

Imperceptible Politics: The Photograph and The Aesthetic Experience

by Jordan Reznick

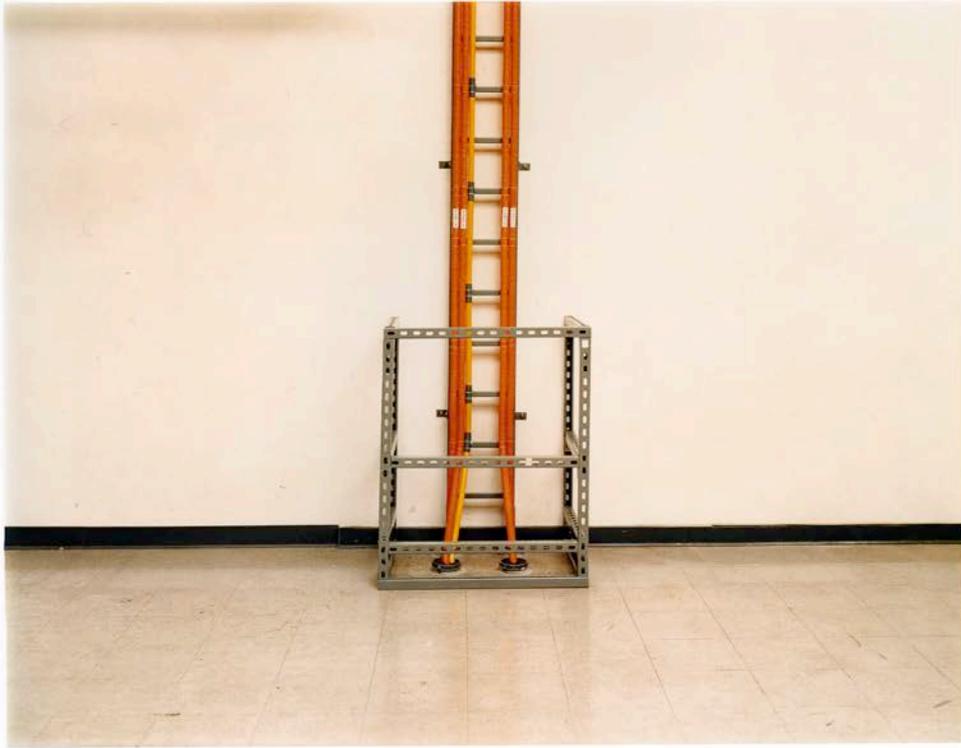
Transatlantic Sub-Marine Cables Reaching Land, VSNL International, Avon, New Jersey (2006/2007, Figure 1) by Taryn Simon. The image is plain. It looks benign. Initially, it might seem preposterous to dedicate an argument to its crucial political role in disrupting our sense of the contemporary world. There is nothing especially troublesome going on here: Five lengths of orange and yellow plastic tubing descend through the center of the photograph, secured to each other with metal bands. The tubes are protected by an unthreatening basic configuration of metal pieces, reminiscent of a child's Erector Set. The environment surrounding this unpretentious arrangement is typical of bland American institutions, complete with dingy white walls, scuffed linoleum tiling of the most ordinary public-building sort and the familiar grey plastic floor trim to accompany it. On the one hand, this image is totally decipherable. Its details are explicitly on display—centered, straightforward and uncomplicated.

On the other hand, it is so uncomplicated and banal that it becomes an abstract plane of visual information, its history indecipherable and unknown. The symmetry and sparseness allow for a visual wandering through the simple elements of the photograph, understanding the objects contained in the frame, but also appreciating them as mere forms and colors—lines of grey, orange and yellow against a beige background.

This is life turned into art. The banal objects of contemporary culture enter the photograph to be contemplated for *what else* they are besides what we use them for when we relate to them in the lived world. Instead of walking through an institutional space, set upon a destination or task, we stop. We stare. We contemplate. We wonder about the significance of this mundane scene monumentalized by Simon's camera. In the quiet spaciousness of the photograph life is paused and the ordinary becomes uncommon.

