

What is the role of the artist today?

It is difficult to make statements about art making in a poststructuralist economy simply because of the illusive and infinite nature of many poststructuralist theories. Thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have given us the death of authorship in a society that generates more artists than ever before¹; the attempt to expose language as an unreliable exercise in accurate representation² through the act of writing itself; and the implication that there is no ‘self’ at the basis of our linguistic activity³ while relying on an individual’s utterance of language to communicate this idea. And this is just the tip of the ice burg. It seems almost a contradiction to make these claims utilizing the very systems they hope to deconstruct⁴, nevertheless these are the working conditions for artists today. Though I take issue with some poststructuralist methods there are also some ideas I find deeply relevant and intriguing; here I will outline just a few in order to expand upon them later. Specifically, I find useful Foucault’s assertion that “knowledge is the product of a ‘will to power,’ that arbitrarily establishes its own truth,” in opposition to the modern theory of objective Knowledge and essential Truth. Also, Derrida’s ideas orbiting his word “difference;” meaning is constructed in a progressively comparative manner and that there must be an eternal postponement

¹ Foucault claims, in *What Is An Author?*, “the author function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within society,” and not an original expression of the autonomous individual, pp. 382.

² Concerning Derrida, see Grentz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, pp. 148.

³ Concerning Derrida, see Grentz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, pp. 144.

⁴ Derrida calls for a questioning of the “logocentric structure...from within the order itself...to dismantle the modern ideal that views philosophy as pure, disinterested inquiry and to repudiate as well the common notion that there is some sort of straight forward correspondence between language and the external world.” (Grentz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, pp.148). I must question the effectiveness of this strategy; by participating in the “order itself” he validates the order’s existence. Simply put, it is futile to attempt complete deconstruction of anything. An analogous argument; even in having *nothing* you have *something*, if only in name. (Grentz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, pp. 144),

of ultimate truth or meaning feels very relevant in relation to the possibilities of instant information transfer. And finally the most useful tool may be the idea of a “hyperreality”⁵ framed by Jean Baudrillard and his resulting phases of the image-reality split. Collectively, these theories also exemplify the perpetual evolution of ontological and epistemological inquiry; theory begets theory, one definition begs to be challenged by the next. And today, in a world deeply influenced by Foucault, Derrida, and Baudrillard artists must actively engage with these poststructuralist ideas and take a self-aware approach to their work in order to challenge what has been done before and reach the next frontier. There are certain media that are, arguably, ideal devices for this cause. I believe photography is suited for this purpose. In this essay I will introduce the photographic work of artist Taryn Simon and the social, political, and economic issues she dissects in order to illuminate the ways in which artists may engage their work with poststructuralist thought.

Photography, since its inception, has been defined not by the objects it produces but by the functions and discourses in which it is created. The method of projecting an image from life onto another surface was utilized as early as the 5th Century; with the camera obscura, and experiments with light sensitive materials began in the late 18th Century. The basic tenants of photography were available long before it was introduced to the public as a patented ‘invention’ in 1839⁶, so one must ask, why was it not developed sooner? Perhaps the conditions were not quite right. John Szarkowski asserts in *Photography Until Now*, that photography arose from “a complex ecology of ideas and circumstance that includes the condition of the intellectual soil, the political climate, the state of technical competence, and the sophistication of the seed.”⁷ Photography does not appear arbitrarily, it is directly tied to the social and cultural conditions of the early 1800s. The advent of manufacturing and the rise of a bourgeois class with their unlimited resources, time and apparent

⁵ See Baudrillard, *Procession of the Simulacra*, pp. 254.

⁶ See ____, *A cultural History of Photography*, pp. 8.

⁷ See Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, pp.18.

