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PHILOSOPHY, LINGUISTICS & THEORY OF SCIENCE

*A Living Man Declared Dead Declared Alive*

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M.A. in Theory of Science



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## *A Living Man Declared Dead Declared Alive*

### **Abstract**

This essay analyses the photographic piece of art *A Living Man Declared Dead and other Chapters I–XVIII* by Taryn Simon, focusing on its references to science. When reading it in a context of science studies, as an artefact imitating a scientific procedure, specific problems with this gesture become visible. Questions arise related to scientism but also to ethics within the field of artistic practice. Furthermore it discusses the work's relation or distance to genetic determinism.

### **I. Outlines of an Argument**

During a TED<sup>1</sup> talk in London in November 2011 something quite subtle but revealing seems to have occurred. When introducing Chapter III, in her body of work titled *A Living Man Declared Dead and other Chapters I–XVIII*, the American artist Taryn Simon opens that of the Kenyan family of Joseph Nyamwanda Jura Ondijo. Ondijo, a Kenyan healer, treats patients suffering from as disparate ailments as HIV/AIDS, mental illness, tuberculosis or infertility. His polygamous family, portrayed by Simon, consists of 9 wives, 32 children and 64 grandchildren. After mentioning that Ondijo usually gets paid for his services in cows and goats, occasionally in women, Simon says “two of his wives were brought to him suffering from infertility, and he cured them.” The audience that is present at the TED conference burst into laughter. How come? Could it be that Simon's photographic, scientific catalogue of human bloodlines and related stories, has at its core a traditional western approach to what is considered rational? This inherent ideal would then make us laugh on behalf of what we regard unscientific, irrational and deviant. Simon's remark is regarded as funny since it is made leaning against a feature wall of what western medicine accepts as a diagnosis and a cure, and what is considered a family and a financial transaction in the West. I here anticipate an argument, which I

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<sup>1</sup> TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) is a global set of conferences owned by the private non-profit Sapling Foundation, formed to disseminate “ideas worth spreading”. They address a wide range of topics within the research and practice of science and culture. [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), retrieved 10.06.2012.

will develop over the following pages, the idea that some unaccounted-for preconception is energizing this artwork. To me it seems important to address this preconception. Meanwhile, at this early point of understanding, the audience's laughter will keep us puzzled in a, as yet, unclear way.

This piece of art, that I here will reflect upon, places itself in our present complex art scene. I have found it relevant to trace it in some directions that seem important for the understanding of it. This paper may then be read as *a suggestion of related issues that are significant*, for the argument that I have found my self forced to make. It is the *outlines* of an argument. During the course of spelling it out, I raise many questions that I intentionally leave without answers. The reader will eventually understand that the questioning is part of my methodology and that these are not research questions I have the slightest belief in being capable of ever answering fully. It can in any case not be the purpose of this essay to do so.

It can, for some works of art, be said to be an intention, or alternatively an effect of them, that they provoke responses, emotions and articulations. Since I believe these to be important to an understanding of *A Living Man Declared Dead*, I will create some space for my immediate reactions to it. To delimit emotions in this equation would mean mutilating a crucial figure.

What then, can initially be said about the characteristics of *A Living Man Declared Dead*, and why can it be made a concern to science studies? On several occasions Taryn Simon emphasizes that her method is systematic just like science. This essay will examine the claims of scientificity made by Simon in her work. It deals with the specific elements of its inherent scientific view. Why? The argument that I am making concerns the ethical implications of the content in *A Living Man Declared Dead*. My instant objection to the arrangement of the work is in this essay subject to consideration. Is there actually any reason for questioning the moral of the work? What related issues would be part of the argument if one paid closer attention to the outlines of it? When

trying to determine this, I held it to be decisive that Simon's work is claimed to be scientific. In modern society in general, science essentially is seen as being of high status. Statements made in its name, tend to receive an aura of unconditionality. If the content of the work is ethically questionable, it is even more so, as it draws heavily on science. Its claims of scientificity is hence one of the issues I have found important in formulating my argument. As a consequence of this reasoning, the essay points to the link between science and ethics, to whether it should, or should not be a concern for science studies to deal with ethics within its field. It also leads us to the contemporary issue of what artistic research should be defined as and characterized by.

Since Roland Barthes "Death of the Author", written in 1967<sup>2</sup>, we have become aware of the importance of the reception of a work to the definition and understanding of it. According to Barthes, every reading of a work can be understood as it's co-writing; in other words, as part of itself. The origin of a work's meaning lies in language and its impact on the reader. I will here regard the critique of *A Living Man Declared Dead*, that is the media reception of the work, as a relevant factor in understanding and criticizing it, but not as a part of the piece as such. Throughout history, much has been said about whether or not one should include the artist's intention, personality, aim or claim in the analysis of a work of art. In this essay, I have decided to take Taryn Simon's statements about *A Living Man Declared Dead* into account. This is because I regard them as an interesting complement to the work and, more importantly, as coming close to what I believe actually characterizes the work itself. In the course of writing the essay I have become more and more convinced that the intentions of the artist actually matters, and that what he or she says about the piece of art is crucial to an understanding of it. My current position is to consider the 'surrounding verbal context' of an art work as being of particular importance. To be included in this verbal context are what the artist claims, how the audience deals with the work and the arrangements made by the art institutions engaged in it. Included are all that is said and written about the work at a particular given time.

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes (1967) "The Death of the Author", Aspen, no., 5-6.

### *Disposition*

I will discuss *A Living Man Declared Dead*, from the following angles: My first encounter with the work initiates this essay in part II. Then, in part III, Taryn Simons's own descriptions of her work and her outspoken aims and methods, are being considered. Next section, part IV, is discussing the work in relation to some points of view from theory of science followed by, part V, containing some reflections stemming from theory of photography. The points that I am making in these sections are to a large extent composed out of extracts from the texts that I refer to. In the subsequent part VI, Analysis/Argument, these extracted points are made use of, and are not given further reference. In part VII, the analysis is thereafter connected to some examples from the media reception of the work. My first encounter with *A Living Man Declared Dead* is thereby placed among other co-reading attempts, in particular from the German context surrounding the Berlin version of the exhibition. In part VIII, concluding reflections terminate the essay.

### *Argument*

An unaccounted-for preconception energizes this artwork. The created photographic catalogue of human bloodlines and related stories has at its core a traditional western approach to what is considered scientific. By keeping a relieving distance to its portrayed objects, by ideallistically observing the standards of natural sciences, it can consolidate its own privileged position over that of the people depicted. With the same gesture, intrinsically a pseudoscientific one claiming neutrality, responsibility for the suggested causality between bloodlines and tragedies is distributed to whoever reads it this way. The artist fails to account for the content and goes undercover in a scientific masquerade. This means that the work stands open to being annexed by the popular influential tendency to genetic determinism. The work inherently suggests that human tragedies are on repeat and that they should be understood in connection with bloodlines. By depriving the portrayed humans a chance to speak of their own diversifications the work damages the human sphere (guaranteed and held in place by dialogue) and enhances the risk of repetition.





## **II. A First Encounter with A Living Man Declared Dead**

The work *A Living Man Declared Dead and other Chapters I–XVIII* by US photography artist Taryn Simon is a widely appreciated exhibition that has been touring Europe and is showing currently at MOMA in New York City.<sup>3</sup> The Tate Modern’s curator of photography, Simon Baker, says it is a project that “contains within its presentation all the things you need to understand about it”<sup>4</sup>. So let us begin with what there was to see at Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin between 22 September 2011 and January 2012. At this point I knew nothing at all about the artist, neither nationality, gender, age nor previous work by her. I had only these panels filled with photos that were presented to me in the impressive building by Mies van der Rohe. I immediately felt concerned and repelled by the collection of images and started to try to identify and formulate what elements/components/themes were being evoked through this work.

If one should suggest a topic for the exhibition one would be forced to formulate it in very general and vague terms. Catastrophes, suffering, violence and death are what are at stake here. A wide range of human situations are being integrated under the same title. The only joint factors, as I understand it, are a bloodline (a genetic aspect) and some kind of tragedy or serious event.

Simon produced the work over a four-year period in which she travelled around the world photographing what she calls bloodlines and their related stories, with a large format camera. The 18 chapters are constructed through three parts, the first being a portrait panel that systematically orders members of a specific bloodline (genetic relatives belonging to a certain family). Then a text panel, which provides information in list form about something that has happened to someone in, or the whole, family. The third panel, which Simon calls the Footnote Panel, includes images that represent

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<sup>3</sup> The exhibition is in New York City between 02.05.2012–03.09.2012

<sup>4</sup> Sean O’Hagan (2011) “Taryn Simon: The woman in the picture”, in *The Guardian/The Observer*, 22.11.2011.

fragments of the overall story, sometimes documents or personal effects, and, as she puts it, the beginnings of other stories.

The collection of families stares back at the visitor from the panels. The arrangement seems to say that here rules transparency and order. At once it seems both overviewable and simple to grasp, clean and at a suitable distance. Moderately spiced with intriguing details the chapters of families make up the center of attention for the cheerful gallery visitor. An instant question I had to ask was, what motivated these particular samples of bloodlines and stories to be part of the collection. With this question in mind I walked from chapter to chapter encountering phenomena as disparate as, amongst others, a Palestinian hijacker and her relatives, Australian rabbits sentenced to death, children from an Ukrainian orphanage, the relatives of a German Nazi lawyer, wives and children of the Kenyan healer we encountered earlier, and the families of African albinos being haunted and murdered in Tanzania.

With increasing disharmony I tried to find the common denominators. Binding the chapters to one another lead to a heartrending dissonance. It caused me to feel ill and outraged. It became a bodily experience.<sup>5</sup> It seemed as if all that was left for me to do, was to either tear the art piece apart, or myself. At its very best it could have left me deeply unsatisfied, deprived, lacking understanding of these portrayed humans and the exposed phenomena, and therefore in ignorance, motivated to turn with greed to where else I could get to know things for real. In any case it was not here. But what captured my attention was, in the end, not the portrayed subjects in their own right, but the logic with which the work itself operates.