The visual forms teeter between familiar and strange, real and symbolic. In their resistance to our attempts to ascribe meaning to their appearance, they reveal the unstable signification of the visible world (Rancière 2007, 64-67). This tender moment of instability and oscillation is crucial to the politics of the photograph. It is here that everyday objects twist free from the meaning and utility normally assigned to them (Tanke 2011, 66, 82).

Each time my gaze fixes upon the cables, my head begins to tilt as I sense their ever-so-slight lean. Though I initially perceive symmetry in the image, I cannot confirm this perception. The cables slope. A yellow cable frustrates the mirroring of the lines. A seam disrupts the floor molding. The tension between symmetry and the slight imbalances that thwart it keep me entranced before the photograph, my eyes tracking the little details. They please me, but I do not know why. The pleasure does not happen in thought, but in the sense of sight freed from thought. The image holds my attention without yielding its meaning. I enjoy it but I have no use for it in thought. I do not



Transatlantic Sub-marine Cables Reaching Land
VSNL International
Avon, New Jersey

These VSNL sub-marine telecommunications cables extend 8,037.4 miles across the Atlantic Ocean. Capable of transmitting over 60 million simultaneous voice conversations, these underwater fiber-optic cables stretch from Saunton Sands in the United Kingdom to the coast of New Jersey. The cables run below ground and emerge directly into the VSNL International headquarters, where signals are amplified and split into distinctive wavelengths enabling transatlantic phone calls and internet transmissions.

Underwater fiber-optic cables are laid along the ocean's floor by specially designed ships. Cables are buried as they approach shore and armored to protect against undersea landslides, marine life (sharks, in particular) and fishing equipment. Fishermen are advised of cable locations as hooking one can interfere with international communication services as well as sink a boat.

VSNL operates one of 14 sub-marine cable systems connected to the continental United States. Exchanges originating in the U.S. are combined and enhanced before broadcast and transmission across the Atlantic. As of 2005, sub-marine cables link all the world's continents except Antarctica.

FIGURE 1. *Transatlantic Sub-Marine Cables Reaching Land*, VSNL International, Avon, New Jersey, by Taryn Simon, 2006/2007. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

agree or disagree with anything. There is no emotion or judgment or desire to be had—just orange and yellow and plastic and metal and linoleum. Without the text, it is simply a visual field for my free, quiet, unthought and personal sensory exploration.

This is the aesthetic experience. When I speak of aesthetics, I do not speak merely about the way things look or about style. Nor do I speak solely about a theory of the beautiful or of the senses. I speak of a Kantian relationship between form and meaning, sensation and intelligibility, theorized by the philosophical discourse of aesthetics. The aesthetic experience is the free play of thought and sense, in which the feeling of beholding an image exceeds the limitations of our understanding for explaining what appears (Kant [1790] 2001).

Perhaps I have held us here in the reverie of the visual a bit too long, for if we were to encounter this image in the gallery or the book, we would have alleviated the pressure of the unknown long ago by reading its accompanying text. Three paragraphs outline the function and maintenance of these cables. The first paragraph reads:

These VSNL sub-marine telecommunications cables extend 8,037.4 miles across the Atlantic Ocean. Capable of transmitting over 60 million simultaneous voice conversations, these underwater fiber-optic cables stretch from Saunton Sands in the United Kingdom to the coast of New Jersey. The cables run below ground and emerge directly into the VSNL International headquarters, where signals are amplified and split into distinctive wavelengths enabling transatlantic phone calls and internet transmissions. (2007, 63)

The text feels clinical and unadorned like the square symmetrical view of the camera. Simon lays out the facts simply, without opinion or embellishment. She focuses upon measurable and technical facts, avoiding subjective or suggestive statements. The facts are far more astonishing than the photograph, though they also relate to something commonplace in the contemporary first world—international communication.

I now understand that these plastic tubes contain fiber-optic cables and that there are potentially sixty million voice conversations travelling through them at the moment of the shutter's release. The monumental reality I have just read about is juxtaposed with the unostentatious physical form that stands for it.

