and absence. Suffice to say, such Derridean wordplay does not capture the attention of Crimp's grandmother, who still makes a crucial observation: the girl is not wearing lace, she notes, but instead eyelet embroidery. And Crimp, grasping that his linguistic construction has come tumbling down through an insight provided by someone experienced in needlepoint, quilting, and braiding, nevertheless comes away with a realization that will pave the way from considerations of modernism to those of postmodernism and, more important, of a postmodernist conception not steeped in totalizing theorizations. As he famously writes, "What any of us sees depends on our individual histories, our differently constructed subjectivities."<sup>1</sup>

What seems of particular importance about Crimp's anecdote today—a historical moment when the field of art is widely understood to be at an impasse—is its appearance as the scholar seeks to revisit photography's radical reevaluation during the late 1970s.<sup>2</sup> At that watershed moment, he observes, the medium occupied a particularly embattled place in the art world. On the one hand, it was finally recognized as being

on par with its disciplinary peers, becoming newly subject to principles of connoisseurship and increasing market values. On the other hand, its unique and continuing access as an artistic medium to the "world outside" necessarily afforded it critical perspective within an increasingly mediated society.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, questions of representation were subsequently brought to bear not only on the modernist myth of the creating artist but also on the universal human subject who would be there to behold any artwork.

Yet if the latter scenario (and the dismantling of conventional notions of artist and viewer) lends greater specificity to Crimp's postulations for postmodernism in *On the Museum's Ruins*, precisely this character of photography—or, more accurately, of the photographic image—as it stands in relation to the world outside suggests that another framing for Crimp's observations might now be necessary. Indeed, looking at the current distribution and circulation of photographic images, as well as at the seemingly novel quality of our present encounters with those images, one is tempted to introduce a literal valence to Crimp's understanding of individual history's role in determining what any person perceives. For that role could now be said to extend not just to what one sees but also to what one encounters at all: In another kind of watershed moment for photography, its images are increasingly found online, where what is made available to different users depends ever more on what they have previously sought. What one chooses to read or see draws similar information to one's screen as sites customize themselves continuously for specific users, effectively reinscribing taste and desire. Or perhaps more accurately, such operations displace, redirect, and reshape those things, as images are encoded, or tagged, in an effort to anticipate desires before they are expressed in so many keystrokes, rising to the fore in order to give them new pictorial form. In such an arena, sometimes one's history seems only to arrive in advance of experience.<sup>4</sup>

It is such a paradox that subtly courses through Taryn Simon's *The Picture Collection*, which puts forward so many arrangements of images drawn from files of an eponymous department of the New York Public Library, featured in this book alongside reproductions of files, librarians' notes and correspondence, and catalogues of visitor requests over the years. As the artist frequently does in her various projects, Simon presents this material in the relatively straightforward manner redolent of the archival impulse prevalent in art shortly after the turn of the millennium—particularly as she is gathering documents whose sheer existence may strain belief, seeming to straddle fact and fiction or, better, to underscore the fictional dimensions of factual information. Time and again, in fact, the artist presents work in organizational systems that seem grounded in scientific methodology but that reveal themselves finally to be nothing other than either arbitrary or products of her own invention.<sup>5</sup>

In this respect, one must note that Simon is unique among her peers for frequently negotiating a kind of interface between different contemporary notions of representation and, more precisely, of what may be seen: Schiller's politicized aesthetics, as extended discursively by Jacques Rancière in his formulation of "the distribution of

the sensible,” is taken up in tandem with the bureaucratic administration and control of photography that legislatively determines our actual access and recourse to pictures.<sup>6</sup> To wit, consider Simon’s *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, a 2007 work arising through her interest in discovering how far a private citizen can go in obtaining access to observe and document areas and objects restricted from view—whether a nuclear waste facility, a contraband room, or the broadcast studio of Alhurra TV, a United States government-sponsored, Arabic-language television station that is not rendered visible within the popular conscious of American society. The last example is especially significant for showing Simon’s ability to give the politics of aesthetics, with its taut weave of fact and fiction, concrete parallels in culture. The Alhurra broadcast is legal only for distribution abroad, such that the artist’s image gives sight to blindness at home regarding a program that ostensibly gives sight—with geopolitical consequences—to those who would be blind.<sup>7</sup>