What troubles me the most? Faces of all ages, stemming from several generations, children of only a few years, silently staring at you, offering themselves to serve as the foundation for speculative or blood dripping stories. No one speaks. No one is asked to utter anything in relation to what is told of the family in the information panels. Their

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<sup>5</sup> In Roland Barthes canonical *Camera Lucida – Reflections on Photography* (1981: 9) the body is regarded a legitimate tool in making sense of photography: “So I make myself the measure of photographic ‘knowledge’. What does my body know of Photography?”.

subjective positions, their different choices in life, remain totally unknown to the audience. Pushed together as in a livestock pen they are offered to be connected to these examples of demoralisation or tragedy. This way they appear dehumanized, objectified or even exotized. They are deprived of what constitutes the *human* condition, the only thing that may function as the base for our ethics, the circumscribed but yet freedom to define our exclusive lives, that which in a complex manner relates us to yesterday and makes us foresee our future as an unknown space: our subjectively expressed language. Language, the way we formulate our own understanding, maybe in opposition to that of a relative or a neighbour of the community. Language, the way it emanates in actions we can call our own. Talking with others erects them as individuals in their own right and validates their integrity. Here rules silence.

The concept of a bloodline is here made the structuring principle of the chapters. What for? But prior to that question, I want to ask: Why does it bother me? Am I denying the influence of genetics and inherited themes or psychological factors transmitted over generations? Do I regard the family as an unimportant unit? On the contrary.

As a psychologist educated in a psychoanalytic milieu, I am familiar with the issue of repetition suggested by Simon. Sigmund Freud's concept *repetitive compulsion*<sup>6</sup> is of major importance for understanding human action. Through the work of Jacques Lacan psychoanalysis has further stressed to what degree language structures experience. Whether the impact of repetition keeps us tied down to a specific fate can be said to be a linguistic issue. Psychoanalysis is for this reason a talking cure. What stands between a person and unmediated repetition giving its reply to the past is the degree to which a linguistic space of creation has been opened by this person. And everyone knows, talking takes place preferably with others.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For example in Sigmund Freud (1920) *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* Leipzig: Internationaler Psychoanalyt-ischer Verlag.

<sup>7</sup> For further reading, see for example Jacques Lacan (1959-1960/2007) "The Death Drive" Chapter XVI, pp. 205-217, in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.

By making tragic stories a family business, or by locating an issue strictly at a personal level there is a severe risk of overlooking structural, societal factors as determining the question in matter. By such a procedure a criminal act is regarded simple lack of morality, and hatred a question of immaturity, and so forth. *Psychologism*<sup>8</sup> is the tendency to attribute shared responsibilities to a single stigmatized individual and means losing the chance of societal growth.

The work *A Living Man Declared Dead and other Chapters I –XVIII* occupies me further, and one reason for this is that I find it difficult to come to grips with. I tend to conclude that the work has a problematic content/logic, one that does not seem to have been regarded often enough as problematic in the context of contemporary art talk. It seems as if no person actually accounts for the content and that it therefore risks getting particularly harmful. Seen in this way, it also becomes harder to address it with a contradictory reply. My position, which is a lingering insistence on reading the work as unwillingly, perhaps (but still), supportive of a scientific genetic determinism, is not stable and hence guides me to explore it further. *A Living Man Declared Dead* is a piece of art labelled as having similarities with science. The gesture of resembling scientific procedure when drawing connections between genetic families and violent tragedies might be understood as a criticism towards the same gesture. Or it might be read as being uncritical towards the gesture, enhancing the tendency that it gets used for political means. How then, can something problematic be best expressed in order to be criticized, without contributing to the same phenomena as it is trying to lighten and diminish? This seems to be an underlying question.

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<sup>8</sup> The use of the term within the philosophy of science is considerably different than within psychology. For further reading see for example Martin Kusch (2011) "Psychologism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.). <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/psychologism/>, retrieved 22.07.2012.

### III. Taryn Simon on her Work

Taryn Simon's own utterances in relation to this specific work, confirm the tendency with which the art piece itself works upon the audience. The comments, given on different occasions to various media, seem multi-vocal and sometimes even contradictory. The work in itself is complex and extensive and therefore in particular difficult to describe in a compressed manner. It has also come to take on different appearances in different countries and museum spaces where it has been shown. One way of learning more about the work is to visit Simon's website.<sup>9</sup> Here follows an extract of some of Simon's own formulations regarding the description of the work, its aim, questions, method and results.

#### *Description*

In Taryn Simon's own words we see "18 chapters of external forces of territory, governance, power, religion, colliding with the internal forces of psychological and physical inheritance".<sup>10</sup>

Let us take one chapter as an example. Chapter 11. Panel one. The relatives of Hans Frank, Adolf Hitler's legal advisor and governor-general of occupied Poland are either portrayed or represented by a blank space if they denied to participate.<sup>11</sup> Others have sent only their clothes to be photographed. In total there are nine empty pictures, four pictures of clothes, one person's portrait pixelated with his back to the audience and

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<sup>9</sup> [http://tarynsimon.com/works\\_livingmanindex.php](http://tarynsimon.com/works_livingmanindex.php), retrieved 04.06.2012.

<sup>10</sup> "Transcription of Interview: Taryn Simon". 3 June 2011. Printed 5 September 2011. Tate Modern, London.

<sup>11</sup> In Chapter 11 the portraits are conjoined with following information: 1. Substitute text from panel two: (Information withheld). [Declined participation] 2. (Information withheld). [Declined participation] 3. (Information withheld). [Declined participation] 5. (Information withheld). [Parent declined participation/child not old enough to decide for herself] 14. Sommerfeld, Maximilian, 31 Mar. 2002. Student. Gross-Umstadt, Germany. [Parent declined participation/child not old enough to decide for herself] 16. (Information withheld). [Parent declined participation] 17. (Information withheld). [Parent declined participation] 18. (Information withheld). [Parent declined participation] 19. (Information withheld). [Parent declined participation]. See Simon's online documentation: [http://tarynsimon.com/works\\_livingmanindex.php](http://tarynsimon.com/works_livingmanindex.php), retrieved 04.06.2012

twelve individuals, including children, portrayed. All of them are ordered according to date of birth and are given a serial number. Panel two. Their names, ages, city, country and occupation are followed by a text about Hans Frank explaining his function in the Third Reich. He was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity during the International Military Tribunal of Nürnberg and was executed on October 16, 1946. This text of approximately 200 words constructs the narrative at stake and is followed by a text commenting on the contents of: Panel three, which is called the annotation panel.<sup>12</sup> In this particular chapter the annotation panel consists of nine images. The contents of panel three are sometimes referred to as photographic evidence. This panel is, according to Simon, more intuitive and it contains fragments of the story or beginnings of new stories. It is less linear and more disordered and thought to be a direct contrast to the unalterable order of the bloodline.

Simon says her project centers precisely at the border between order and disorder, where blood is ordered and the stories told are chaotic.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the methodological ordering of a bloodline, the central elements of the stories – violence, resilience, corruption, and survival – disorient the highly structured appearance of the work.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Excerpt from panel 3: “c. Official Adolf Hitler postage stamp and Hans Frank imitation stamp. The Hitler stamp was printed in 1941 for the second anniversary of the founding of the Generalgouvernement and was in circulation until the end of the Second World War. A replica of the Hitler stamp, with Frank's image, was produced by British intelligence and released in Poland to provoke friction between Frank and Hitler. Henry Gitner Philatelists, Inc., New York. [---] e. Leonardo da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine*, taken by German troops from the Czartoryski collection during the Second World War. It hung in the Wawel apartment of Hans Frank and was later brought to his family home, Schoberhof. After Frank's arrest, the painting was returned to the Czartoryski Museum, where it now hangs across from the empty frame for Raphael's missing *Portrait of a Youth*. Czartoryski Museum, Krakow. [---] f. Rembrandt's *Landscape with the Good Samaritan*, taken by German troops from the Czartoryski collection during the Second World War. One of only eight oil landscapes painted by the artist, it was returned to the Czartoryski Museum upon Frank's arrest. Czartoryski Museum, Krakow. [---] 7. Frank, Norman, 06 Mar. 1928. Bavarian television facilities director (retired). Schliersee, Germany. [---] 8. MJK, 24 May 1958. (Information withheld). [Sent clothing as representation]”, [http://tarynsimon.com/works\\_livingmanindex.php](http://tarynsimon.com/works_livingmanindex.php), retrieved 04.06.2012.

<sup>13</sup> [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), retrieved 10.06.2012.

<sup>14</sup> [http://tarynsimon.com/works\\_livingmanindex.php](http://tarynsimon.com/works_livingmanindex.php), retrieved 04.06.2012.

“Several of the stories that I document also function in that type of archetypal form where they feel like things have happened before will happen again”.<sup>15</sup>

In her past projects Simon says she has often worked in serial form, documenting things that have the appearance of being comprehensive through a determined title and a determined presentation which are, in fact, fairly abstract. In this project she wanted to work in the opposite direction and find an absolute catalogue, something that she could not interrupt, curate or edit by choice.<sup>16</sup>

### *Aim*

During interviews Simon states different things about the aim of the work: “The works are attempting to *map the relationships* among chance, blood and other components of fate; trying to see or struggling to *find some sort of code or pattern embedded* within that.”<sup>17</sup> “The collective chapters do not amount to an overwriting idea, but are an *exploration* of chaos.” “Archives often exist because something can not be articulated”.<sup>18</sup> “I guess I am *trying to organize it* for myself!”<sup>19</sup> Her urge to “*find an absolute catalogue*” led her to blood. This catalogue should consist of something she “could not interrupt, curate or edit by choice”,<sup>20</sup> “I was *struggling to suggest* that the chaos, violence and survival that surround us are somehow as patterned or coded as blood itself”,<sup>21</sup> “[...] if anything I want to *lead to a certain disorientation and further*

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<sup>15</sup> sic. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImX648BEVig>, retrieved 18.06.2012.

