

## FAMILY OF MAN

### A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII

By Taryn Simon

Museum of Modern Art

New York City

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A century after August Sander began his lifelong series of environmental portraits, *People of the 20th Century*, the nature of documentary fine art photography has evolved into a multifaceted, contextualized genre no longer reliant on traditional photography's unique moment in time. Taryn Simon's project *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII*, recently on view at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, exemplifies this contemporary approach.

Simon's project consists of eighteen "chapters" (nine of which were on display at MoMA), each focusing on a group of people or animals that are usually connected genetically. Simon spent nearly four years, from 2008 to 2011, traveling throughout the world and photographing these "living genealogies and interconnected groups," including orphans in the Ukraine, invasive rabbits in Australia, a "representative" multigenerational family selected by the Chinese government, the descendants of a Nazi administrator, a Kenyan polygamist and practicing medical doctor and his offspring, as well as the families of a living man declared dead by land thieves in India, and the first female hijacker. Simon divides each group into three separately framed components: a grid of individual studio portraits shot against a neutral light brown background; a text panel consisting of brief descriptors for each of the portraits and a summary of the group; and lastly, a panel of ancillary photographs (mainly still lifes and landscapes), which Simon captured while on location making the portraits, and which provide context for the underlying genealogical portrait.

In Simon's presentation at MoMA the portraits were small, only about 3 x 5 inches, thereby reducing the importance of any particular individual in favor of the larger whole and contributing to the significance of the accompanying text. The size of the photographs and their sheer quantity encourage the viewer to consider the more apparent connections across the large number of portraits: age, race, hair color, and even absence (Simon chose to leave a blank space for those who declined to or could not be photographed). Simon astutely frames her text to present it as its own panel, centered between the grid of portraits and her more limited selection of ancillary

photographs, elevating its importance in the grouping and ensuring that her work is not just about looking. We are forced to read in order to understand the relationships across a group, the history of its interconnectedness, and the contemporary legacy Simon is presenting.

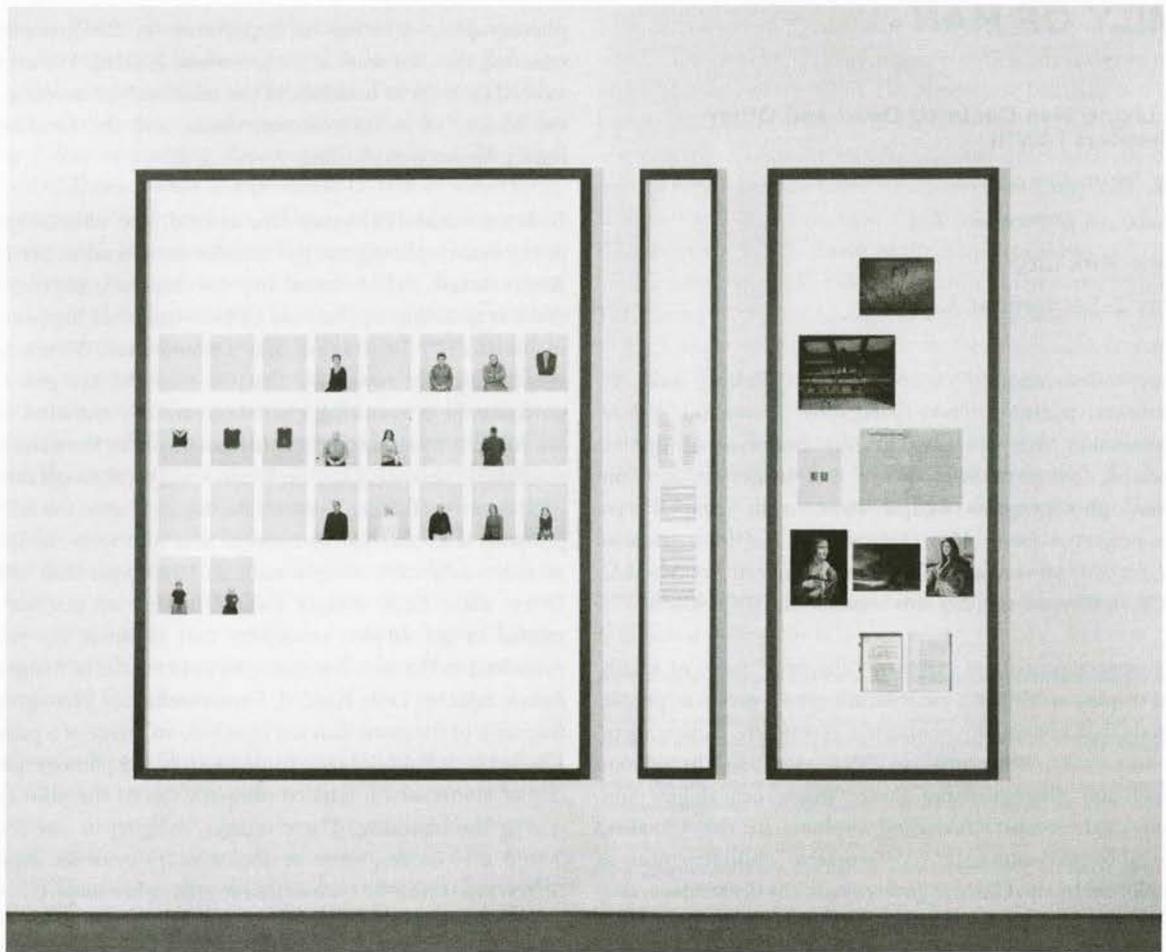
In her seminal 1981 essay "In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," feminist artist and writer Martha Rosler asked, "How useful are documentary photographs if there is no follow up, no way of knowing what happened next in the story?"<sup>1</sup> In *A Living Man Declared Dead*, Simon answers this question in two ways: first, in many of her genealogical portraits she is revisiting a public figure of some kind (most of her subjects have been previously portrayed in the news media), essentially "following up," in Rosler's words, through the lens of each figure's offspring. Second, she expands upon the individual portraits with the text component and also with the inclusion of more subjective images such as landscapes and still lifes. Often, these latter images include interior or exterior spaces related to the subject, or objects that reinforce the narrative contained in the text. For example, in her series of images about female hijacker Leila Khaled, Simon includes a photograph of a fragment of the plane that she hijacked, an image of a painting of Khaled by a Palestinian artist, and an aerial photograph of the city of Haifa, which Khaled allegedly forced the pilot to circle during the hijacking. These images, ranging in size from 3 x 5 to 8 x 10 inches, serve as documentary evidence supporting Simon's narrative text, while also revealing her subjective choices of exactly what to include.