But in *The Picture Collection* such matters of presentation and classification take on a different quality along the axis of history, partly by virtue of the sheer idiosyncrasy of what is on display. Simon’s individual images feature numerous pictures of seemingly haphazard origin, with, say, an early-twentieth-century, fine-art photographic plate placed alongside an illustration from a recent fashion periodical, while the actual names of the various picture files seem rather far-fetched in rationale, organized under headings such as *Alley*, *Snow—Avalanches*, *Beards & Mustaches*, and *Rear Views*. (Simon takes the contents of files found in the Collection and arranges them for her artworks, never changing the file’s title.) Similarly, the artist’s photographs situate the viewer on ambiguous ground in relation to these images, as Simon places each of her works in wire-hung frames more associated with the era of photography’s inception than with the museum or gallery environment today. In fact, although so many of the images she depicts conjure a sense of the past—featuring the styles and events of generations long deceased—they nonetheless seem oriented toward the future. However many pictures are available to be seen, scores of others are obscured in overlapping piles or arrays, not reframed or contextualized by the artist so much as shown ready to be sifted through and seized on, awaiting their different histories. (Even if it is a history posited by the individual viewer, as in *Folder: Abandoned Buildings*, whose images are almost entirely occluded—and yet so familiar as to make it all too easy for audiences to fill in the blanks.) Their arrangements occasionally even bring to mind image carousels one sees online. Precisely such an unlikely futurity in the past seems at the core of *The Picture Collection*. The digital is foreshadowed in the analog, at the same time that history—its classifications, its contents—seems the stuff of projection.

2.

To grasp this anachronism as it plays out in Simon’s project, however, one must first grapple with the history of this often-overlooked department of the New York Public Library, the Picture Collection itself, which has a Borgesian, fable-like flavor in its



Taryn Simon arranging and photographing the contents of “Folder: Television Programs”, *The Picture Collection*, 2013

dizzying attempt to create an exhaustive catalogue of the living world—a project that is mystifying in light of the Collection’s circuitous path and yet strangely prophetic of image resources and licensing today.<sup>8</sup>

As told by associates of the New York Public Library, the Collection was conceived when, immediately after the opening of the library in 1911, the institution’s Print Room found itself overwhelmed by requests for images “strictly from a subject point of view.”<sup>9</sup> This development was driven by an exponential expansion of New York’s printing industries (both in terms of capacity and, given the day’s influx of immigrants, demand) and, equally significant, of publishing’s graphic components as printing processes evolved to allow for photographic reproduction and color. Designers and illustrators were thus in need of source material on which to base and design their own work. With such an expansion also came the requirement among other industries—wanting to remain apace with the times—to generate graphic material, such that the library’s Print Room was approached by leagues of professionals in not only the realm of publishing but also advertising, movies, theater, architecture, and fashion.<sup>10</sup> Such demands could not possibly be satisfied by the facility’s archives, which in any case were organized by artist name, as opposed to subject. And so, in 1914, the library “began saving plates, posters, postcards, and photographs for the new sort of ‘reader,’” who was just as literate in pictures as in language—perhaps even more so.

Thousands of donations of material quickly followed as word of mouth spread, and the Picture Collection opened its doors the following year with roughly one and a half million different images in a full spectrum of media, from photographic print

to magazine clipping, and an equally diverse range of genres, from fine art to the sciences. This trove would only expand over time: it was estimated by the 1940s that, in addition to donations from benefactors, images clipped from more than sixty publications were being added to the collection each week by library staff. As Romana Javitz, legendary curator of the collection during its crucial period of development between 1929 and 1968, would write, “The entire panorama of the history of the world, its architecture, science, people, apparel, art, and everything that has been recorded graphically make up this collection.”<sup>11</sup>

Javitz’s writing on the Picture Collection is invaluable regarding its conception and, over time, its changing complexion. But her accounts are most resonant within the larger expanse of photography’s history for a fundamental bond she posits between the medium’s indexicality and its instrumentalization by those who visit the Collection. In this respect, Javitz goes so far as to say in a 1942 essay that the collection is a “comprehensive, unbiased record of the visual aspects of human knowledge ... consulted and borrowed for information, to answer specific search[es] for facts.”<sup>12</sup> All questions of the Collection’s ontology aside, there is, in truth, some entertainment to be found in this perspective. “Was Cleopatra beautiful?” Javitz asks rhetorically in a magazine piece.<sup>13</sup> (We’ll never know, she says, because the ancient Egyptians had no cameras.) And how would the New York Central Railroad ever have arrived at the correct yellow for its coach seats, if not for a picture of forsythia borrowed from the Collection and passed around at the company’s board meeting?<sup>14</sup>

Yet by maintaining such a strict delineation of the photograph as a document—as something pointing to the outside world—the Collection begins to obtain a kind of photographic quality in its own right, insofar as it offers fleeting portraits of its living context and assumes sociological dimensions, in both its content and its use. Javitz writes in 1933:

As in other years, requests kept apace with newspaper headlines. In the wake of Repeal, came search for images of whiskey flasks and Burgundy labels ... Mae West brought requests for mustache cups ... Picture requests for pogroms, burning of books in other days, revolutions ... round out the year’s interests.<sup>15</sup>

By 1942, the premonitions laid out by her last notes on such “interests” become manifest in the United States military’s requests for images of the Japanese landscape. The curator again leans on the premise of photographic factuality in her assessments, writing:

Since a soldier is taught to bayonet the enemy and not some undefined abstraction, he must learn to recognize that enemy; he must go into battle armed with visual knowledge of the face of the enemy and the contour of his lands.<sup>16</sup>

Taking into consideration such developments, one sees that the ebb and flow of image requests—in sheer scale and administration—frequently reflect larger societal forces, as

when, for example, the military finally removes and classifies all images related to its enemies so as to leave no trace of its searches.<sup>17</sup> Or when, during the early 1930s, there is a nearly 43 percent increase in image requests, arising almost exclusively from the needs of artists newly hired by the Works Progress Administration to decorate buildings under construction and renovation throughout the city.<sup>18</sup> Notably, in response, Javitz hired dozens of Works Progress Administration artists to assist in the organization and circulation of pictures in the library. And this move, over time, would have the added effect of introducing works by such artists as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange into the collection as just so many more documents alongside mass-produced illustrations. (Brought into contact with the Collection through the WPA, Roy Stryker of the Farm Service Administration donated nearly 40,000 such prints, fearing their destruction by a Library of Congress that might not approve of the images’ content.<sup>19</sup>) Only during the mid-1990s were these pictures reclassified by the New York Public Library as photographs, and handed over to the Photography Department in direct response to rising market prices for the artists.<sup>20</sup> As Simon notes, in a statement that has significance for her arrangements of pictures from the Collection files, “Those works that later became ‘valued’ were mined out of this public collection and relegated to an exclusive space, despite the artists’ express wish for their images to be democratically available.”<sup>21</sup>

Ironically, it is perhaps this last detail—a change in terminology prompted by societal causes from without—that best underscores a fundamental stress point within the Picture Collection pertaining to its internal organization. Or, more specifically, to a relationship forged there between image and text. For this relationship is tenuous at best, given that Javitz herself seems deeply doubtful of language’s capacity, to say nothing of its privileged place, as a structuring device in culture.<sup>22</sup> “Pictures in print have become as common as words,” she writes in a magazine piece titled “Pictures from Abacus to Zodiac,” years before any such articulation among artists.<sup>23</sup> And elsewhere Javitz leaves little doubt as to which side of this equation will prevail, observing, in a 1940 text, that “many facts which require hours to be tracked down in texts can be swiftly and simply discovered by consultation with pictures,” given that, for instance, there is no word that can truly describe a color.<sup>24</sup> Such an attitude obviously inflects the idiosyncratic classification of the images in the Collection. To rehearse them once more: *Alley, Avalanche, Mustache, Rear Views, Costumes—Veils ...* The list goes on, nearly self-fulfilling with respect to Javitz’s summations on the shortcomings of language, as evidenced by the numerous textual skips and jumps found in file after file, often flagged by the directive *see* or *see also*, as in: “Ghost towns, see Abandoned buildings & towns,” or “Accidents, See also Airplanes—Wrecks, Ambulances, Automobiles—Wrecks, Explosions ...” and, curiously, “LOVE, see also Leap year.”<sup>25</sup> Time and again, the categories fail to contain.

By contrast, Javitz is willing to make the bold claim, “Pictures are now a universal form of communication.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, one notes, the form taken by such communication is decidedly contingent—determined, in other words, entirely by use. In fact,

explicating the collection's changing classification scheme, Javitz states plainly at one juncture that the Collection's subject headings should follow demand—an assertion that suggests what is, in fact, most prescient about the Collection and its conception of photography.<sup>27</sup> For if the pictures retained here are intended to circulate—such that they effectively anticipate their continuous recontextualization through time—the same may well be said of the Picture Collection itself. Just as the meaning of any of its images is yet to be formed, so the Collection awaits meaning in reception, with the terms set by reception itself reflected in the Collection's classifications. If its contents point us to the “world outside,” so the institution itself is acutely sensitive to the shifting terrain of that larger arena. Roughly contemporaneously with Javitz's writings, theorist Walter Benjamin would suggest about photographs, “For the first time, captions have become obligatory. And it is clear that they have an altogether different character than the title of a painting.”<sup>28</sup> In the case of the Picture Collection, it is clear that such captioning will always be transitional, with pictures and institution alike migrating in a crude algorithm, reactive to the movements of the populace who would draw on them—of those, in so many words, who would initiate a search.

It should hardly come as a surprise that the very notion of classification here should seem at once so haphazard and overdetermined in both presentation and reception, even while the photograph ostensibly retains its *retardataire* status as a document. In the fabric of sober regulation is the weave of sheer volatility. As Javitz observed in 1940 about the Collection's composition, “The type of picture included in this Collection and the subjects represented have both depended upon the accident of the gift.”<sup>29</sup> And, as she conveyed the experience of artist Diego Rivera when using the files as studies for his murals in New York City, “The form of his conceptions was often fixed by the accident of the material available in its files.”<sup>30</sup>

3.