<sup>16</sup> [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), retrieved 10.06.2012.

<sup>17</sup> Transcription of Interview: Taryn Simon. 03.06.2011. Printed 5 September 2011. Tate Modern, London. The italics are mine.

<sup>18</sup> Sean O’Hagan (2011) “Taryn Simon: The woman in the picture”, in The Guardian/The Observer, 22.11.2011. The italics are mine.

<sup>19</sup> Transcription of Interview: Taryn Simon. 03.06.2011, Printed 05.09.2011. Tate Modern, London. The italics are mine.

<sup>20</sup> [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), retrieved 10.06.2012.

<sup>21</sup> Hong Xin, Camille (2012) “Case Studies: Taryn Simon at MoMA <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2012-05-01/taryn-simon-moma/>, retrieved 19.06.2012.



questioning [...]”.<sup>22</sup> She is examining “[...] *whether our fate is determined by blood, chance or circumstance*”.<sup>23</sup>

### *Questions or no questions?*

What is Simon actually trying to understand? She says her work considers the idea that we keep going, that people keep being produced. She asks: “*And does that all amount to some sort of evolution, or are we on repeat?*” “It is kind of this relentless cycle that just keeps going, and people are born and people die, and the stories keep coming and coming. It is kind of this unending machine-like churning of stories and individuals, and to what end is completely unknown.”<sup>24</sup> “[...] the persistence of birth and death and that these stories keep coming and coming and *questioning what it all amounts to.*”<sup>25</sup> What does Simon try to understand and do these questions motivate the chosen samples to be contained in the work? What is gained from them being constructed this way? Does she want to make a globally valid representation of something? We will keep these questions for later.

### *Method*

The curator of *A Living Man Declared Dead* at MOMA, Roxana Marcoci says that Taryn Simon is researching bloodlines.<sup>26</sup> The chapters are arranged as case studies. Simon explains: “There is an ordering principle in all of the works, where they are *scientifically ordered*, where it is the eldest member of a generation followed by their descendants, and then their descendants, and it repeats and so on.”<sup>27</sup> Simon *dismisses the label political* to her work. She thinks her work is arranged as *neutrally* as possible, but says it may activate something political in the viewer or resonate with them in a political

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImX648BEVig>, retrieved 19.06.2012.

<sup>23</sup> [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), retrieved 19.06.2012.

<sup>24</sup> Transcription of Interview: Taryn Simon. 03.06.2011. Printed 05.09.2011. Tate Modern, London. The italics are mine.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImX648BEVig>, retrieved 19.06.2012.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Transcription of Interview: Taryn Simon. 03.06.2011. Printed 05.09.2011. Tate Modern, London. The italics are mine.

way. She says she has *no agenda*. “I guess a lot of what I do is underpinned by anxiety. But I am also anxious about photography and its role. I try to keep *a clear distance* from the subject.” Simon uses the camera in her own words as a *simple recorder*. The exhibition is *designed to refer to an archive* and it seeks to be a *shedding of style and embellishment*. The setting, a *non-place* behind her subjects is said to correspond to this erasure. The non-place, a neutral cream background is meant to *eliminate races, environment and contexts*. In several ways Simon seems to want to be unimportant for the art piece. She seems to want to withdraw from what has been constructed. Simon states that if anything is to be established, it is in the gaps in all the information that she presents.<sup>28</sup>

### *Result*

What does Simon say about her results? From the project description we learn that Simon’s presentation explores the struggle to determine codes and patterns embedded in the narratives she documents, *making them recognizable as variations (versions, renderings, adaptations) of archetypal episodes from the present, past, and future*.<sup>29</sup> “The work, in the end is constructed almost as an archive. There is something we can not completely understand, and we want to remember and record, but it is not necessarily clear in what ever language we know, and whatever documentation we have collected. It is in the space between all of it. So if anything, I want to lead to a certain *disorientation and further questioning* [...]”.<sup>30</sup> Simon hopes that new stories come to exist. Among other things, she asks if our fate is determined by blood. To what conclusions does she come? Is our fate determined by ‘the unalterable’ bloodline?<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Sean O’Hagan (2011) “Taryn Simon: The woman in the picture”, in The Guardian/The Observer, 22.11.2011. The italics are mine.

<sup>29</sup> [http://tarynsimon.com/works\\_livingmanindex.php](http://tarynsimon.com/works_livingmanindex.php), retrieved 04.06.2012

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImX648BEVig>, retrieved 18.06.2012

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

#### **IV. Theory of Science – Some Points**

As stated in the introduction, I will use a few points made in the field of science studies to put Taryn Simon's work in perspective. The first point concerns her claim to be neutral, or *objective* in studying the bloodlines, which in an exaggerated form is one of many components of *scientism*. Simon seems to be borrowing terms from the practice of natural sciences. The concept of objectivity – the attempt to be neutral in relation to results, the claimed use of the camera as a mere instrument, objects being isolated from 'interference' from surrounding contexts – points in that direction. In stating that her work does not have an agenda, that it does not even amount to an overwriting idea, she reveals a utopic or idealistic aim. This expressed tendency is from the point of view of science studies known as the ingredients of scientism.

##### *Scientism*

Scientism as a term has come to mean different things at various times and in various areas. In historicizing the term Richard G. Olson follows it from what Thomas Henry Huxley in 1893 in *Evolution and Ethics* criticized as the tendency among scientists of applying the principles of evolution for providing solutions to social problems.<sup>32</sup> Huxley pointed out the danger that these principles thoughtlessly misapplied could be used as weapons for political and ideological ends. Later F. A. Hayek termed this criticism scientism in *Scientism and the Study of Society* (1942), meaning a modern abuse of reason stemming from a false understanding of the methods and aims of the natural sciences and the error to mistakenly apply these methods to social phenomena.<sup>33</sup>

Since the notion of scientism has been subject to constant change, Olson suggests a broader definition of scientism as "the transfer of ideas, practices, attitudes, and methodologies from the context of the study of the natural world (which is assumed to be

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<sup>32</sup> Richard G. Olson (2008) *Science and Scientism in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, cited in: Jaipreet Viridi (2011) "Shaping Science and Scientism" in *Science as Culture*, Vol 20, No 4, 541-545.

<sup>33</sup> Jaipreet Viridi (2011) "Shaping Science and Scientism" in *Science as Culture* Vol 20, No 4, 541-545.

independent of human needs and expectations) into the study of humans and their social institutions, without imposing any judgment on the legitimacy of such an appropriation”.<sup>34</sup>

The means by which natural philosophers of the seventeenth century established the legitimacy of science, involved a fundamental appeal to objectivity and non-partisanship, which later became the idea that science should be value-free.<sup>35</sup> Stephen Gaukroger asks and answers: But how can something that is value-free realize human ideals and aspirations? The answer is that it cannot, and what in fact happens is that scientific, technological and economic goals replace – rather than realize – more traditional political, social and cultural ones.<sup>36</sup>

In this somewhat outdated opinion about what characterizes natural sciences, they are idealistically seen as mirroring an uncomplicated outer world and not as practices that are constitutive of its knowledge.<sup>37</sup> The scientist is regarded as asocial, an objective ‘registrator’ without subjective contact with the outer world. Margareta Hallberg describes how this scientific ghost still haunts areas where the natural sciences seem to be put on a pedestal, where the dependence upon other social institutions is denied.<sup>38</sup> These remarks lead us to ask what constitutes Simon’s objects of study, and what scientific methods they primarily gain most from.

### *Human Sciences vs Natural Sciences*

Natural sciences are no longer considered an adequate model for all other sciences, as Margaretha Hallberg writes.<sup>39</sup> Hallberg discusses what makes up the field of human

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<sup>34</sup> Richard G. Olson (2008) “Science and Scientism in Nineteenth-Century Europe”, p. 1, in Jaipreet Virdi (2011) *Shaping Science and Scientism in Science as Culture* Vol 20, No 4, 541-545.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Gaukroger (2006) *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture – Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1210–1685*.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Margareta Hallberg (1997) *Symmetri och reflexivitet – sociala studier av humanvetenskapens villkor*. Uddevalla: Göteborgs universitet.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

sciences and describes them as striving to understand the Human, where a human is defined as a *cultural* living being unlike animals, chemical processes or machines. Its objects are considered meaningful since they stem from human activities and they therefore require methods that gain an *understanding* in contrast to *explanation*.<sup>40</sup> Simon's objects of interest may be described as families connected to phenomena resulting from failing social structures, actions or passages of events, for example terror, murder, crime, all of which one must admit are carried out by humans with ideas and emotions. One chapter of course disturbs this classification, namely the chapter where the portrayed subjects are Australian rabbits, though they are subject to human decisions. Human sciences make use of a variety of methods for understanding and are less afraid of subjectivity blending with the studied object, since it is often even regarded a necessary condition in all acquisition of knowledge.

Now turning again to this so often passionately longed-for objectivity.