interest in the poetic notion “that it might be possible to snatch from the very air a picture formed by the forces of nature,”⁸ enable the first true photographers to develop their craft. Subsequently each new sub-genre of photography requires also an analysis of the institutions and conditions in which it developed. Documentary photography is defined through its function as a tool for social change. Jacob Riis and Lewis Wicks Hine serve as two prime examples in this respect, both photographers worked for organizations (Hine for the National Child Labor Committee and Riis for the New York Tribune) intent on enacting social reform. In the years before WWI, in New York City where huge population densities and unfair employment practices provided the conditions for such a need, these photographers pioneered a straightforward style of photography to capture ‘true’ and horrific inequalities. The meaning of their work cannot be separated from the politically charged forum in which it was presented. With similar examples in mind, critic and historian Geoffrey Batchen discusses the history of photography as a history of ‘photographies,’ and brings up another important point; not only is a photograph dependant on its context for meaning we can conclude that a photograph is not an autonomous object containing universal truth or meaning⁹. Batchen quotes English critic John Tagg; “Photography as such has no identity. Its status as a technology varies with the power relations which invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work. Its function as a mode of cultural production is tied to definite conditions of existence, and its products are meaningful and legible only within the particular currencies they have.”¹⁰ Tagg leaves no room for the photographic object to retain any inherent power of its own, it is plastic, malleable and its meaning will transform in conjunction with whatever form or function is applied. Another way to think of Tagg’s version of photographic history is with the help of Foucault who claims that meaning arises within the discourse of whatever

⁸ See Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, pp.18.

⁹ See Batchen, *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography*, pp. 5.

¹⁰ See Batchen, *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography*, pp. 5.

cultural institution is at work. Therefore, the meaning of a photograph is constituted through the cultural and social conditions in which it is presented. The same photograph presented in an institution of fine art, as part of a photo-journalistic essay, as evidence in a court of law, or in an advertisement will convey very different meanings. In addition to the implications of presentation is the interpretation of the viewer. According to Derrida, we are able to understand language because it is part of a larger agreed upon system; words in a sentence produce meaning through the connections of grammar and sentence structure, both cultural constructs. So too does a photograph produce meaning in relation to the viewer's own culture and ideology. The subject depicted in a photograph carries with it visual signifiers or signs that signify meaning over top of physical characteristics. The resulting conception of the signified object will vary depending on the experiences of the viewer. An American businessman will interpret a photograph of an apple very differently than a female Indian teenager. What is at stake is the notion of a singular meaning to be found in a word or image. Derrida uses the aforementioned argument to prove that all meanings are fluid¹¹ and manifest differently for all viewers, there is no essential, underlying message or connection to 'reality.' However, a photograph, being the closest possible depiction of the likeness of an object, is often taken to be the real life object. That is not to say a viewer will look at a photograph of an apple and attempt to bite into it, instead the viewer will look through the frame of the photograph and determine a cause and effect relationship without recognizing the hand of the image maker; an apple exists as a representation because there once was, in front of the camera lens, a real life apple. To assume this connection is faulty, though it does exemplify the first stage of Baudrillard's image-reality split and is often utilized by photographers as a manipulative device. In these ways, photography embodies the some of the poststructuralist theories mentioned before.

¹¹ See Grentz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, pp.146.

Photographer Taryn Simon displays a sophisticated awareness of these theories and takes advantage of the illusionary and deceptive characteristics available in photography to explore social, political, economic and cultural themes around the world. Her work resists the labels traditionally associated with such investigations—photojournalism or documentary photography—and in this way sheds some of the baggage associated with these historically defined genres. Here I will present three bodies of her work; *The Innocents*, *Contraband*, and *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*.

In *The Innocents* Simon explores the limits of photography in providing an accurate version of reality. Throughout the summer of 2000 Simon traveled across the United States photographing wrongfully convicted criminals in places of significance to their alleged crime; their place of arrest, alibi location, or the scene of the crime¹². In each case the wrongful conviction was the result of a misidentification. Law enforcement and prosecutors rely on ‘eye witness testimony’ to identify the perpetrator based on their accurate memory of the event. This testimony comes after “exposure to composite sketches, mug shots, Polaroids, and [police] lineups”¹³ that can effectively alter memory. The ‘eyewitness’ subsequently creates a nightmarish reality out of a completely constructed fiction. Since their initial conviction and partially serving their applied sentence, all of the men Simon photographed were exonerated through the use of DNA evidence. Only recently has DNA evidence become a requirement to corroborate eyewitness testimony. This indicates the permeability of our mind’s creation of reality, and more specifically points to the combined power of memory and images to create an acceptable reality. In her photographs Simon has each man pose calmly in a seemingly serene tableaux that conveys a heavy sense of solemnity. And while these images are meant to reference a horrific fiction originally instigated by another ‘incriminating’ photograph they themselves are fictions as well. Their meaning depends on the context in which they are presented; each photograph is strategically presented with didactic text, without which a very different

¹² See Simon, *The Innocents*, foreword.