Notably, Rivera would also express his belief that the scope and limits of the Collection might shape contemporary visions of America—suggesting that today's “accidents” might be tomorrow's conventions for the popular conscience. Such inconsistency in, and potential consequences for, classification seems very much in keeping with Simon's long-standing interests. Interrogating the relationship of photographic image to material world is, after all, one of the basic premises of her oeuvre to date. Consider *The Innocents* (2002), whose portraits depict individuals wrongly convicted of crimes at the locations of their supposed offenses or sites of particular significance to their conviction. All of these people were mistakenly identified by their accusers through photography, suggesting a relationship between representation and reality that is tenuous at best. And yet, taking into account Simon's exploration of the Picture Collection, one notices that the instability of the image even here is necessarily bound up with its reception. In fact, the question of representation is of less concern to Simon than is its relationship to memory and, more precisely, to how “the photographs replaced the memory of the actual perpetrator.”<sup>31</sup> The status of the image is contingent not only on circumstance, but also on subjectivity and projection, such that the picture

may take on the ambiguous role of placeholder—providing the viewing subject with a sense of history where it is, in fact, absent. If Crimp writes that what each of us sees is necessarily one's own history, the basic desire (if not need) to attribute a history, or determinacy, carries some weight as well.

Indeed, the question of projection also provides a significant thematic thread through Simon's oeuvre, most literally, perhaps, in her *Black Square* pieces (2006–), for which she sets individual images within black frames and backgrounds matching the dimensions of Kazimir Malevich's famous work. Often her subjects are troubling in nature—a book falsely purported to contain the minutes of a meeting among Jews planning to take over the world; male mosquitoes engineered to kill their offspring by passing along a lethal gene; Ethel and Julius Rosenberg's final letter to their children, written the day of their execution. But these subjects are taken out of context and, in fact, framed by a work residing at the borders of representation. In other words, they reside in a space devoid of directions or, more precisely, devoid of captions beyond the most basic contextualization offered by Simon's titles. (The one instance where a picture and text meet—fully “developed,” as it were, with internal and external conditions finding explicit correlation—is in the image of a parrot suffering from Feather Destructive Disorder, wherein depression is made visible in the form of plucked feathers.) Given Simon's gesture to Malevich, one might usefully compare her maneuver to that of another artist at the inception of modernism, Wassily Kandinsky, who once asserted that he liked to leave a part of every canvas blank, or unfinished. As art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh explains:

That “empty space” ... was conceived of as ... negating aesthetic imposition, functioning as a spatial suture that allowed the viewer to situate himself or herself in a relationship of mutual dependence with the “open” artistic construct. The empty space functioned equally as a space of hermetic resistance, rejecting the assignment of ideological meaning and the false comforts of convenient readings alike.<sup>32</sup>

The potential implications—and precise nature—of such a “mutual dependence” today seem especially relevant for Simon's engagement with the Picture Collection. To what extent, in other words, do they announce their classifications—and to what extent do we project our preexisting ones upon them? Partly this question revolves around recognition. And true enough, one is bound to recognize a few images throughout her various compositions—in *Folder: Costume—Veil*, for example, where a famous Edward Steichen photograph appears in a couple of iterations in the midst of other pictures featuring cultural figures, from model to movie star, some likely familiar to present-day, acculturated audiences and others not. (In such instances, one is able to receive with some accuracy the historical information within the image—and yet, in tandem with this connection, one must think of the significant role of projection underlined by “empty space” in Simon's other works such as *Folder: Abandoned Buildings*.) More abstractly, one also inevitably grasps a flattening of hierarchies that seems of a priori value to the Picture Collection, to say nothing of its jumble of genres, from fashion

photograph and head shot to photojournalism and sociological study.<sup>33</sup> And here again arises a kind of futurity in the past. Dialogues around such erosions of high and low, even within the museum, are by now long-established for contemporary audiences. But Simon seems to reanimate such a tension of hierarchies ever so lightly by marking our historical remoteness from this earlier moment. For if the discourse of High and Low seems largely settled today, the contents of the Picture Collection exceeds such categorizations—but notably before the discourse ever took place. And so audiences inevitably recognize themselves in the Collection’s disorder even while seeking to differentiate themselves from it. Surveying chronologies in art, one typically imagines oneself at a natural end point or culmination of a centuries-long trajectory, but the Picture Collection skews any such comfortable perspective lines by which the present might be seen in relation to a distant past.<sup>34</sup> Even with respect to critical technique, the Collection seems to figure in advance artistic innovations that developed only generations after the department’s inception. It can seem as though a Baldessari-like figure had already passed through the files to erase the images’ immediate functionality.