### *Why Objectivity?*

Objectivity is one of the classic ideals of science.<sup>41</sup> It refers to a cluster of attributes: first among them is truth to nature, but there is also impersonality, fairness, universality, and in general an immunity to all kinds of local distorting factors like nationality, language, personal interest, and prejudice. Results are to be assessed according to a protocol that is to be as mechanical as possible. Objectivity means knowledge that does not depend too much on the particular individuals who author it. It provides defense against critics who claim that someone has bent knowledge to their own advantage or arbitrarily treated another unfairly.<sup>42</sup>

Theodore Porter suggests that the relative rigidity of rules for composing papers, analyzing data, even formulating theory or giving presentations ought to be understood

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Theodore M. Porter (1995) *Trust in Numbers – the Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 217-231.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

in part as a way of generating a shared discourse, of unifying a *weak* research community.<sup>43</sup> Objective rules serve as an alternative to trust. Strategies of impersonality must be understood partly as defenses against suspicions. There should be little room for personal judgment, and hence also a minimum of opportunity for others to doubt the analysis. A community founded on objectivity can be seen as an endangered community, one with unsecure borders to the outside, and one without an effortless shared understanding – in short, a very modern kind of community. This argument resembles what Thomas Kuhn once wrote of science; it has little need of rules as long as paradigms are secure. But new, weak, and exposed fields must often do without widely shared assumptions and meanings. It then becomes important to use explicit standards that can address this uncertainty. The act of mimicking what is regarded the attributes of a secure community such as physics gets tempting. And this mimicking at times actually leads to enhanced credibility for the claims being made.<sup>44</sup> Fields dominated by a relatively secure community, much of what we normally associate with the scientific mentality – such as an insistence on objectivity, on the written word, on rigorous quantification – is to a surprising degree missing.<sup>45</sup>

Mechanical objectivity is especially prominent where the inside and outside of a community are not sharply differentiated.<sup>46</sup> The insistence on objectivity and impersonality is partly a response to pressures from outside. Such an influential factor is that of politics. More and more science is supported by the state for practical purposes. This incorporation breaks down the boundaries around the research community and makes efforts to strengthen it necessary. Such a situation encourages the greatest extremes of standardization and objectivity, a preoccupation with explicit, public forms of knowledge. This is naturally most evident where knowledge is asked to be shaped for policy purposes. Occasionally the rigid standardization, style and rhetoric used by this weaker community actually stand in the way of explaining and understanding a studied

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> We may add, perhaps also artistic research.

<sup>45</sup> Theodore M. Porter (1995) *Trust in Numbers – the Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 217-231.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

phenomena.<sup>47</sup>

The enormous premium on objectivity in science, which is a response to pressures, resembles a kind of mirror of existing political societies.<sup>48</sup> This congruence goes a long way toward explaining the prestige of the scientific form of knowledge in modern public life. We have here not the stable, organic *Gemeinschaft*, but the impersonal and suspicious *Gesellschaft*, requiring a form of knowledge that is genuinely public in character. Politics, not science, demands narrow rigor. The role of science in standardizing and objectifying political and economic life must be seriously taken into account.<sup>49</sup>

### *Whose Objectivity?*

Porter suggests that one of the benefits of standardisation, rationalization and urge for objectivity has been that different scientific communities spread over the world have been able to communicate on shared matters.<sup>50</sup> But, as we shall see, there is no reason to salute these concepts too much. Bruno Latour argues that we, the 'modern' western world, tend to reward our own rationality over that of others'.<sup>51</sup> It seems as one type of rationality is being conceived at the expense of a possible marginalized other. In this case the concepts cannot be said to enhance a tendency to cooperation on equal terms all of the world, but give a privilege to the West.<sup>52</sup>

Latour explores the dualistic distinction modernity makes between nature and society.<sup>53</sup> He attempts to reconnect the social and natural worlds by arguing that the modernist distinction between nature and culture never actually existed in practice. He claims we must rework our thinking about natural phenomena, social phenomena and the discourse

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Bruno Latour (1991/1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, pp. 1-12

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

about them, so that they are not seen as separate objects to be studied by specialists, but as hybrids made and examined by the public interaction of people, things and concepts. The Great Divide between Them – all the other cultures, and Us – the westerners, a relation which Latour describes as asymmetrical, can be explained by how we have forbidden ourselves from conceiving of hybrids, while they have been devoting themselves to conceiving of hybrids. The other cultures have by this operation been excluded from spreading and gaining credibility. In stressing separateness and objectivity, all of which characterizes successful science in the West, we keep a clear distance to Their alternate forms of knowing.<sup>54</sup>

### *Scientific Enough?*

Is Simon's method de facto characterized by objectivity and rationality? What could be asked of the project, in order to meet such criteria? Theory of science includes discussions of what parameters are relevant in order to shield scientificity. As we have seen, from one perspective objectivity seems to be an ideal impossible to reach or even not a thing we ought to strive for when searching for scientific knowledge. On the other hand, if following a positivist realist criterion when striving for acceptable scientific standards of reason, objectivity could be one of many criteria science could benefit from. Only, qualifying in this respect is very demanding. When combining criteria and criticism from these two angles we reach the conclusion that, in order to recognize that one is not proceeding scientifically enough (in, for example setup or reasoning), one has to acknowledge and consider one's own subjective position as a researcher. This stand is the necessary base for reflexiveness and symmetry, for the needed distance to the claims that one makes in the name of science.

As has been argued, there are political and financial incitements for claiming rationality and objectivity of own scientific projects. But there is reason to expect further motivation. We will now pay some attention to psychological and emotional factors that might fuel tendencies in a milieu of exaggerated scientism.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



### *Subjectivity eliminated*

In order to reach the longed-for objectivity there is need to suppress the unwanted presence of subjectivity.<sup>55</sup> In their exploration of the ethos that made the epistemic virtue, the aim for objectivity, possible in the history of science, Lorraine Daston & Peter Galison discussed the elimination of the scientific self. Subjectivity was regarded the enemy within which the extraordinary measures of mechanical objectivity were invented and mobilized to combat. These measures often appealed to self-restraint, self-discipline, self-control. They strove for a self-denying passivity, a will to will-lessness. Self-imposed selflessness.<sup>56</sup>

The kind of person thought to be best suited to pursuing objectivity sets aside their own feelings and emotions for the common good, and is hard working and male.<sup>57</sup> “In the making of images, the taking of measurements, the tracing of curves, and many other scientific practices of the latter half of the nineteenth century, *self*-elimination became an imperative.”<sup>58</sup> The answer to the question “Why objectivity?” lies precisely in the history of this scientific self which is to be eliminated. This seems to be the point where shared standards and ideals of a community or even society turns into what Michel Foucault called “technologies of the self” practices of the mind and body that mold and maintain a certain kind of self. Macrostructures dialectically engage with microstructures of the individual.<sup>59</sup>

Daston and Galison see the scientific and artistic selves as conceived and trained in diametrically opposed ways in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>60</sup> Have they since then come to meet more similar fates? In our present time, when artistic research has appeared as a new field, we may wonder how the training of selves may be affected.

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<sup>55</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (2007) *Objectivity*. New York, pp. 191-251

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 196-197

### *Humorous?*

Now, what may have caused the audience to laugh in our opening example from the TED conference? In an article on humour Freud understands it as the gaining of pleasure derived from the ego escaping the demands of reality.<sup>61</sup> One type of humouristic situation occurs when a storyteller takes someone else to be the object of a funny narrative. Both storyteller and listener gain pleasure from what is told. The process with which this economy is achieved takes place both in storyteller and listener. What kind of pleasure are we talking of here? Freud argues that there is something deliberating and grandiose in humour that is derived from a triumph; it is the victorious insistence on invulnerability of the ego. The ego hereby refuses to let itself be humiliated by what reality is prescribing it. It will not accept a necessary suffering from real conditions and it maintains that the traumas of the outside world are of no concern. Hence the humouristic attitude serves an illusion. Humour can be understood as a method with which the storyteller identifies with the grown-up position (the internalized parental one), and laughs at a distance at what now suddenly seems a smaller problem. Pleasure is gained from spared emotional energy that the situation would otherwise have cost. It contains the displacement of excitement from the ego onto the super-ego, an instance known as built from ideals taken from parents and shared structures in language and society in general.<sup>62</sup> Humour might, as well as other human phenomena, be one way of maintaining a certain kind of self at a collective level.

### *Construction*

The researcher, regardless of all effort made to withdraw from what is studied, is making imprints. Taryn Simon has created a conceptual framework for her collected bloodlines and is obviously constructing an archive-like arrangement of her taste. Ideas express themselves not only in conclusions (the scientists) or agendas (the politicians). Every selection and every other move by the subject supplying material is marked by the subject. Sergio Sismondo writes that scientists' actions are theory-dependent, and their

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<sup>61</sup> Sigmund Freud (1927) "Der Humor" in Almanach. Wien: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, pp. 9-16.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

work on theory takes place primarily in a social context, not in a context where their influences are inputs from the rest of the natural world.<sup>63</sup> Even their impressions of these inputs are guided by social objects. Thus the process of selection itself becomes important to reflect upon. Karin Knorr-Cetina equates ‘constructed’ with ‘decision-impregnated’ and points out how scientists are inhabiting a world of their own construction.<sup>64</sup> And the decision-impregnated becomes of course decision-impregnating.

Knorr-Cetina’s constructivist programme states that, rather than considering scientific products as somehow capturing what is, we have to consider them as selectively carved out, transformed and constructed from whatever is.<sup>65</sup> According to Sismondo, the display of social processes that lead to institutions, epistemologies and knowledge has helped to erase the positivist picture of science as a purely rational activity. It is in spelling out these actions that the constructivist programme has revealed the literary, rhetorical and persuasive techniques that are necessary in order to convince the community, and thereby create an object.<sup>66</sup>

If we look at Simon’s structuring of an archive as something similar to the activity in a laboratory, what, then, is revealed? Sismondo describes how Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar have analyzed the operations involved in the construction of facts and knowledge within laboratories.<sup>67</sup> They have followed the fate of a statement as it moves in a community from being unsayable, to possible, to false, to possibly true, to a fact undeniable by anybody in the field. Along the way, they have mapped the different operations that can be performed on a scientific paper: ignoring it to detract, citing it positively, citing it negatively, questioning it, and ignoring it because everybody accepts it.<sup>68</sup> It is probable that a piece of art can meet a similar destiny and its contents may be

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<sup>63</sup> Sergio Sismondo (1993) “Some Social Construction” in *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 515-553.