Typically, photographs serve as evidence for a claim, therefore functioning as an interpretation of the reality it records (Butler 2010, 70). In this representational relationship between text and image, text supplies the context and history while image supplements the text with visual substance. Form and content are packaged together neatly, minimizing and eliminating the possible kinds of unpredictable interpretations that might emerge from the aesthetic experience (Rancière 2007, 114-117). We see this representational use of photography in multiple spheres of life: news, mass media, science, photo albums, advertising, entertainment, anthropology, history, medicine, the court room, etc. Photographs compose a cultural archive that tethers us to our own history and to a

larger narrative of human history, allowing us to comprehend and locate ourselves in relationship to other people, places and times.¹

However, the photograph is not the stable vessel of data that it appears to be. Its interpretation, as we can see with *Transatlantic Submarine Cables Reaching Land*, is not self-evident but dependent upon text. Photographs most often appear with captions, titles or other verbal testimony to help viewers to decipher, understand and respond to the supposedly implicit message, framing how they fit into or alter established perspectives (Burgin, 144). The text creates the snug fit of form with content that assigns meaning, affect and value to things in the sensible world, defining the relationships of things to each other and to ourselves, as if these relationships were self-evident and natural (Tanke 2011, 75). In this way, photographs become complicit in the general circulation of images that reproduce the histories, norms and understandings to which our current political and social systems are anchored.

This active production of knowledge in which the photograph participates is also the jettisoning of what becomes unknowable—imperceptible, invisible, unsayable and unimaginable—and therefore determining of what is impossible for thought, action, politics, events and social transformations (45-46). Thus, photographs do not simply show the reality before the lens, but participate in a larger strategy of selecting and excluding what will count as reality. What is absent from images and their accompanying interpretation haunts the periphery of the frame as its invisible excess (Butler 2010, xiii).

If we are compelled to understand our world in this contemporary moment, we face a conundrum: We are too embedded in the modern ordering of knowledge to see it clearly. We cannot see the lens through which we think and view the world, others and ourselves. The textures, distortions, limitations, striations and blind spots of that lens are also our own and therefore invisible to us (Foucault 1970, 219-221; Tanke 2009, 41). And, since its invention in the nineteenth century, photography has become natural accomplice to the inadequate lens of knowledge, selecting what will and will not count as part of the striated narrative that explains the contemporary world.

We can think of this striation of knowledge as a partitioning of people, populations, locations, objects and events into definable categories with assigned values, capacities and functions. When these categorized parts of the world appear in photographs with explication that limits possible interpretations, these values, capacities and functions appear to be self-evident facts instead of unstable qualities open to reconfiguration. Other possibilities for knowing and configuring the world are literally imperceptible.

¹ “From the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onward, industrial capitalist society established itself in Europe and the world according to the schema of the great nationalities. History had the function, within bourgeois ideology, of showing how these great national units, which capitalism needed, came from far back in time and had asserted and maintained their unity through various revolutions. “History was a discipline by means of which the bourgeoisie showed, first, that its reign was only the result, the product, the fruit, of a slow maturation, and that this reign was thus perfectly justified, since it came from the mists of time.” Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume Two*, (New York: The New Press, 1998) 423.

However, we do not have the choice to simply open our eyes and pay attention, discover the imperceptible and snap a picture of it. The active construction of reality in which the photograph participates is invisible. The photograph's operations of selection and those power relationships behind it are not necessarily representable. There is not necessarily a figure or intentional subject that could be exposed as the actor and thus oppressor to blame (Butler 2010, 73-74). The imperceptible is obscured by complex relationships between "institutions, economic and social processes, behavioral patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification, modes of characterization" (Foucault 1972, 44-45). These relationships are not present in the visual itself, but affect the ways in which we apprehend the visual such that other possibilities for apprehension remain unknown. In order to discover and destabilize the limited lens through which we think reality, we must somehow perceive that something is imperceptible and that it is the capacity of our knowledge that is preventing that perception (Butler 2010, 73-74).

This is the opportunity that Taryn Simon offers us in her series *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*. As the discourse around the "War on Terrorism" turned US attention upon enemies attempting to invade its borders, defining the United States and its subjects against its dangerous Other, photographer Taryn Simon turned her camera towards the remote places within the US that might hold keys to understanding this moment in history. The photographs and text that she presents are peeks into contemporary realities that are simultaneously astonishing and unsurprising, strange and ordinary.