But if that artist’s Conceptualism was steeped in structures of signification—how the meaning of an image or object shifts according to context—most important here is the impact of time on that operation. Indeed, Simon suggests as much with her purposeful inclusion of *Folder: Cats*. The file ‘Cats’ likely seemed little more than another heading when the Picture Collection was created, but today is all but impossible not to view through the prism of search engines and cats as an online craze. One might again consider Simon’s *Black Square* works, in particular the image there of a manual for learning the English language, buried in a time capsule during the 1939 World’s Fair, made with the intent of teaching those people centuries from now who will have never read or heard it. But the work most illuminating for *The Picture Collection* is another project that Simon developed contemporaneously—and, one suspects, in reply to the library’s collection—with the late programmer Aaron Swartz. For this project entwines any relationship of mutual dependence between viewer and image with the question of use. Titled *Image Atlas*, the work consists of an algorithm that harnesses local search engines throughout the world in order to compare search results from different countries including Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Iran, New Zealand, North Korea, Russia, and the United States. (An atlas key enables searches in still other countries.) Users enter keywords of their choice, which are then translated into the relevant languages by Google Translate; the regional algorithms subsequently present the top image results from local search engines around the world. Regarding these images, Simon and Swartz indicated their desire to reintroduce a sense of difference into contemporary understandings of the global—reasserting, in effect, a concrete sense of gaps into utopian discourses around the free exchange of information on the brave new highways of digital communication. Accordingly, searches might well give rise to similarities, but they will just as often generate highly divergent results for even the most banal of terms. For example, *groceries* will summon pictures of a fruit stand in France, a bag of wheat in

Russia, and, strangely, a robot in Syria, while North Korea offers no image whatsoever. The term *revolution* is perhaps even more telling, with political parties across the centuries arising in Chinese and Russian search engines, while the top picture in the United States comes from an eponymous television program about the end of organized society.<sup>35</sup> In their brief mission statement for the project, Simon and Swartz accordingly employ language far different from that used by Javitz decades ago, saying that *Image Atlas* “interrogates the possibility of a universal language and questions the supposed innocence and neutrality of the algorithms upon which search engines rely.”<sup>36</sup>

In this regard, Simon is quick to outline the subtle administration (intentional and not) of photographic images by every society, and, for that matter, by every online corporation, as is rendered apparent in their project. Among the various components she draws attention to are such factors as the actual languages available for translation by Google—a tacit judgment of relevance on the global stage regarding any region—and, of course, the accuracy of such translation across idioms. (As she says, again touching on the “empty space” between work and user: “I’m ... interested in the invisible space between people in communication; the space guided by translation and misinterpretation. This space highlights the inevitability of solitude and the impossibility of true understanding.”<sup>37</sup>) And, as emphasized above, the algorithms themselves guide users to different results, frequently giving visible form—almost a kind of portraiture—to belief systems fostered within specific locales. If words have different meanings in different geopolitical areas, such valences are often at the service of governing systems, to say nothing of prevailing manners and custom. Indeed, whereas Roland Barthes’s deconstructions of myth in culture during the 1950s revolved around the identification of visual signs, today these could be called so many notations embedded in code. (Surmising a photograph of a politician looking into the distance, Barthes might call attention to the sign of futurity and progress that had been choreographed for instant recognition within the collective, mediatized conscience. Now, such shared codes are redoubled in tags, and reshaped by algorithm. As Simon notes of *Image Atlas*, the “top results” for any search often grow more powerful as more new users are guided to top results.<sup>38</sup>) Arguably, then, with search engine optimization, the very notion of searching is rendered tautological; one gains only a false sense of discovery with any given search for images, since these are often tailored in anticipatory fashion. Accordingly, in *Image Atlas*, deconstruction as a critical model gives way to the passage of time, allowing users to see how the same search renders different results from day to day, as an interplay among users and algorithms unfolds globally.<sup>39</sup>

4.

Such a postulation resonates strongly with another recent project by Simon, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* (2011), for which she traced different bloodlines throughout the world—effectively diagramming how the stories of individuals are continually reshaped as they come into contact with larger cultural

narratives and societal currents. What becomes palpable here are the various gaps—the people who could not be pictured, the stories that trail off, the strands that rise to the surface in a given historical context—all of them subject to contingency. In this regard, Simon is remarkably astute in her selection of the Picture Collection as a subject, since it mirrors her oeuvre to date—providing evidence of inevitably failed attempts to organize the world in images and text—while at the same time being rich with implications for the organization of society more generally. If the Picture Collection has assumed sociological dimensions, so here does Simon's own methodology. As Hal Foster writes in "An Archival Impulse," conjecturing on various artists' desire to delve into the idiosyncratic histories of modern art and philosophy, seeking out new ways of ordering both civilization and experience: "Perhaps, like the Library of Alexandria, any archive is founded on disaster (or its threat), pledged against a ruin that it cannot forestall."<sup>40</sup> Alternatively, it is precisely such ruin, or erasures, that might be most intriguing. As Simon has said regarding her work with archives, "Something is said in the gaps and shifts among all the information that's collected."<sup>41</sup>