<sup>64</sup> Karin Knorr-Cetina quoted in Sergio Sismondo (1993) “Some Social Construction”, in *Social Studies of Science*, vol 23, no. 3., p. 529.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 515-553.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*.

understood as displaying a particular historic phase in the negotiation of what counts as facts. Sismondo summarizes Latour's argument that scientists in a laboratory operate upon a preconstructed artificial reality as they try to "create order out of chaos".<sup>69</sup> The laboratory itself is artificial. Even the source materials with which scientists work are preconstructed. The laboratory displays itself as a site of action from which "nature" is as much as possible excluded rather than included. This is linked to the concern with selection because "the scientific laboratory consists of materializations of earlier scientific selections [...]".<sup>70</sup>

Latour and Woolgar do not mean to say that facts do not exist or that there is no such thing as reality.<sup>71</sup> Their point is that "out-there-ness" is the consequence of scientific work rather than its cause. Once a scientific controversy has settled, reality is taken to be the cause of this settlement; but while controversy is still raging, reality is the consequence of debate. The studied object is created out of negotiation and eventual consensus. Facts are unstable until they take on an apparent stability after the controversy ends.<sup>72</sup>

In constructing patterns and conceptual order in the laboratory, machines for example inscription devices, are of particular importance.<sup>73</sup> A camera defined as a mere recorder, a so-called mechanical objective camera (to be discussed in next section), sometimes claims to be used, but gets little support here. The artificial reality, described in terms of an objective entity, has in fact been constructed by the use of the inscription device. The inscription device actually helps push the topic of conversation in the laboratory towards the inscriptions and away from the material substances, the former being mistakenly assumed to have a direct relationship to the latter.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar quoted in Sergio Sismondo (1993) "Some Social Construction", in *Social Studies of Science*, vol 23, no. 3, pp. 515-553.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

### *Objective Images in Science*

In their book *Objectivity*, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison show how epistemic virtues can be inscribed in images, in the way they are made, used and defended against rivalling scientific views in the creation of, for example atlases (catalogues).<sup>75</sup> Throughout history, scientific battles have been fought in which one made use of fighting words as well as fighting images. The arguments at stake in these battles were questions about the objectivity of images. Was objectivity violated, distorted or made conform to theoretical predilections, in the images that were presented as facts? In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, photography within science was much discussed in relation to an ideal called mechanical objectivity.<sup>76</sup>

Daston & Galison have traced these past struggles over images along with their ethical and epistemological interests. They write that mechanized or highly proceduralized science initially seemed incompatible with moralized science, but in fact the two were closely related. Mechanical objectivity was a drive to repress the wilful intervention of the artist-author, and to put in its stead a set of procedures that would automatically move nature (as it were) to the page through a strict protocol. The image-making practice aimed to quiet the observer so nature could be heard. To be resisted were the temptations of aesthetics, the lure of seductive theories, the desire to schematize, beautify and simplify. Fear of the projection of personal preconceptions and theories on to images was in fact of greater concern than that of technically advanced procedures which resulted in risks of distortions of the photographed object.<sup>77</sup>

By the late nineteenth century mechanical objectivity was firmly installed as the guiding ideal of scientific representation.<sup>78</sup> But it should be noted that at this point in the early history of photography, according to Daston and Galison, there is evidence that photographer, scientists and audience were perfectly aware that photography could be faked, retouched or manipulated. And not all photography made claims of being

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<sup>75</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (2007) *Objectivity*. New York, pp. 115-190.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

mechanical objective. Mechanical objectivity made use of a camera viewed as a scientific recording device, and postulated that the registered objects painted and fixed themselves without the least contribution of the hand of man. The machine was said to bypass the will of man. It ensured that no intelligence would disturb the image, which was then claimed to be judgement-free. The camera was in this fantasy regarded at once observer and artist.<sup>79</sup>

Daston and Galison note that the rise of the objective image polarized the relation between art and science.<sup>80</sup> Until then it had been one of collaboration not opposition. The scientist (author) tended to rely that much on the illustrator/photographer that he sometimes even was listed as co-author of a work.<sup>81</sup>

### *Intention vs Effect*

Listening to Simon it soon becomes quite clear that what she is saying about her work points in many directions. One direction could be described as: the work shows repetition and determinism. Another is that the future remains unknown. It is certainly not the case that Simon intends to harm her portrayed subjects. It is probably also not the case that she intends to establish tragedies in genetic relations in particular. It seems to be the case that she does not want to state anything at all about causalities. She rather seems to want to encourage the audience of further story telling of use for the understanding. Considering this, it becomes relevant to establish a distinction: that between intention and effect. The work in itself may have effects. It may express something that did not answer to the artist's intention. The materiality that builds the content, must itself be taken into account. We are left to make an interpretation.

### *Interpretation*

Simon states that if anything is to be established, it is in the gaps of all the information that she presents. We are in a way encouraged to search for what is conveyed in the

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

space between what is given. We have to make an interpretation of our own. Here her work connotes a different type of science from that of an idealistic natural science. According to Margareta Hallberg, interpretation can be understood as the prime method of human sciences.<sup>82</sup> By interpretation we investigate how it is that other people's creations can be so utterly their own and so deeply part of us. In Charles Taylor's definition of interpretation, it is an attempt to make clear or make sense of an object of study. The object is a text or a text-analogue, which is in some way confused, incomplete, cloudy, seemingly, contradictory – in one way or another unclear. The interpretation aims to bring to light an underlying coherence or sense.<sup>83</sup> Is the act of interpretation open to any kind of reading? And is it something one can carry out privately for oneself? According to Porter, interpretation is in many ways informal, even implicit; it draws on tacit understandings, shared ideologies and expectations, and a common reserve of background knowledge.<sup>84</sup> Science operates this way too. We could even say that science is created by interpretive communities.<sup>85</sup>

### *Genetic determinism*

In the way that *A Living Man Declared Dead* constructs stories stemming from bloodlines, it can be said to relate to what Karin Johannisson calls a scientific field on its way to explode from its own merchantability, namely that of genetics.<sup>86</sup> Johannisson writes that today, in a world which has become harder to gain an overview of, and where cultural borders are fluid, our urge to see ourselves as having a stable identity, lead us in hope to biology as the identity builder. Biology seems to offer a longed-for root system. It is meant to dictate everything from smaller personal details to our collective history or our political taste. History is being moved over from culture to biology. Now, how innocent is this procedure? Johannisson states that culture is by no means a frail

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<sup>82</sup> Margareta Hallberg (1997) *Symmetri och reflexivitet – sociala studier av humanvetenskapens villkor*. Uddevalla: Göteborgs universitet.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Theodore M. Porter (1995) *Trust in Numbers – the Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 217-231.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Karin Johannisson (2012) "DNA och drömmen om den perfekta människan", article published in the Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter*, 26.03.2012

membrane over a firm biology, and there is a severe risk that biology could turn to ideology. The genes are then meant to tell the truth. Genetics carry an imminent risk of determinism. They are in this way unsupportive and closed towards an unknown Otherness. Johannisson writes that we draw up our communities and solidarity according to bloodlines and at the same time incubate dreams of perfection. The individual gets more fixed to itself and less oriented towards society.<sup>87</sup>

Within the field of genetics there is an ongoing reflexive discussion of the implications of its results. I include some points from these, since they are on a kind of meta level in relation to their own field, and thus share some traits with theory of science.

Since the vast increase in the power of genetics that followed the understanding that DNA was the foundation of it (now referred to as the ‘new’ genetics), concerns about the implications of its results have grown amongst its research circles.<sup>88</sup> Henry T. Heely discusses the ethical, social and legal effects of the new genetics in several areas. He writes that the new genetics have created a uniquely high expectation of medical progress; its successes therefore raise all these crucial issues in dramatic form. One aspect we should consider are the implications for ethnic identities. ‘Ethnic groups’<sup>89</sup> often share both a common culture and a substantial degree of common ancestry. This genealogical connection implies that a genetic connection or variation will be more common in some populations than in others, and it could be used for trying to define a person’s ethnic identity. The ethical implications of the naïve use of inherently inaccurate methods for defining ethnicity will depend on the circumstances, including whether they were adopted by the group itself or imposed on it. Another issue is the prediction of behavioral traits. The efforts to link genetic variations with human

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Henry T. Heely (2001) “Ethical Issues in the ‘New’ Genetics” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*, pp. 4762-4770.

<sup>89</sup> That is – all ethnic groups, even those who belong to the norm. My comment.



behavioral variations have, thus far, had little success. If such predictions were possible, the ethical implications could be substantial.<sup>90</sup>

The hardest to predict, and the most far-reaching ethical implications, may be the effect of the new genetics on society's beliefs.<sup>91</sup> We have to remember that genetic theories were used to provide support for a 'scientific' racism in the first part of the twentieth century. Heely points out that the ethical challenge is of great significance for the future of genetics. The general population seems to hold a much stronger belief in the power of genes, than does the actual scientific community. For that reason, new genetics could end up promoting a more closed and fatalistic view of human life and abilities than that which is held by contemporary society or by that which science would support.<sup>92</sup>

Benno Müller-Hill writes that among possible future outcomes, it is wise to consider the worstcase scenario.<sup>93</sup> He sketches how this would look like and relates it to the historical burden that weighs on the field of genetics, which it to a larger extent should be dealing with. Although the field has suffered major methodological weaknesses in the past, geneticists have believed that their views about humans were scientific and responsible. They have tended to deliver a deterministic view about human nature, and made promises about how to optimize human society. In order to do so, they have again and again defamed genetically defined minorities. Many more people have been affected harmfully on the advice of geneticists than have ever been healed by them. Geneticists tend to forget this. According to Müller-Hill, the forgotten past gives a hint about the possible future of modern genetics. The door to genetic determinism stands at times particular open. He gives one example by quoting James Watson<sup>94</sup>: "We used to think that our fate was in our stars. Now we know, in large measure, our fate is in our genes". Müller-Hill then asks how we should understand 'fate' here? And 'in large measure'?

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<sup>90</sup> Henry T. Heely (2001) "Ethical Issues in the 'New' Genetics" in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*, pp. 4762-4770.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Benno Müller-Hill (2002) "Human Behavioural Genetics – Past and Future" in *Journal of Molecular Biology*, 319, pp. 927-929.

<sup>94</sup> Dr. James D. Watson, co-discoverer of the structure of DNA.