At the twenty-fifth of sixty images in Simon's book we find *Transatlantic Sub-marine Cables Reaching Land*.² The encounter with this image and its text overturns the normal representational logic of the photograph: It does not sufficiently serve as evidence of a claim. I believe Simon that these cables are what she says they are, that this is the actual scene that appeared before her camera and that the stated facts relate to that appearance. However, what I learn from the text does not account for what I sense before me. I do not sense sixty million voices. I sense silence. I do not sense the distance between New Jersey, USA and Saunton Sands, UK. I sense a space whose scope I could relate to spatially with my own body. What am I to make of this disjuncture between sayable information and visual information presented as coupled, quantifiable and determinate? The photograph *is* and *is not* an image of the reality that the text describes.

The aesthetic experience happens in the very place that I do not expect it. Between the clinical view of the camera and the exacting chronicle of the text, I am prepared to absorb the import of this appearance and conjure up the appropriate reaction and move along. But, my habitual passive reception is thwarted, because while the text and the image touch each other and occupy each other, they do not match up. They converge and diverge from each other in sense and speech, frustrating expectations for the snug fit between form and content. The image is not merely a coded expression,

² While the photographs are in a fixed sequence in the book, when exhibited their sequence is changed for each exhibition. In the exhibitions, the photographs appear without text. Instead the texts for all the photographs are printed in a single newspaper distributed at the entrance to the exhibition. See installation views at <http://tarynsimon.com>.

translation or duplicate of the ideas attached to it. The obstinate silent visuality of the image loiters at the edges of the text, as if to remind us that there is something unruly missing in the logical accounting of facts. At the same time, the text creeps into the visual surface, showing how these ordinary objects can be decoded to reveal the history inscribed on their forms (Rancière 2007, 3-11).

Gaps and clashes between text and image spark the realization of unanticipated meanings (46). The text does not minimize the multiplying of possible reactions to the image. It does not render me the passive receiver of the photograph's interpretation, but an active viewer summoned to figure out what appears before me and why.

Without instruction, I discover the image's unstable nature. When I cannot apprehend the image in the very moment that I most expect to be able to do so, what becomes exposed is my expectation that photographs deliver stable meanings. What becomes exposed is the fact that images actually depend upon text to acquire their apparently self-evident meanings. What becomes exposed is that the things in the sensible world do not actually have definitive meanings, values and capacities naturally contained within them (Rancière 2007, 26; Tanke 2011, 61-62). Image and text always have an unstable relationship to each other. In the moment that we discover this instability, we also gain the freedom to make new connections between the visual and meaning (Foucault 1970, 9-10).

When I conceptually locate the text in the visual, the photograph points to the physical, historical, cultural and manufactured connection between Europe and North America, between the Queen and her former colonies, between my British friends and myself. I wonder about the indifference of these cables to the alternating voices of US President Obama and UK Prime Minister David Cameron that certainly pass through their oceanic span. Did this site somehow witness decisions about troop withdrawals from Afghanistan? Did these cables transmit their conversation upon Cameron's appointment as Prime Minister?: "[I] reiterated my deep and personal commitment to the special relationship between our two countries," Obama claims to have uttered into the cables. "A bond that has endured for generations and across party lines" (Zeleny 2010). Is this the site of that conversation? Of that bond? Could this photograph—these simple parallel lines—really contain the site of such a tangle of history?

The intangible events that compose history cannot actually be physically located or visually represented. All that exists are the physical traces that historical events leave behind in their wake. Accordingly, every ordinary object is an archive of the histories that converge upon its manifestation. *Cables* is the accounting of one such manifestation.

As I begin to see these cables as artifacts of humankind, I imagine them as ruins uselessly left behind by the march of progress. How ridiculous they seem. Something as immense as our transatlantic telecommunication system—and all of the economic, political and interpersonal systems that depend upon it—is as fragile as five cables that unceremoniously touch the earth somewhere that is no more pretentious than an elementary school cafeteria in New Jersey.

And so, the impossibly complex tether between institutions; economic and social systems; public, private and political life; humans and the planet, converge upon this scene, yet are not figurative within it. The unsaid, unseen and unknown hover at the periphery of the frame as its

imperceptible excess. We cannot see them, but we can perceive that we cannot see them, such that they vacillate in and out of the picture, undoing the self-evidential testimony of the photograph in an unmanageable eruption of meanings.