Previously, from 2000 to 2003, Simon worked on *The Innocents*, a project documenting convicted murderers who were later exonerated based on DNA evidence. There, too, Simon utilized environmental portraits and extensive text descriptions to reference a history of social documentary photography dating back to Jacob Riis in the 1880s. Riis's photography, first published in his 1890 book *How the Other Half Lives*, embraced human concerns in an effort to reform the slums of New York City. Like Riis, Simon sentimentalizes her subjects in *The Innocents*, portraying them in the warm glow of an overly stylized, cinematic light. This humanizing effect reinforces her critique of the judicial system responsible for so many wrongful

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Excerpt from CHAPTER XI from *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII* (2011) by Taryn Simon; © Taryn Simon; courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York



convictions. Such empathy is less apparent in *A Living Man Declared Dead*, where Simon neutralizes her subjects through her use of a consistent light brown backdrop and flat strobe lighting. This neutral form makes the work far more open-ended. Are we meant to be sympathetic or critical of the heirs of the Nazi administrator? Are they to blame for being related to someone who helped administer one of the world's worst genocides? Simon pushes her audience to arrive at its own conclusions about whether to feel critical or compassionate toward the complex and sometimes odd "families" at which she has directed her lens.

Simon is part of a new generation of contemporary documentary photographers who see the individual photograph as the starting place for their explorations rather than as an end point. Fred Ritchin, in his 2008 book *After Photography*, describes artists such as Simon as "image-makers [who] will be thought of simply as 'communicators'" rather than as photographers, and for whom "communication of whatever kind becomes more important than the singularity of the photographic vision."<sup>2</sup> This logic implicitly questions the depth of content that the stand-alone image can convey. After all, how much meaning should we expect from 1/125 of a second when there are more than ten million such moments in each day? By contextualizing her portraits with additional photographs and text elements, Simon guides us to a more complex understanding of each individual she depicts.

A decade after Simon launched her career with the traditional yet didactic work presented in *The Innocents*, it is exciting to see the maturity and subtlety with which she brings us the genealogical portrait, presenting diverse familial groupings from around the world in a static, grid-based equality. This revelatory exhibition of eighteen "families" creates a sort of global equivalence, suggesting that no one genealogy is more important than any other. Instead, each genealogy is made up of layer upon layer of complexity and is unique, not so much in the physical appearance of any individual, but in the psychological inheritance that is revealed through the stories and objects associated with one's ancestors.

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NOTES 1. Martha Rosler, "In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 316. 2. Fred Ritchin, *After Photography* (New York: Norton, 2008), 146.

**Above**

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