What is fate? Actions we cannot stop by free will? Where does fate end, where does it begin? The quoted seems to suggest that genes determine our behaviour, (in other words, our fate) in large measure, and that there is little possibility of a way out.<sup>95</sup>

The worst possible scenario outlined by Müller-Hill, is a scientifically justified persecution of ethnic (genetic) groups, posited as being of lower value than others.<sup>96</sup> Apartheid becomes a general policy, not imposed by governments but by the market and the free decision of all the participants. If this is so, Plato's prophetic view will become true: "those who have gold in their blood will rule with the help of those who have silver in their blood over those who have iron in their blood".<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Benno Müller-Hill (2002) "Human Behavioural Genetics – Past and Future", in *Journal of Molecular Biology*, 319, pp. 927-929.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Plato cited in *ibid.*, pp. 927-929.

## V. Theory of Photography – Some Points

In trying to describe and understand an artistic work, one immediately encounters difficulties. One has to determine what the work is, or rather where it is located, and will eventually realize that it has the capacity to shrink or expand into different areas depending on how it is defined. Many distinctions need to be specified but also reconnected. To start with, there is the distinction between the artist and the art piece; and also between the artist as a private person with a biography and, amongst other things, unconscious urges, and the artist as a professional.

Already, we see here, some interesting problems appearing. These questions of demarcation get particularly crucial when considering ethical issues connected to art. It feels tempting to draw an absolute line between the artist and the work to establish an object of study, but this attempt is not fully supported even by our legal structures. There have also been recent examples where artists have been convicted of crime for having created art that was regarded as racist.<sup>98</sup> Thus, the ‘professional’ artist, a private person, was convicted on the basis of the content of his ‘art piece’. This legal act cuts through and annuls the categories that we have tried to establish. In practice they are related, and must be. Hardly anyone would argue that all possible actions should be allowed in the name of art, and that the individuals engaged in them are to be held irresponsible.

At this point it suddenly becomes appealing to invent criteria for good and bad art, or for art and non-art, placing the aforesaid criminal art either in the category not art or in that of bad art. How problematic and hard it would be to carry out such a move, I like to only mention briefly, because in studying *A Living Man Declared Dead* by Taryn Simon, I come closer to a wish for such criteria.

It should also be noted that a work can be read differently depending on its changing environment. Should the site where it is shown be included in the content or be treated

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<sup>98</sup> In January 2012 the Swedish artist Dan Park was convicted of a crime for having printed a poster that was regarded as racist.

as an external factor? What role is attributed to a curator of an exhibition, when it comes to defining the supposedly inherent meaning of the content? And furthermore, is additional information supplied with the work (a museum catalogue or artist book)<sup>99</sup>, to be taken as part of it? Thirdly it seems urgent to consider the context of the work. Is it, for example, performed in an academic setting or primarily for sites in the independent art world?

Further distinctions that are relevant in the understanding of a work become visible when one takes into account certain situations that occur in relation to it. For example, if someone asks the artist to say something about the work, the artist can use this opportunity to make art. In this situation we could ask if the statement is a new piece or belonging to the talked-about piece? Is it on a metalevel or on the same level? Who is talking? And who is responsible for what is being said? Again, where does the work actually reside?

To conclude, given its scientific claim, it is crucial to try to place *A Living Man Declared Dead* in a proper context or category, to be able to address the question of responsibilities of its content. What type of work is it? And also, what does it do? Who carries out the action and are there some being harmed by it?

### *Artistic Practice / Artistic Research*

According to Henk Borgdorff, artistic research is a controversial subject.<sup>100</sup> To meet the question whether it can be understood as a form of academic research, he sets out to distinguish the character of the latter. It is guided by well-articulated questions and topics that are relevant in the research context and it employs methods that are appropriate to the research and that assure the validity and reliability of the research results. The findings are presented, documented and disseminated in appropriate ways.

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<sup>99</sup> The book *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII* (2011) Mack books. Hardback, 864 pages with numerous gatefolds and over 1,000 full colour images. Texts by Homi K. Bhabha and Geoffrey Batchen. Winner of the Author Book Award at the Rencontres d'Arles 2011.

<sup>100</sup> Henk Borgdorff (2010) "Where are we today? The state of the art in artistic research" in *Forskning och kritik*, pp. 17-31.

In other words it answers the questions: What is being studied? Why is it being studied? How is it studied? In what form are the results presented? He concludes by saying that if artistic research is described this way, there is no reason to exclude it, even though its object, context, method and knowledge production may be unconventional. Borgdorff argues for a methodological pluralism within the emerging tradition of artistic research. Artistic research may sometimes be related to humanities research, social science research, ethnographic research, technological research and so forth. These disciplines may provide frameworks and methods that can be used for the artistic research in question. On the matter of the epistemology of artist research, Borgdorff adds ‘insight’ and ‘comprehension’ to the goals of science, which commonly are described as to gain ‘knowledge’ and ‘understanding’. Artistic research emphasizes the importance of a perceptive and receptive engagement with the subject matter, and it seeks to enhance experience through action, practice and sense-based apprehension. One important question that Borgdorff asks is what role language has to play in artistic research. How can research be understood and evaluated if language does not have at least a mediating or explanatory role in regard to the results? He sees the reflexiveness of art, in conjunction with the reflexive stance of the artist, as one of the most important rationales for research in the arts.<sup>101</sup>

Jan Svenungsson sets out to specify what artistic research might mean, given what is regarded a difference between art and science.<sup>102</sup> He asks what kind of outcome the new hybrid operator, the artist who does research, wishes for. In both art and science curiosity is the drive. The fundamental difference between them is that artistic activity’s primary product is inspiration – the search for knowledge, not knowledge in itself. The scientist aims to establish knowledge that should be valid at least for a certain time and which can be shared and used as such by others. The artist strives to install in the viewer or reader an urge to further searching and for further preoccupation with *what there is*. An artist may achieve this not by eliminating contradictions, but instead by finding a

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Jan Svenungsson (2009) “The Writing Artist” in *Art & Research – A Journal of Ideas, in Contexts and Methods*, Volume 2, No. 2.

way of bringing them to the fore and making them an asset instead of a liability. Svenungsson writes that an endless generation of interpretative activity, not explanation, is the desired outcome of an artwork. Important works provoke different reactions depending on the viewer, and they elude answers.<sup>103</sup>

A visual body of art gains an added dimension if the artist writes texts (or gives speeches).<sup>104</sup> The two components of artistic practice will be read in the light of one another. Here, there are rich opportunities to play with contradictions and ambivalence that are in between. Artistic writing can be of many kinds, but it is often characterized by the display of several layers of meaning, and also by experiments with language and structure. Artists employ tricks, use irony and play games in order to achieve the rich, multi-layered and ambiguous goals they have set for their texts. The meaning of a text can be hidden in different coatings, accessible or not, depending on the readers' capability to follow traces and use their imagination. Accordingly, Svenungsson writes that "if we recognise this palette of double entendres, subtle irony, subversion and multifocus that we see in artists' writings, we cannot NOT see problems arise with the new academicisation of artists' activities: artistic research."<sup>105</sup> For the immediate future of artistic research (the text part of it) Svenungsson sees two possible dangers: firstly, the institution fighting for acceptance from other parts of the university, therefore finding it necessary that the artists' papers and dissertations are compatible with the standards of the rest of the university. The demands on texts will then focus on formal aspects and will gradually view the artistic layering mode negatively. This attitude would with time mean that the artistic research would have less and less to do with making art. The second danger could be described as the institution letting artistic research writing become indistinguishable from what an artist would write in a "free" situation. This development might produce some important, multi-faceted and

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

ambiguous writing, but would carry the risk that the rest of the university will increasingly see artistic research as a joke.<sup>106</sup>

What could these arguments come to mean when they get applied to the related domain of visual art labeled as research versus art performed outside an academic setting and lacking any ambitions of gaining scientific status. Translated from the context of artistic writing, what can be said of other forms of artistic work? What happens if we place *A Living Man Declared Dead* as a visual artwork outside the academy but as one that *is making* scientific claims? Does it then have to follow any restrictions? Are there any principal ethic guidelines that might be observed? Is there a need at all for something like that? Or would it only lead to criterias harmful to artistic practice as such?

Further discussions of academic artistic writing are made by Adrian Piper.<sup>107</sup> Piper writes that the intellectual conservatism characterizing an analytical philosophising attitude to writing (one within a traditional academic setting) answers a certain ‘intellectual conscience’ that will not accept fuzzy thinking, logic leaps or lacunae. She contradicts this posture to the art world where “intellectual standards are to be violated” resulting in an ‘intellectual radicalism’. These two forms, ‘intellectual conscience’ and ‘intellectual radicalism’ have each weaknesses and strengths. The latter can result in lack of intellectual conscience, which ultimately leads to opportunism and a dependence on other people’s judgment, and the undermining of intellectual responsibility.<sup>108</sup> The tendency of this described latter case seems to get enhanced when too little responsibility for the setup is taken by the artist, as in the case of claimed objectivity. An artwork of this kind, might to a higher degree, distribute responsibility to the reader/viewer. But is it acceptable?

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Adrian Piper (1989) “A Paradox of Conscience” in Adrian Piper (1996) *Out of Order, Out of Sight – Volume II – Selected Writings in Art Criticism*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, pp. 149-150.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

### *The Pain of Others*

One of the distinguishing features of modern life is that it provides countless opportunities for regarding the pain of others at a distance through the medium of photography.<sup>109</sup> Susan Sontag writes that torment, a canonical subject in art, is often represented as a spectacle, something being watched by other people. The implication is: no it cannot be stopped. In her effort to analyse the impact of depicted cruelty on the viewer, she pays regard to a variety of possible responses. At one point she asks: Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who can do something to alleviate it, or those who can learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be.<sup>110</sup> This remark is interesting since it puts Simon's work in a certain light, where it is necessary to ask what one should do after engaging in it. Who could and who would do anything? What would they do – to stop it?