My relationship to the ordinary world around me is punctured by the ever-present possibility of the unknowable testimonies inscribed on its visible surfaces. The real world itself teeters between strange and familiar, newly unfastened from commonly shared meanings and subjected to the musings of my personal philosophical thought (Tanke 2009, 2).

This is the politics of the photograph. If sincere political change is not forged by passing a better law or electing a better official, but instead requires the reconfiguration of human relationships to each other and the world around us—a refashioning of the entrenched yet invisible blunder of subjectivity itself—then it must somehow become evident our way of knowing the world is not the only way of knowing the world. It must become evident that the cultural consensus of meaning—the partitioning of the sensible world into a taxonomy of things with defined values, qualities and narratives—is in fact a consensus based not upon self-evident fact but upon its own reproducibility as if it were fact. Even the possibility of *fact* itself must be rattled from its secure position as a part of knowledge at all.

Because photographs are offered to the public unsolicited in multiple spheres of life as if they were vessels of facts that explain the world, the unfastening of the photograph from its assured relationship with meaning is a critical component of uncovering the limitations of knowledge. When an encounter with a photograph alters the ordinary relationship between sense and meaning, it makes possible new forms of perception (Rancière 2009, 102-103; Tanke 2011, 103). As viewer, I try to wrestle the photograph into conversation with all the other things I know, necessarily unsettling my own foundation of knowledge which cannot contain within its taxonomy the explosion of meanings springing from the thing I behold. The meeting of photograph and viewer is an active, dynamic event that bravely disturbs the settled order of knowledge with its silent speech.

In the case of Simon's work, the viewer finds herself in a perpetual wrestling match. Never merely a passive receiver of text and image, she must work to reconcile the images into conversation with each other and with her own knowledge. As I turn the pages of *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, I find myself in the confusing tangle of its bizarre cataloging of my nation.

NASA, The Beach House (2007), *Cryopreservation Unit* (2007), *Hibernating Black Bear and Cubs* (2005/2007, see Appendix), *Live HIV, HIV Research Laboratory* (2006/2007, see Appendix), *Imperial Office of the World Knights of the Klu Klux Klan* (2007), *U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Contraband Room* (2005/2007, see Appendix), *Great White Shark in Captivity* (2007).

In *Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Plural Marriage, Wyler Residence, Colorado City, Arizona* (2007, Figure 2), I face another ordinary white wall. Arranged upon it are thirty-four images in an incomplete grid. Each image is identically framed in black with gold-leaf trim. In each one appears a studio portrait of a white person, couple or family. An electrical outlet, showing its years of use in the paint chipped from its surface, offsets the asymmetry of the unfinished display. The grid is not only incomplete, but also imperfect. Its columns are differently



Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Plural Marriage
Wyler Residence
Colorado City, Arizona

*Marvin Wyler, a polygamist, fathered 34 children, with his three wives
Charlette, Estler and Laurie. Wyler has over 110 grandchildren.*

The original Mormon Church, or Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), traditionally recognized polygamy as a privilege for a select group of men. Responding to government pressure, Mormon settlers, in what is now Utah, officially banned polygamy in 1890 and agreed to excommunicate anyone who publicly acknowledged participation in the practice.

In 1935 a group of excommunicated members of LDS, seeking to preserve polygamy, founded the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS) and with it, Colorado City. Colorado City and its twin city, Hildale, Utah are considered the primary centers of polygamist practice. The region is isolated from law enforcement and the nearby Colorado-Utah state border allows for easy crossing to avoid arrest. Warren Jeffs, the current prophet of FLDS and former member of the FBI's 10 Most Wanted List was arrested in August, 2006.

FIGURE 2. *Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Plural Marriage, Wyler Residence, Colorado City, Arizona*, by Taryn Simon, 2007. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

spaced. I can see that someone sincerely tried to keep them lined up as the collection grew. He or she tried to align each portrait to the frame above it, but accidentally made some columns veer to the right and others to the left. The hand that is absent is also palpably present. The last row, cut short at the fourth portrait, gives the impression that the designer of this grid expects to acquire more photographs for the collection.