And, in fact, Simon surveys an institution that is perpetually being reorganized, continually giving new meaning to the context of photography and, moreover, of that medium's evolving status as a document. For what, after all, is a library? Perhaps no public institution is so fundamentally paradoxical in its constitution. It is ostensibly devoted to the preservation of cultural materials across the centuries, but only in tandem with the tenet of accessibility and the continuous distribution or circulation of those contents. And the latter makes this reservoir for knowledge (and, indeed, this basis for knowledge itself) uniquely subject to the whims of history, standing at a perpetually renegotiated interstice of governance, technology, and, most important, actual use. Even the modern library's roots in the singular constellation of circumstances around the Enlightenment suggest such delicate contingency or, better, an acute sensitivity to epochal shifts in society. The august institution as we know it emerged only when the principle of rationalist egalitarianism—according to which the library was a sphere suffused with the potentiality of reference and research—coincided with technical innovations in publishing that altered the fundamental character of books as precious objects collected privately, to say nothing of the emergence of copyright laws that provided a formal basis for information's more widespread dissemination and exchange.

As Simon's project suggests, one need look just at the continuing evolution of the New York Public Library—a relatively youthful institution, by any historical measure—in order to grasp the provisional character of any such entity.<sup>42</sup> Today, little more than a hundred years after opening its doors, the library is embroiled in a controversy surrounding a new configuration, called the Central Plan, which its trustees consider less a radical reimagining than a necessary reflection of a changing weave in the fabric of society at large. Implicitly acknowledging the absence of civic funding to preserve aging volumes in existing facilities on the one hand—the library has openly proposed to clear its rooms by shipping the contents of its stacks to sites outside the

city—and seeking to accommodate a digital age on the other, the embattled plan retools the library's spaces for online facilities and, as significant, for social interaction among generations for whom the bound page, let alone the written word, might increasingly seem a figure of the past.<sup>43</sup> If this comes to pass, Javitz's assertions about photography might well seem from another time, but only one to come.

#### Notes

1. Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 4. It bears mentioning that this passage is all the more important for underscoring the importance Crimp ascribes to the task of arriving at nontotalizing theories of postmodernism that still avoid an air of "anything goes" in art. This discussion remains increasingly relevant as the photographic medium's form and distribution system grows ever more varied.
2. The desire among art historians and critics to posit an end for art today is legible everywhere in recent publications, including David Joselit's *After Art* (2013) and Pamela M. Lee's *Forgetting the Art World* (2012), suggesting that a new discursive mode might be wanted to describe contemporary models of cultural production. The simple question is then prompted: How have conditions around photography shifted since its reevaluation in tandem with the first utterances of postmodernism, and what productive observations can we make about the field of art in turn?
3. Per Crimp: "Its meanings were secured not by a human subject but by the discursive structures in which it appeared." And, he continues, "[S]ubjective expression is an effect, not a source or guarantee, of aesthetic practices." Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, 16.
4. I have touched briefly on this idea in a recent essay considering how such operations might impact the possibility of critical dialogue and exchange in art, and ask for a reconsideration of the very term *art world*. See Tim Griffin, "Notes on an Art Domain," *Texte zur Kunst*, September 2012, <http://www.textezurkunst.de/87/bemerkungen-zu-einer-kunst-domain/>. Taryn Simon's current project is exceptional for the correlations it establishes between analog and digital photographic practices and, more important, their classification, which I will engage below.
5. I borrow the description of fact's underpinnings in fiction from Hal Foster as he outlines artistic practices in "An Archival Impulse," *October*, Fall 2004, 3–22. His observations there also seem relevant for Simon's expressed interest, among her various projects, in considering the precariousness—if not outright arbitrariness—of order in the face of chaos. As he writes of Tacita Dean, Thomas Hirschhorn, and others, "For why else connect so feverishly if things did not feel so frightfully disconnected in the first place?"
6. As Rancière writes: "The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed ... it defines what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language, etc. There is thus an 'aesthetics' at the core of politics that has nothing to do with Benjamin's discussion of the 'aestheticization of politics' specific to the 'age of the masses' ... It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time." See Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 12–13. As one might expect, genre and classification of images play a role in this distribution, as he once suggested by pointing to Jean-Luc Godard's observation about the rise of the epic or documentary in different geopolitical regions in the Middle East. See Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, "Art of the Possible: Jacques Rancière interviewed by Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey," *Artforum*, March 2007, 256–69.
7. As Simon's caption for the image reads: "Section 501 of the U.S. Information and Education Exchange Act, passed by Congress in 1948, authorizes the U.S. government to disseminate information abroad about the U.S. and its policies. Section 501 also prohibits domestic dissemination of that same information. It is therefore illegal to broadcast Alhurra domestically. Alhurra is Arabic for 'the free one.'" In effect, Simon provides viewers with a document of a storytelling device whose effectiveness depends at once on its factual, and matter-of-fact, appearance abroad, and its imperceptibility at home. And she both declassifies images and "de-classifies" them, rendering them newly subject to a proliferation of potential

readings and meanings.