¹³ See Simon, *The Innocents*, foreword.

interpretation would inevitably result. One portrait of a well-dressed man standing amid an array of tall, thin trees states;

In the case of Troy Webb, convicted of rape, kidnapping, and robbery, the victim was shown a photo array. She tentatively identified Webb's photo, but said that he looked too old. The police then presented another photo of Webb taken four years before the crime occurred. He was positively identified. Troy Webb served seven years of a forty-seven-year sentence.

Based only on proximity between text and image, this photograph becomes a portrait of Troy Webb; we can assume he has been released from prison and perhaps now leads a prosperous life.

Ultimately, this series reflects both Foucault's theory that discourse brings objects into being through identification¹⁴ and Derrida's assertion that our definition of reality is constituted through discourse and difference. The subject of each photograph has been labeled as a criminal through false identification and whether intentionally mislead or not eyewitnesses create a truth in their mind that they fully believe. One victim, quoted in Simon's introduction to *The Innocents* puts it this way; "All the images became enmeshed to one image that became Ron, and Ron became my attacker." Simon takes Derrida's idea to extreme lengths to show us that not only is meaning arbitrarily assigned through language and sign-systems but can also be manipulated through memory, emotions, imagery, and experience. While it may seem easy to accept Derrida's assertion it is quite another thing for these men whose reality shifted instantaneously and erroneously due to factors outside their control. A culturally constructed reality takes on new meaning through these themes of judgment and fate.

In the next series, *Contraband*, Simon spent five days photographing items confiscated from air passengers and mail entering the United States at JFK International Airport's Customs and Border Protection Federal Inspection Site and the Postal Service International Mail Facility. Each object is photographed under very basic, diffused light on a plain white background. The result is a

¹⁴ See Grentz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, pp. 132.

collection of 1,075 photographs of prohibited items that range from the everyday, to the illegal, to the just plain odd, depicted in a seemingly objective aesthetic. Instead of addressing the ways in which we assign meaning to objects and events this series explores how our treatment of those objects reflects the values and conventions of our culture. She shows us neatly arranged boxes of illegal pharmaceuticals, the bodies of deceased animals, counterfeit designer handbags, a package of lard. Each one of these objects, because of its material properties, embodies a specific cultural concern and is thus barred from entering the country. At its point of origin these items held a very different meaning and their purpose was acceptable. Unlike the previous series, Simon does not include textual explanations with the photographs. Each is titled and then grouped into one of three categories; prohibited, illegal, or counterfeit. These words become powerful agents in the conceptions we form around each object. As a result of Simon's strict framework, this series reflects Foucault's denial of "the idea of single authorship... he insists that all works are ultimately socially produced."¹⁵ By photographing objects chosen by a culturally defined process of elimination, Simon shifts the creative function from herself to the viewer and provides us with a mirror to examine ourselves. This series serves as an index of our societies' fears and desires, and illustrates the process by which our culture is shaped by the definitions we assign.

Finally, in her latest body of work, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, Simon combines her previous two approaches to realize a multifaceted and insightful photographic essay. Over the course of four years Simon traveled the world researching bloodlines and their related stories. Simon presents each case or bloodline as a 'chapter' made up of three panels; the first is a grouping of portraits, the second a thinly formatted, scroll-like didactic text, and the third a collection of photographs; still lives, landscapes, video stills—evidence to illustrate the text and portraits. Every portrait is painstakingly made under the same conditions, Simon and her assistant

¹⁵ See Grentz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, pp.137.

hulled substantial lighting set ups and backdrops around the world to ensure uniformity. A plastic sheet was laid out on the floor before each shoot marking the locations of camera, sitter, lights, etc.¹⁶ Some portraits remain empty, the sitters having been unavailable for situational or religious reasons, only the frame stands for their existence. The effect is implied neutrality, the artist is actively refraining from prescribing an emotional or political affect. The photographs in the third panel are arranged arbitrarily, as if their only goal is to stay out of each other's way. The thin text panel serves as an index and is formatted with numbers and letters corresponding to either a portrait or an item on the third panel. This printed text acts as more than date and title, it is actually a control device that limits the viewer to all the information Simon deems necessary for us to know. In separating this information from the source image Simon requires an active investigation by the viewer. In fact, with the format and aesthetic of this body of work Simon requires much more from the viewer than an active investigation, she calls into question our basic experience of daily life. In *Chapter I* we are introduced to Shivdutt Yadav who, upon visiting the local land registry office in his home of Uttar Pradesh, India, discovered that "official records listed him as dead."¹⁷ As a result he has been strip of his home and land rights. The lengthy text presented in the center panel of this 'chapter' thoroughly explain the predicament of Yadav and his family as well as their tireless attempts to restore what is rightfully theirs'. The additional images include a photograph of a document requesting official recognition that Yadav is living and a reinstatement of his property, also a photograph of a corpse floating in the Ganges River; a striking reminder of the proximity of actual death. Presented with this basic information we are left to determine for ourselves the degree to which certain factors determine the course of this man's life. With the forensic character of her presentation Simon allows us to believe we can autonomously draw conclusions from the work. This however is a fallacy since we are not able to make any conclusion that isn't already provided. This