Scuffs below the final portrait punctuate the arrangement. I try to imagine, but I cannot figure out what action led to these marks. The unknown act haunts the frame with an unknowable history—a scar that does not give up its tale. What meaning or inflection does this punctuation add to the statement of this formation? I do not know. The story trails off into silence.

The text below, detailing in two paragraphs a brief history of Mormonism and its polygamist practices, makes me think that this grid will be filled in by the growing family of the man in whose home this was taken. The unspoken stories linger between the picture frames, unfolding invisibly beyond the image. The terminal picture waits for others to subsume it and bury it in new stories, but the scar will always set it apart from the others. The adolescent boy who occupies the frame with crossed arms and a mild smile is marked. My gaze will always be drawn back to him as if his absent testimony were beckoning my eyes to look for the unspoken.

Again, the text and image intersect but do not match up. I am left wondering about the people in these pictures. Without the text to interpret the frame for me, I would not be able to decipher its relationship to Mormonism and plural marriage from the image alone. However, that information merely anchors my curiosity about these people. Should I judge these people or empathize with them? Text and image stare blankly back at me with no opinion. What is it like to grow up in such a family? Who is a wife? Who is a daughter? Who is a granddaughter? No reply. I can only wonder. I can only sense the presence of these people and the absence of their stories.

Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (2007), *Infectious Medical Waste Treatment Center* (2007), *Field Burning* (2007), *Jury Simulation, Deliberation Room with Two-Way Mirror* (2007), *Death with Dignity Act* (2007), *Weather Modification, Cloud Seeding* (2007), *Alhurra TV* (2007), *Cheyenne Mountain Directorate, Underground Spring Support System* (2007), *Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youths and Adults* (2007).

These stories—the cables, the Mormons, the infectious waste, the NASA beach house—are leveled in importance by their presentation. Without a cohesive narrative or climax to unify the images, Simon renders each image equally important, equally definitive of the hidden underside of the United States. The paragraphs of carefully researched text and meticulously composed images continually claim to reveal the facts while making perceptible the fact of the unknowable elements that haunt their periphery, thwarting the desire to actually understand the contents of these stories. We overwhelmingly sense how much we do not understand about the time and place to which we belong—the contemporary United States.

Research Marijuana Crop Grow Room (2007), *Nuclear Submarine, Strategic Weapons Officer* (2007), *Forensic Anthropology Research Facility, Decomposing Corpse* (2007), *Military Operations on*

Urban Terrain, Virtual Simulation (2007), *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews* (2007), *Exotic Game Hunting, Scimitar-Horned Oryx* (2007), *Nixon Gift Vault* (2007, see Appendix).

The list goes on like Borges's impossible encyclopedia. Together, these images compose a perplexing heterogeneous spatiotemporal portrait of the United States. I try to figure out upon what their unity could be based. They overlap, diverge and entwine in the oddest ways leaving chasms of unknown histories between them. Yet, they are arranged homogenously on the pages—image, text, image, text—as if they should compose a tidy and comprehensive taxonomy of US secret sites. Instead, their appearance together as a unity attests to the impossibility of a site in which they could all appear, except for in the taxonomy itself. These incompatible elements assembled into a unified arrangement cause contemplation of the fact of order itself. Such contemplation reveals the instability of taxonomies of knowledge simply by making perceptible the fact of order, which is usually so self evident to a given culture that it is also invisible (Foucault 1972, xv-xxii).

Each time I make the journey through the book, I feel unsettled all over again. The texts astonish me, though somehow nothing mentioned seems terribly preposterous. The images are beautiful, simple and sober. Again and again the texts and images *do* and *do not* match up. This mismatch happens in the relationship of a photograph to its text, and also in the relationships of images to other images across the entire body of work. They occupy each other. They exceed each other. They creep into each other and hover around each other, but they do not fit snugly together.

Themes intersect, disrupt and employ several categories: government, science, medicine, war, religion, entertainment, human interference with the natural world, archives, facilities, the environment, land use, law, death, the human body, technology, fringe groups, media, international communication and disability. They do not appear to build upon each other or add to each other. The links between them are indiscernible.

Microsoft Home (2007), *Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC)* (2007), *Plum Island Animal Disease Center, Locker Room* (2007), *The Ten Commandments, Buried "City of the Pharaoh" Film Set* (2007).