8. Originally published in 1941, Jorge-Luis Borges's story "The Library of Babel" describes an endless expanse of interlocking hexagonal rooms containing innumerable books. Apparently organized at random (and mostly composed of pure gibberish), these volumes nevertheless, it is thought by Borges's narrator, must contain all possible combinations of letters, spaces, and punctuation—meaning, by extension, that they contain every possible permutation of each book and, moreover, contain all potentially useful information, including predictions of the future. While Borges's thought experiment was influential for many artists at the beginnings of postmodernism—consider, for example, Robert Rauschenberg's numerous engagements with the notion of the labyrinth—it seems particularly relevant for this real-life consideration of the Picture Collection, particularly given how Borges's library implies there is no steady, meaningful distinction between truth and fiction.

9. Anthony T. Troncale, "Worth Beyond Words: Romana Javitz and the New York Public Library's Picture Collection," originally published in *Bibliot: The Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 4, no. 1 (fall 1995). Available at [www.nypl.org/locations/tid/45/node/62019](http://www.nypl.org/locations/tid/45/node/62019).

10. The Picture Collection curator Romana Javitz herself points to the Collection's role in the design of jewelry, clothes, window displays, and fabrics, saying, "American creative output is influenced by this picture service." See Romana Javitz, "The PICTURE COLLECTION of The New York Public Library," 1940, Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

11. Javitz, "The PICTURE COLLECTION of The New York Public Library."

12. *Ibid.*

13. Javitz, "Pictures from Abacus to Zodiac," in *The Story of Our Time, an Encyclopedia Yearbook* (New York: Grolier Society, 1955), 335.

14. Javitz, "Annual Report 1939, Picture Collection," Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

15. Javitz, "Annual Report 1933, Picture Collection," Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library (p. 161 in the present volume).

16. Javitz, "Annual Report 1942, the Picture Collection," Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library (p. 194 in the present volume).

17. *Ibid.*

18. Javitz, "Annual Report 1934, the Picture Collection," Picture Collection records, manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library (p. 74 in the present volume).

19. Such reasoning is stated explicitly by the FSA's Lenore Cowan in a letter dated July 26, 1983. Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library (p. 310 in the present volume). See also James Estrin, "A Historic Photo Archive Re-emerges at the New York Public Library," *New York Times*, June 6, 2012, <http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/06/ahistoric-photo-archive-re-emerges-at-the-new-york-public-library/>.

20. A memorandum from the Picture Collection's Mildred Wright notes that the FSA images are "'works of art' and are not only of significant historical importance, but are of monetary value as well. Many of them are worth several thousand dollars in today's Photography market. With continuing budgetary cuts, it becomes increasingly difficult to plan a future for these photographs within the Picture Collection." Memorandum from Mildred Wright to Robert Foy, January 13, 1992, Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library. A New York Public Library memorandum from the Picture Collection's Constance Novak makes a formal request for such a transfer by saying: "I thought you might be interested in seeing the prices which FSA photographs are getting in today's market. I am also attaching some examples of Picture Collection's FSA photographs (unfortunately examples of neglect and deterioration). Is there some way we could expedite a transfer to Photography before it's too late to save these valuable items?" Memorandum from Constance Novak to Thomas Alrutz, February 25, 1997, Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library (see p.305 in the current volume).

21. E-mail from the artist, August 9, 2013.

22. In light of the Collection's content, her suspicion seems valid. Accidents, for example, is apt to have one image of a car accident beside another of spilled ketchup or a kitten knocking over a vase. Even a word, it seems, awaits its history here and is given different meaning according to context, putting the very notion of specificity at risk. Every file, it seems, stands at the crux of difference and "anything goes," that embattled position recalled by Crimp at the inception of postmodernism.

23. Javitz, "Pictures from Abacus to Zodiac," 334.

24. Javitz, "The PICTURE COLLECTION of The New York Public Library."

25. Notably, author Art Spiegelman once penned an essay for the *New Yorker* considering such idiosyncrasies in the collection, noting that Kant, Kandinsky, and Boris Karloff could be found here, but only under P for "Personalities." See Art Spiegelman, "Words: Worth a Thousand," *New Yorker*, February 20, 1995, 196–99.