¹⁶ See Batchen, *Reverant*, pp.2.

¹⁷ See Simon, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, Chapter I.

exercise eventually becomes self-reflexive. Most of us live day to day under the assumption that our actions are innately our own and come from some essential, instinctual place, that these actions govern the course of our lives. This isn't necessarily false but it isn't entirely true. Simon demonstrates that our fates are determined both by who we are and by the events that surround us. As we've learned from Foucault and Derrida, our character traits are constituted through the experience of living in a culture. Through our interactions with people and our observation of events we assimilate our own actions to match cultural norms of how to act, what to think and most importantly what we take to be true and of value. The events that surround us, sometimes outside our control, are made up of the same stuff and these events have an equal bearing on the course of our lives. Put another way, by Geoffrey Batchen; "Mediated by circumstance, human agency...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."¹⁸ This assertion leads to the conclusion that our concept of free will is simply a myth. Therefore, our fate is inextricably wrapped up with that of others'. We are but one of many, many functioning organisms whose actions create ripples that radiate from their source and affect anything and everything they contact, intersecting with other ripples that may again alter change the course. Simon's work reflects these ideas in two ways. Her subject matter literally illustrates the intersection of fate and autonomous determination. Her unassuming, pseudo-objective presentation format produces an effect that allows the viewer to navigate the subject matter with a sense of free will, almost unaware that her prescribed format actually dictates their information intake pattern that in turn influences their interpretations.

A Living Man Declared Dead also has an addition effect. Simon has created a self-contained reality within self-defined parameters. After an extended period of time with the work we slip into the successive phases of image-reality detachment, into "hyperreality," as Baudrillard defined it; one

¹⁸ See Batchen, *Revenant*, pp.3.

that “substitutes signs of the real for the real itself.”¹⁹ In the first phase we take the image to be a reflection of a basic reality, a characteristic effect of most photographs. Next we experience an image that “masks and perverts a basic reality.” Simon achieves this status by stripping her portraits of immediate context; the sitter seems to be floating in an arbitrary purgatory with no clues to their origin outside their physical traits and attire. In providing so many of this type of portrait we begin to sense “an absence of basic reality” outside the work. The individuals depicted seem not to belong to a specific time or place; they only belong to and refer to each other in an endless relay. Finally, in conjunction with the text and supplementary photographs we enter into an alternate reality, a “hyperreality,” that “bears no relation to any outside reality whatsoever.” We are embedded in Simon’s new structure while also complacent in its existence. The real focus of this work is not the conception of ‘other,’ it is about ourselves, its meaning is not to be found in “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.”²⁰ In this way, and maybe most importantly, Simon’s work also demonstrates Derrida’s concept of the *mise en abyme*, the idea that meaning is constituted through other meanings in an infinite cycle, we are subjugated to an experience of the world within the limits of our own socially constructed reality.

With all this in mind, what is the impact of poststructuralist theories on art-making today? I have described the ways in which Taryn Simon demonstrates an awareness of and engagement with poststructuralism and the unique format in which she presents her work. The “hyperreality” she creates defies categorization within the traditional labels of photojournalism, documentary, or fine art. However, just as poststructuralism relies on the theories of structuralism for definition, Simon’s work relies on the traditional outlets of photography. The photojournalistic and documentary structures becomes a necessary starting point from which she can create her own structured reality,

¹⁹ See Baudrillard, *Procession of the Simulacra*, pp. 254.