### *Documentary Tendencies*

*A Living Man Declared Dead* is partly documentary and journalistic, and partly conceptual. It touches upon several categories of art. When approaching its documentary side, it is interesting to relate it to a previous debate in the field. Martha Rosler writes that the exposé, the compassion and outrage, of early documentary photography fueled by dedication to reform has today merged into combinations of exoticism, tourism, voyeurism, psychologism and metaphysics, trophy hunting – and careerism. The boringly sociological has become the excitingly mythological/psychological.<sup>111</sup>

According to Rosler, documentary photography had, prior to this, come to represent the social conscience of liberal sensibility presented in visual imagery.<sup>112</sup> Its roots were somewhat more diverse and included the 'artless' control motives of police record-keeping and surveillance. The liberal documentary did, however, catch an image out of

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<sup>109</sup> Susan Sontag (2003) *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Martha Rosler (1989) "In, around and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)", in Liz Wells (ed.) *The Photography Reader*, pp. 261-274, London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*



the stream of the present and held it up as a testimony, and as evidence in the most legalistic of senses, arguing for or against a social practice and its ideological-theoretical supports.<sup>113</sup>

Rosler writes that, documentary photography has actually been much more comfortable in the company of moralism than it has been wedded to a rhetoric or program of revolutionary politics.<sup>114</sup> And the camouflaging claim to help the portrayed victims/down-and-outs by highlighting their existence (when claiming such an ambition at all), is no longer easily made. Rather, the liberal documentary assuages any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch and simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position. The veneer of social concern has dropped away from the upwardly mobile and comfortable social sectors. Even in the fading of liberal sentiments one recognizes that it is impolite or dangerous to stare in person. Rosler goes on to say that the documentary photo then serves as a surrogate for the real thing. With the appropriate object to view, one no longer feels obligated to suffer empathy. One is free to enjoy the freak show. Documentary testifies to the bravery or manipulateness and savvy of the photographer, who entered a situation of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay and saved us the trouble; who also entertained us by showing us the places we hope never to visit. If, some years ago, documentary was accomplished in aloofness, this has now given way to a more generalized nihilism. In today's liberal documentary, poverty and oppression are almost invariably equated with misfortunes caused by natural disasters. Causality is vague, blame is not assigned and fate cannot be overcome. Liberal documentary blames neither the victim nor their wilful oppressors. Rosler discusses how documentary can heighten patriotic sentiments and also preclude any understanding of the depicted subject. She asks: "Are photographic images, then, like civilizations, made on the backs of the exploited?"<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

Instead of deepening the understanding of the dialectic relation between images and the living world, of the relation between images and ideology, this relation has lately<sup>116</sup> been severed in thought.<sup>117</sup> This is mainly done by denial of content and denial of the existence of the political dimension in the photographic work. Rosler gives examples of how responsibility for a person's photographic work at times has been aggressively rejected. Images are held to yield any narrative whatsoever, and all meaning in photography applies only to what resides within the 'four walls' of the framing edges. Rosler would instead argue against the possibility of a non-ideological aesthetic.<sup>118</sup>

Rosler calls for a radical discussion of the myth of objectivity.<sup>119</sup> An analysis which reveals social institutions as serving one class by legitimating and enforcing its domination while hiding behind the false mantle of even-handed universality necessitates an attack on the monolithic cultural myth of objectivity (transparency, unmediatedness), which implicates not only photography but all journalistic and reportorial objectivity used by mainstream media to claim ownership of all truth.<sup>120</sup>

Rosler asks for a radical documentary to come into existence, one that incorporates an explicit analysis of society and at least sparks the beginning of a programme for changing it.<sup>121</sup>

### *The Family of Man*

In response to the Parisian version of the exhibition *The Family of Man*<sup>122</sup> showed in 1956, Roland Barthes gave some critical comments on its problematic aim to depict the

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<sup>116</sup> Written 1989.

<sup>117</sup> Martha Rosler (1989) "In, around and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)" in Liz Wells (ed.) *The Photography Reader*, pp. 261-274, London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> *The Family of Man* was a photography exhibition curated by Edward Steichen first shown in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It contained 508 photos from 68 countries representing 273 photographers. The photos showed the human experience of birth, love, and joy, but also touched war, privation, illness and death. Steichen's intention was to prove visually the

universality of human actions.<sup>123</sup> In several ways he objected to it with the same arguments as I made when encountering Simon's work. Birth and death, he writes, are natural phenomena – universal facts. But if one removes History from them, there is nothing more to be said about them; any comment becomes purely tautological. Barthes writes that the failure of photography seems to be flagrant in this connection. To reproduce death or birth tells us literally nothing. For these natural facts to gain access to a true language, they must be inserted into a category of knowledge, which means postulating that one can transform them, and precisely subject their naturalness to our human criticism. Truly, children are always born, but in the whole mass of the human problem, what does the 'essence' of this process matter to us compared to its modes, which are perfectly historical?<sup>124</sup>

The modes that Barthes refers to, are all the highly specific variations that make up the fate of a single human being. By celebrating the natural essence of birth and death, *The Family of Man* turns into a sentimental lyricism that fails to remember all there is to do to fight injustices and death. Importantly he states thereafter: "It is this very young, far too young power that we must exalt, and not the sterile identity of 'natural death'."<sup>125</sup> The universalized appearance of birth, death and even work, claimed in *The Family of Man*, might for some people pass as acceptable, but will upset others more. Barthes suggests a question that could be directed to the North African workers in Paris: What do they think about its claims? Barthes fears that the final justification of the myth of a universal Family of Man might give the immobility of the world an alibi of 'wisdom' and 'lyricism'. This would, in turn, make the gestures of man look eternal, and would easier defuse them.<sup>126</sup>

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universality of human experience and photography's role in its documentation. The exhibition travelled in several versions to 38 countries. More than 9 million people viewed the exhibit.

<sup>123</sup> Roland Barthes (1957/1973) "The Great Family of Man" in *Mythologies*, London: Granada Publishing

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup>, Roland Barthes (1957/1973) "The Great Family of Man" in *Mythologies*, p. 102. London: Granada Publishing

<sup>126</sup> Roland Barthes (1957/1973) "The Great Family of Man" in *Mythologies*. London: Granada Publishing

### *Photography and Ethics*

In Susan Sontag's earliest and now classical writing *On Photography* she stresses some topics of major relevance for the discussion of ethical questions in the field.<sup>127</sup> Moral feelings are always embedded in history, she writes. Its personae are concrete, and its situations are specific. Photographs that manage to mobilize conscience are hence linked to some given historical situation. The more general they are, the less likely they are to awaken conscience.<sup>128</sup>

Photographs are in Sontag's understanding given a somewhat limited skill to raise an ethic.<sup>129</sup> They cannot create a moral position but can reinforce one, but for doing so they depend upon the existence of a relevant political consciousness that may be called into function. Sontag writes that without a politics, photographs of the slaughter-bench of history will most likely be experienced as unreal or as a demoralizing emotional blow. To grasp her point, it is needed to consider how she relates photography to epistemology. Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks. Understanding is based on how it functions, and functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph, she writes. The limit of photographic knowledge is that, while it can goad conscience, it can, finally, never be ethical or political knowledge.<sup>130</sup>

Sontag seems to say that photographs need contextualizing analyses and historical facts. Texts. In contrast to Sontag's understanding of the characteristics of photographic knowledge, photography rapidly was absorbed into rational, bureaucratic ways of running society, precisely because it was thought to carry sought for knowledge in the

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<sup>127</sup> Susan Sontag (1977) "In Plato's Cave" in *On Photography*. London: Penguin Group

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

form of information.<sup>131</sup> The “realistic” view of the world compatible with bureaucracy redefined knowledge as techniques and information. Photography suited the purpose of bureaucratic cataloguing of the world, and did so while it was used as confirmation of the reductive approach to reality considered realistic. This way photographs were enrolled in the service of institutions of control. To Sontag their value as information should be regarded as of the same order as fiction. Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy.<sup>132</sup>

One argument Sontag makes is that the ethical content of photographs is fragile.<sup>133</sup> An intention of a photographer to place the work in a politically relevant sphere may fail due to the tendency that its particular qualities gets swallowed up in the generalized pathos of time past.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

## VI. Analysis / Argument

The audience present at the TED conference burst into laughter. Why? Has the photographic catalogue of Taryn Simon's creation at its core a traditional western approach to what is considered rational? Does this inherent ideal let us make fun of what the West regards as unscientific, irrational and deviant? Yes. The storyteller is here carrying out a manoeuvre with which the scientifically imposed self-elimination upheld by the ego fends off the attack from the confronting reality of the Kenyan example. The example threatens to confront the foundation of the, in fact, not so stable objectivity demanded by the idealized scientific community of the West. Taking Latours arguments into account, the modernity of the West has established its rationality and objectivity to the expense of an unprivileged other base of knowledge, that of Them. It is supervised through how we have banned ourselves from conceiving hybrids between nature and culture. And it is kept steady through amount of effort described by Daston and Galison as needed for the elimination of the scientific self. The flow of energy that is distributed in this economy could be understood in the light of Freud's metapsychology, where ego, id and super ego function as regulating instances. The humouristic situation occurs as a relief stemming from saved effort for the entity that is able to keep the illusion of being superior to the demands of reality, which is, in fact, more complex and tentative than it wants to admit. The rational objective ideal of the scientific community of the West, expressed in the example of *A Living Man Declared Dead*, celebrates its triumphs by managing to avert what threatens the energy balance provided by its current historic form. The Kenyan example of chapter III challenges its foundation, but becomes in this particular arrangement defused from its power to extend science. *A Living Man Declared Dead* performs an action where the Other is made visible, whereas it obstructs the Other from being a factor that expands what is accepted as real. The gesture carried out rather uses the case study to remain steady on the illusions of the old fashioned ground. The fact that the audience laughs reveals at what distance the stories are told and it shows that the case study is designated to have a certain function to uphold the scientific self-understanding of the West. Let us look more closely at this by picking

up some issues brought to the fore in the sections Theory of Science and Theory of Photography.

