

Introduction from *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*

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This book is an inventory of what lies deep within the borders of the United States at the foundation of a national culture. It anticipates the reconstruction of a confused moment in the midst of a country's burgeoning self-consciousness. In compiling *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* photographer Taryn Simon assumes the role of a shrewd informant while invoking the spirit of a collector of curiosities, culling from the diverse domains of science, government, medicine, entertainment, nature, security, and religion. One commonality persists in her chosen subjects: each remain relatively unknown or out-of-view to a wider public audience. These are the hidden and unfamiliar. Yet Simon is quick to admit that her selection process is random and the 62 annotated photographs comprising the series are by no means a system of classification. This is not an archive, but a time capsule. And as such, *An American Index* documents one artist's journey, over a period of four years, to uncover and examine subjects integral to America's foundation, mythology, and daily functioning. Offering visions of the unseen, and explanations for the unexplained, Simon captures the strange magic locked beneath the surface of these unsettled times.

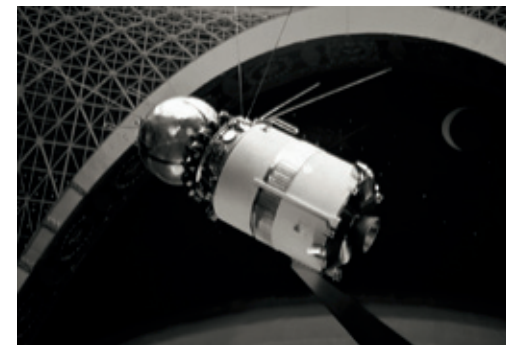
In the years leading up to *An American Index*, Simon's work focused on international regions in turmoil. Her personal projects in Lebanon and Israel and professional assignments in Gaza, Syria and Aceh have informed and influenced her photographic program, which has come to occupy a territory bridging the world of art and politics. Simon confronts this divide between politicization and aestheticization by casting a seductive spotlight on individuals and locations that traditionally might not receive such a carefully sculpted stage.

As a child Simon experienced another seminal period when she first saw far corners of the world in Kodachrome slides her father had shot and amassed during his work and travels as a young man. Simon's father documented Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev at the height of the Cold War.

As an employee of the Department of State, stationed in Bangkok during the Vietnam War, he documented sites in Northeast Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. He later photographed extensively in Afghanistan, Iran, and Israel. These were sites unseen to most American eyes during a time when the United States was engaged in a program of cultural, political, and economic exportation, spearheaded by such government organizations as the United States Information Agency (1953–1999).

A desire to uncover unknowns, understand their purpose, and display their majesty motivates much of Simon's work. *An American Index* was inspired by a visit to Fidel Castro's Palace of the Revolution, the seat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and of the Council of State and Government, where Castro greets special guests. A photograph Simon took of the grand entrance hall, lavishly decorated with tropical plants and illuminated with gleaming strips of light, laid the groundwork for her ensuing project. It was a discerned movement away from an earlier body of work, *The Innocents*, which focused exclusively on portraiture of Americans wrongfully convicted of crimes they did not commit and subsequently exonerated due to DNA evidence. As a marker of a communist stronghold, her photograph of Castro's Palace captures the incongruous opulence of an immutable foreign leader. It is a window into a power structure that both intrigues and threatens a large global constituency, much like the photographs Simon's father procured during the Cold War and, in turn, those that comprise *An American Index*.

In the midst of a national identity crisis post 9/11, Simon quickly recognized that a more immediate and revelatory window to the unknown opened onto a critical moment in America's own history. Like many great American photographers before her, she turned her eye inward. There is more than a century's worth of photography's



Richard Simon, Vostok 1 capsule, in which Yuri Gagarin orbited Earth as the first man in space, Moscow, 1965

social realist history proceeding *An American Index*, from Jacob Riis's late nineteenth century muckraking exposé of the impoverishment of Manhattan's lower east side in his acclaimed reform-inducing book *How the Other Half Lives*; to Lewis Hine's commitment to uncover child labor exploitation; to the government-supported Farm Security Administration's exhaustive documentation of poor, rural America. Though situated in the wake of these powerful reformist movements, Simon's project is not preeminently critical. Rather, there is a certain liberatory spirit to her work, which draws from other movements occurring throughout the history of American art, even those distanced from overarching political apparatuses. *An American Index* calls to mind the optimism rooted in the potential discovery of uncharted territories which has been so endemic to American art throughout its development, an ethos thrust to the fore with romanticized notions of the American landscape in nineteenth-century painting and complicated a century later by the indeterminacies, banalities, and strangeness of American culture exposed by flâneur photographers such as Diane Arbus, Walker Evans, and Robert Frank.