²⁰ See Batchen, *Revenant*, pp.7.

but without those institutions firmly planted in the minds of viewers there would be no proverbial toe-hold to depart from. I believe that it is the duty of the artist to not only engage with contemporary critical theories but also to incorporate subjects, traditions, structures, and practices of the past in order to synthesize all available information into something new, unique, and interesting. In one of the later chapters of *A Living Man Declared Dead* a supplementary photograph depicts a classroom in a Ukrainian orphanage, a sign hanging on the wall translates to “Those who do not know their past are not worthy of their future,” a fitting epitaph to those artist who do not heed the warning.

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The role of the artist today:

The photographic work of Taryn
Simon

The Innocents



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, 2002

Chromogenic print, 48 x 60 inches (121.9 x 152.4 cm), Edition of 5
© Taryn Simon



Troy Webb Scene of the crime, The Pines, Virginia Beach, Virginia
Served 7 years of a 47-year sentence for Kidnapping, Rape and Robbery, 2002

Chromogenic print, 48 x 60 inches (121.9 x 152.4 cm), Edition of 5
© Taryn Simon



Ron Williamson Baseball field, Norman, Oklahoma
Williamson has been drafted by the Oakland Athletics before being sentenced to death
Served 11 years of a death sentence for First Degree Murder, 2002

Chromogenic print, 48 x 60 inches (121.9 x 152.4 cm), Edition of 5
© Taryn Simon

Contraband



Bird corpse, labeled as home décor, Indonesia to Miami, Florida (prohibited)
ANIMAL CORPSES (PROHIBITED)



Steroids, Testosterone & Sustanon, Pakistan (illegal)
ANABOLIC STEROIDS (ILLEGAL)



Cow dung toothpaste, India (BSE, Foot and Mouth Disease) (9CFR.94.6) (prohibited) COW
DUNG TOOTHPASTE (PROHIBITED)



USA American Visagra, Viagra, China (counterfeit)
ERECTILE DISFUNCTION MEDICATION/CIALIS/VIAGRA (COUNTERFEIT/PROHIBITED)



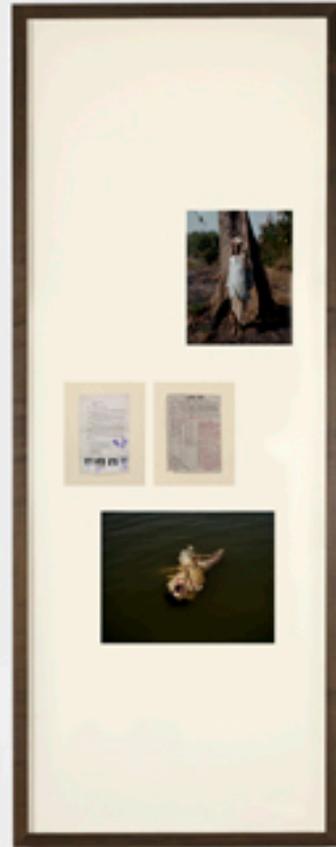
Handbag, Louis Vuitton (disguised) (counterfeit)
HANDBAGS, LOUIS VUITTON (COUNTERFEIT)



Deer penis, Asian origin (9CFR.94) (prohibited)
DEER PENIS (PROHIBITED)

A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters

Chapter I





1.



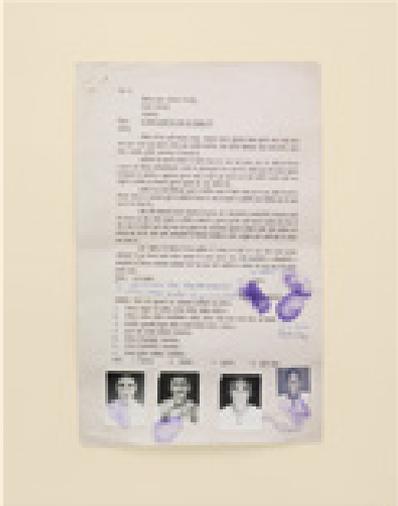
2.



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3.



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Chapter IV



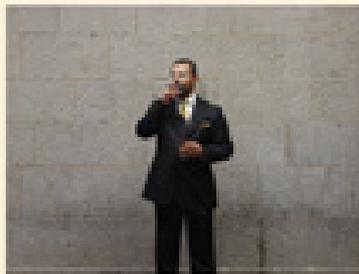


3.



4.





Chapter XVII





11



12



13



14



136.



137.



138.



139.



b.



c.