Clashes manifest throughout the images and texts. Combining their heterogeneous forms into one body of work reveals an impossibility of understanding it all—an impossible breeding and multiplying of unseen, unsaid and unknown elements banging their invisible fists upon the walls that have partitioned them to the unreality beyond the frames, between the pages and exceeding any kind of accounting that can be contained between book covers or gallery walls. There is a conflict behind the comfort of a world that once seemed so readily available to explanation. By carefully researching and recounting the context of each image, Simon has somehow made the country seem unintelligible, wrought with conflicts, oddities and paradoxes that have taken on the most anodyne of appearances (Rancière 2007, 56-57). The unknowable challenges our understanding of reality. And so it becomes a question: whether there really is anything united about the United States. What disquieting stories are hidden behind the everyday forms all around us?

Death Row Outdoor Recreational Facility, "The Cage" (2007), *Fireworks by Grucci, Northern Test Site* (2007), *Republic of Texas, Interim Government* (2007), *Sexual Assault Kits Awaiting DNA*

Analysis (2007, see Appendix), *Exploding Warhead* (2007), *Church of Scientology*, *Screening Room* (2007).

I turn a page and find myself in a field of the muted browns and greys of metal, dirt, cement and overcast sky. I am peering into the cage of a tiger in *White Tiger (Kenny)*, *Selective Inbreeding, Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge and Foundation, Eureka Springs, Arkansas* (2006/2007, Figure 3). I know right away that something is wrong, but I am not sure what. It is not only my moral feeling of wrongness evoked by the cage and the troubled creature inside. He does not look the way I think a tiger should look. What I initially thought was the crouch of an attack posture, I realize is the result of limbs that are too short and a head that is malformed and set awkwardly upon his body. The text tells me of the selective inbreeding that produces white tigers. I am looking at a failed attempt to manufacture a perfect white specimen. After the text recounts the facts in the usual clinical tone, I trail off into my own thoughts about the United States. I want to understand why Kenny appears in a taxonomy of the country's privileged secrets. Simon never tells us *why*. I think about the boundary between man and nature blurred by capital—for surely the hope of financial gain is partially to



FIGURE 3. *White Tiger (Kenny)*, *Selective Inbreeding, Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge and Foundation, Eureka Springs, Arkansas*, by Taryn Simon, 2006/2007. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

blame for Kenny's disturbing existence. His position here, monumentalized on a pathetic pedestal, speaks to how the disabled body is viewed as a failure and the ways in which America must hide its failures to maintain a mythology of the infallible American subject.

But none of these thoughts are written in the text or dictated by the image. The square compositions of each refuse to answer the question, *why?* They present the facts without anticipating their meaning. I can become just as absorbed in the obstinately mute visuality of the image as I can in my thoughts about it. Both things happen at once. The creature in the image almost disappears into abstraction as I linger in the contrast between the organic stripes of his fur and the grating of the cage.

Because Simon does not didactically suggest *why* this image is significant or what affect it should evoke, I am compelled to figure it out on my own, based upon the facts that I behold and the sensation that there is more here than what I can see and decipher. My conclusions are not necessarily correct. They are not the only possibilities. This is essential; for as I draw those conclusions, I know that there are others I am not drawing. As I behold the explosion of the multiple meanings inscribed on the surfaces of reality, it becomes evident that my way of knowing the world is not the only way of knowing the world. Suddenly, the supplied interpretations of the other photographs I encounter in my daily life do not seem so self-evident. I cannot passively receive their messages.

Photographs are dynamic actors in the writing of history. Our personal aesthetic experiences of them are vital for challenging the limited narratives of our time. Initially, photographs like Simon's simply allow us to witness evidence of histories previously unseen, unsaid and unknown. But, more profoundly, the unseen, unsaid and unknown that we witness give us a sense of something beyond what is possible for sight, speech and knowledge in the cultural ordering of knowledge to which we are tethered. Freshly undone from its normalized significations, the visual world yields to new interpretations. As viewers we claim the capacity to decipher for ourselves the meanings of the signs and objects around us—and thus the capacity to render new possibilities for sight, speech and knowledge.

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