26. Javitz, "Annual Report 1942, the Picture Collection."

27. As Javitz writes about the determining factors for the labeling and classification of images: "Expediency demands that a subject heading should not be changed to a new form except when the older term fails to serve to locate the pictures or becomes quite incorrect as a description of the pictures ... " Javitz, organizational instructions for the Picture Collection, 1944, Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library. In a 1940 statement, she similarly writes, "It is a guide to the use of pictures files for the facts depicted and is a guide to the editing of pictures for such use." (Also, Javitz's 1940 "The Picture Collection," in which she says that the Collection "did not start with a plan. ... It grew haphazardly as the public came and asked for pictures.") In "Worth Beyond Words," Troncale also writes of shifts in classificatory schemes as they happened in 1934: "Any new system would need to reflect new commercial and industrial vocabularies and interests and the current nomenclature of artists."

28. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 226.

29. Javitz, "The PICTURE COLLECTION of The New York Public Library."

30. Javitz, "Annual Report 1933, Picture Collection."

31. Taryn Simon, "Taryn Simon and Brian De Palma in Conversation," *Artforum*, summer 2012, 251 (see p.128 in current volume).

32. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Warhol's One-Dimensional Art: 1956–1966," in *Andy Warhol* (October Files), ed. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Annette Michelson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 16.

33. Intriguingly, Javitz, would in 1965 argue that this mix of pictures made it possible not to "become snobbish about art." At the same time, she makes a remarkable comment about how the context for—or text accompanying—an image gives it different meaning: "For example, you may see a picture of what you think is a very evil-looking man, but you will look at it in a different way if you are told it is a picture of the kindest priest in a diocese." "Library not art snob, picture chief says," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, November 30, 1965.

34. The discomfort prompted by the Collection is all the more compelling for its existence within an institution such as the New York Public Library. For a consideration of how such institutions have historically been designed to give audiences the sense of standing at the culmination of history, see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

35. Accessed August 3, 2013.

36. This statement accompanies the work as it appears on Simon's website, <http://www.tarynsimon.com/>. The duo made similar remarks as part of their conversation during the Rhizome "Seven on Seven" conference on April 14, 2012, available at <http://vimeo.com/40651117>.

37. See Lauren Cornell, "On Image Atlas: An Interview with Taryn Simon," *New Yorker*, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/08/on-image-atlas-an-interview-with-tarynsimon>.html. Notably, Simon frequently asserts that images, like text, are subject to issues of mistranslation.

38. As Simon observed in her interview with Cornell, seeming to echo Javitz's remarks decades ago: "But really, 'top' images represent mass taste at a given moment that is inevitably shaped by political and cultural events, trends, etc." See Cornell, "On Image Atlas: An Interview with Taryn Simon."

39. Perhaps a better way to articulate the tautology of searching online is to consider a conflation of two senses of the term search. Etymologically, the word, arising in the fourteenth century, meant "to go about (a country or place) in order to find, or to ascertain the presence or absence of, some person or thing; to explore in quest of some object." Some fifty years later, such explorations would find an interior correlative in another usage: "to look through, examine internally ... in quest of some object concealed or lost." The expanse without is matched with the one within. *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/174308?rskey=ith0c6&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

40. Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 5.

41. E-mail from the artist, August 13, 2013. See also Taryn Simon, "The Stories Behind the Bloodlines," TED video, 17:59, filmed November 2011, posted April 2012, [http://www.ted.com/talks/taryn\\_simon\\_the\\_stories\\_behind\\_the\\_bloodlines.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/taryn_simon_the_stories_behind_the_bloodlines.html). On a more humorous note, one notes that ruin in the Picture Collection—and even the preservation of ruin—arises and becomes discernible through the archive's use.

To wit, gaps in the Collection arise as Andy Warhol steals thousands of images to use as source imagery for, among other things, his Coca-Cola canvases. And these stolen items are preserved, ironically, in the Pop artist's archive today. See Susan Chute, "Pop! Goes the Picture Collection: Andy Warhol at NYPL," September 9, 2010, <http://www.nypl.org/blog/2010/09/09/pop-goes-picture-collection-warhol>.

42. The library was first envisioned by New York governor (and onetime presidential candidate) Samuel J. Tilden, who at the time of his death in 1886 bequeathed most of his fortune to the city for the creation of a free library and reading room. Notably, however, the library finally came into existence only a decade later, when the Tilden Trust partnered with the libraries of John Jacob Astor and James Lenox—two private endeavors experiencing financial difficulties in their efforts to keep apace with the new century's growth in publishing.

43. This controversy continues. As biographer Edmund Morris argued at a legislative hearing this summer: "An exquisite repository is now going to be turned into a populist hangout, and have its former stack space stuffed with more and more and more and more miles of computer cable. That's O.K. for scholars whose attention span extends back no farther than the early 1980s. But those of us cognizant of what happened to civilization after the great library in Alexandria burned down can only think with trepidation of what the Central Plan is going to do to the historical memory of New York." See Robin Pogrebin, "Critics Prompt New Review of Library Plan," *New York Times*, June 27, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/28/arts/design/critics-prompt-new-review-of-library-plan.html>.

Originally published in Taryn Simon, *The Picture Collection*.  
Paris: Edition Cahiers d'Art, 2015