Simon's commitment to an aestheticized realism positions her closer to photographers like Frank or Evans, than it does to any romanticist tradition. Yet there is also something of the scientific realism of a nineteenth-century painter like Thomas Eakins coursing through the photographs of *An American Index*. Eakins's belief in the empirical, and later his reliance on photography as an aid to his precise renditions, made his view of the world one committed to a seductive, calculated beauty while nonetheless deeply entrenched in direct, hard facts. Simon's portraits of *The Innocents* align with Eakins's psychologically intimate figure studies, whereas the photographs of *An American Index* borrow more from the intense clinicism found in a painting like

Eakins's *The Gross Clinic* (1875). A crisply focused portrait of a doctor presiding over a bloody bone operation on a young boy, it utilizes a tight pyramidal structure illuminated by a sharp shaft of sunlight overhead. The direct sense of measurement, light, and form evident in each of Simon's compositions, especially the pseudoscientific subjects like that of the Hymenoplasty, the Serpent Handler or the Cryopreservation Unit, recall a nineteenth-century view of the world with all its expanded possibilities.

Since the 1970s, skepticism about the political efficacy of imagery has questioned the ability of the documentary to be interventionist in the face of aestheticization. Contested by artist-critics Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula, objectivity was implicated on the grounds that it was morally and ethically questionable. As a way out of this irresolvable dilemma, photographers of this era integrated image and text into a conceptualist, yet decisively socio-political context. The impact of this technique on art-making has been evident in Simon's practice since she inaugurated *The Innocents*, a project which directly responded to the photograph's potential to render an innocent man guilty; a number of *The Innocents* were wrongly accused due to erroneous photographic documentation supported by eye witnesses. Acknowledging the pitfalls of being seduced by imagery, or the risk in removing it from its relevant context, Simon is disciplined in her juxtaposition of image and text. She makes use of the annotated-photograph's capacity to engage and inform the public. Transforming that which is off-limits or under-the-radar into a visible and intelligible form, she confronts the divide between the privileged access of the few and the limited access of the public.

Sometimes Simon spends over a year researching each of these photographs and its accompanying text. Access takes time, effort, and commitment. Simon's application for admission often requires prolonged correspondence and screening before she is granted permission and, typically, that admission is subject to strict protocol. Her trip to Plum Island's Animal Disease Center required her to shower upon entering and exiting the facility and an earlier trip to the Avian Quarantine Facility delayed her entry onto Plum Island for two weeks due to fear of cross-contamination. When inside, Simon's tool is a large-format 4x5 camera, unless otherwise prohibited. Her lighting requirements make her equipment heavy and the shot she will take of her predetermined location is rarely decided upon before entering the site. David Levi Strauss writes about photography: "To be compelling, there must be tension in the work; if everything has been decided beforehand, there will be no tension and no compulsion to the work."¹ The compulsion comes from an artist with a crisp artistic vision committed to the facts. The tension emerges from the high risk of failure. Sometimes, after months of negotiation, Simon admits to returning without a photograph that meets her artistic standards, yielding to the medium's pre-eminent principle of image above all else.

In Simon's photography, the American soil is wrapped up in a political, cultural, and economic quagmire, yet it never fails to offer unexpected splendors. As her photograph of a fireworks display informs us, this is where the largest American firework



Taryn Simon, *Interior of The Palace of the Revolution, Havana, Cuba*, 2002;
Thomas Eakins, *The Gross Clinic*, 1875

manufacturing firm tests their materials and works to develop beauty, precision, and safety in pyrotechnic art. Yet even in a photograph so evocative of American patriotic celebration, there is something foreboding in its tone. The text continues, listing the explosive simulators Grucci develops and supplies for military training exercises. Here, Simon's project subverts, not fearful of turning down a road with gestures of the ominous, as if something from a David Lynch daydream. This unwavering sense of doom is the undercurrent of *An American Index*, made overt in a photograph like *Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility, Cherenkov Radiation*. The beautiful and eerie blue glow of the cesium chloride capsules submerged in neutralizing water is a quiet reminder of what lies volatile beneath the surface, just visible through the murk.

Notes

1. David Levi Strauss, "The Documentary Debate: Aesthetic or Anaesthetic? Or, What's So Funny About Peace, Love, Understanding, and Social Documentary Photography?" in *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York: Aperture, 2003) p. 10.

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