Simon claims that her work is scientific. When examining the scientific elements of her work we find that Simon's use of the term 'scientific' means: Not political. No agenda. No overwriting idea. Neutrality in relation to the outcome. Isolated factors. Eliminated categories such as races, environment and context. Visualized parameters. Objects treated in the same way. Shedding of style and embellishment. Neutral background, objects placed in a non-place. The scientist (artist) of no importance for the outcome. The instrument (the camera) regarded a mere recorder without interference with the objects. Let us take this scientific appearance of the work seriously. Let us treat the work as an artefact of a specific and frequently spread view of science. If it were to be regarded as science, what type of critic would it be target for? Strictly speaking, when taking science studies into regard, it is hard to argue that these characteristics are valid even for the natural sciences. Rather they compose the recipe of *scientism*. They correspond to a highly idealistic view of how scientific knowledge came to exist. It is beyond doubt that Simon tries to precede experimentally in a way which is associated with the natural sciences practice in the laboratory. What for? Since when are human conditions best understood in a scientific setting which tries to subtract all that is human?

Simon's objects of study are better seen as human phenomena elsewhere than in a natural science setting. Her objects of interest may be described as phenomena resulting from failing social structures, actions or passages of events, for example terror, murder, crime, all of which one must admit are carried out by humans with ideas and emotions. In the way Simon arranges facts and objects, what do we learn about the human? What do we understand? Might it be that the attempt to, in this way, create order in the exposed chaos, even violates the possibility of understanding?

Could her urge to apply methods depicted from the natural sciences be understood as a strategy undertaken within a weaker scientific community, that of artistic research, in order to lend credibility to the claims? When Porter<sup>135</sup> describes mathematics as having the virtues that its reasoning is explicit and self-contained, it reminds us of Simon Bakers dictum of *A Living Man Declared Dead*: “it contains within its presentation all the things you need to understand about it”. This might be read as the artistic community doing some institutional work to declare the work as authoritative.

According to Hallberg the natural sciences are no longer regarded to be an adequate model for all other sciences. Studies within the humanities have articulated and applied their own models, which are better suited for their objects of study. In light of this, Simon’s scientific design strategy is confusing. Either we need to read her objects as being defined as merely biological and located in an animal or technical sphere (machinelikely on repeat), studied according to the natural science-type of methods, or we may be critical towards her choice of study model applied on the objects regarded – human.

One strange thing about Simon’s project is the confusing way in which she uses methods that attempt to keep a considerable distance from the objects studied, while claiming to encourage the telling of new stories which is a method belonging primarily to human studies. It is not possible to oversee that the persons portrayed in *A Living Man Declared Dead* remain silent. They are only meant to be the object of someone else’s story. This circumstance also makes it imperative to understand how these individuals were asked to participate in the project? What were they told it would be about? What information about its overall content were they given? Did the photographer use a privileged position, to convince them forcefully of the importance of their presence in this experiment? Was it made in the name of science? What for? It better have been of a well supported reason. But it seems, on the contrary, to have been of a particularly unclear

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<sup>135</sup> Theodore M. Porter (1995) *Trust in Numbers – the Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.



one. This calls Rosler's question into consideration: "Are photographic images then, like civilizations, made on the backs of the exploited?"

In designing a scientific set-up, the scientist has to observe the aspects of validity and reliability. Choosing objects for an investigation, it is of course important to take a sample that is considered relevant to the question asked. So in what sense are bloodlines here of particular interest for the outcomes of the thinking practice? Why are they made to structure the beginning of new stories? Or to be more precise, of what relevance are genetic bloodlines to the exposed tragedies? A scientist would have to pronounce the outset, a hypothesis, or a starting point. Complete neutrality regarding the set-up, innocence, a claimed ignorance towards it, would be unprofessional or lacking in seriousness. Simon fails to convince us about the appropriateness of using an unalterable bloodline as basis for understanding. The work does not sufficiently or convincingly answer the question What is being studied? nor Why is it being studied?

A scientist makes decisions regarding where to start, with what objects? how? and for what reason? Based upon this awareness of these choices the scientist is capable of reflecting upon the outcomes of a study, in order to optimize the study for the next time, or to contextualize the outcomes in relation to various other relevant factors. Irrespective of her claims, Simons' samples are not systematically chosen. They seem to be an almost random part of the collection. Or one could say that they are, of uttermost subjective reasons, reasons, that she does not account for. The reflexive moment crucial to all science is therefore lacking. One consequence of this is that the experiment cannot be optimized or criticized in a manner that is usual in a scientific community. Latour points to the fact that the scientific laboratory consists of materializations of earlier scientific selections. The work, if claiming to be scientific, needs to be contextualized, in order to be understood. It then necessarily relates to a scientific community, which plays a major role in producing its facts. There is reason to ask Simon to explain her selection and relate her work to some scientific principals or findings prior to her work.

The method used by Simon obviously strives to meet the ideals of mechanical-objectivity. The image-making practice aims to quiet the observer so nature can be heard. To be resisted are the temptations of aesthetics, the lure of seductive theories and the desire to schematize, beautify and simplify. But Simon's definitions, style, categories and choice of samples are hers, although shared with others. The similarity to a laboratory, a scientific archive, the whole "neutral" setting is stylish. It can be said to be one of many forms of aesthetics. Maybe it is one of the more fruitful ones when it comes to gaining credit for its content from the established powers of western society.

What can be said of the images that we are supplied with in *A Living Man Declared Dead*? The portraits are, according to Simon, taken against a neutral cream background. But we need to ask in what sense the colour cream is neutral? How easy it is to oppose such a statement can be shown by looking at some pictures from forensic photography. To take an example, the series *Least Wanted* collected by Mark Michaelson contains typical American mug shots taken between the 1870s and the 1960s.<sup>136</sup> The function of these photographs was to serve as utilitarian instruments. Most of them were actually taken against what now looks like a cream background. In any case, cream is in the arrangement and politics is evidently part of the procedure.

Simon does not understand the work as political in itself, and she says she has no agenda and does not want to draw any conclusion about what is depicted. What she neglects is that ideas express themselves not only in conclusions or agendas but even in choices made, since every selection is made by a subject. As Sismondo put it: scientist's actions are theory-dependent. Knorr-Cetina equated constructed with decision-impregnated. So what has Simon constructed, and what ideas, theories and decisions impregnate her work? Obviously the unalterable order of blood is used as the foundation of it. We assume this is for a reason and since this reason remains unclear the work stands open to avid interpretation. If wanting to avoid reading it as pure nonsense, one tries to read it as in some way meaningful. Serving as the spinal column of the work, the bloodline shows

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<sup>136</sup> <http://www.steidville.com/books/435-Least-Wanted-A-Century-of-American-Mugshots.html>, retr-ieved 25.06.2012.

itself as fundamental for the other vital aspect of the work – which is tragedy. The bloodline, being the unalterable factor, serves as that which the other included variables are judged against. Of all the mentioned aims for her work, the urge to tell whether our fate is determined by blood, chance or circumstance, seems to be closest to what Simon is actually testing. Does she want to make a globally valid representation out of the result?

To avoid reading the work as suggesting just a causal relationship between blood and tragedy, Simon must clarify why blood is of particular relevance in her work. She must make another reason obvious enough. But at this point she rather withdraws from her own arrangement, stating that she merely records and keeps a distance. She goes undercover in the scientific masquerade.

Simon looks on the bloodline as an unalterable order. It was her urge to find an absolute catalogue that led her to blood. This longed-for catalogue should consist of something she could not interrupt, curate or edit by choice. One problem with this statement is that this archive or catalogue is not given any precise limits. Included in the catalogue, described as absolute, uninterrupted and unedited are a variety of things derived from the three types of panels. Now, if we accept a bloodline to be of this quality of unalterability, we can only accept the desired catalogue in question to contain the bloodline and nothing else, no second or third panel of information. The arrangement has the appearance of cataloging all the material of the work, not just parts of it.

Simon says her work reflects on the idea that we keep going, that people keep being produced. She asks: “are we on repeat?” “It is kind of this unending machine-like churning of stories and individuals”. However, what we essentially are witnessing in *A Living Man Declared Dead* are not stories but factual tragedies, people randomly being connected with tragedies. There is no repetition. There is a suggestion of repetition. The information that is given, which is said to be “corresponding” information to the families, is not corresponding information, but information seductively described as

concerning the people portrayed. That which is repeating is birth and death. However this “catalogue of repetition” has by one simple title *A Living Man Declared Dead*, come to include much more. It hereby seems to predicate that tragedies are related to bloodlines and that they entangled together are on repeat.

After hereby dismantling the scientific look of the work, showing it as most of all an empty but successful gesture to resemble science, let us consider *A Living Man Declared Dead* as being art not science. Is it appropriate as an artist, to make a claim of neutrality and objectivity? Is it adequate to refer to the camera as a simple recorder? Has not, in this case, the basic assumption of the arrangement, namely the genetic aspect, been blurred while being presented as an obvious, “natural” structure? One may perhaps say that the artist had no agenda, but the work still has in itself, some consequences for political concern. Does the piece of art perhaps share logic with a widespread unquestioned one with severe ethical and practical consequences for the human condition in the 21st century? A genetic scientific determinism? Does it in fact promote the fatalistic view of human life and abilities held by the general population of contemporary society, such as Heely described it?

In the most recent trend, history has been shifted over from culture to biology in the name of genetics. Now, how innocent is this procedure? With it there is a severe risk that biology turns into ideology. The genes are then meant to tell the truth. Genetics carry an imminent risk of determinism. Considering that capitalism in the west is the supreme and almost unquestioned ideology<sup>137</sup> of our time, and given the fact that genetics is tightly intertwined with a financial marketing, there is cause for concern. This I see as one factor in exciting the tendency to ideology and to determinism based in genetics.

Maybe the context around *A Living Man Declared Dead*, could be read as an ongoing negotiation of genetics as the legitimate cradle of understanding humanity, here specifically in relation to disasters. Genes do not commit murder. Bloodlines do not

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<sup>137</sup> Slavoj Žižek (2001) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

cause crime. Therefore it is important to forever refuse consensus around such an idea trying to eventually settle. Simon has black-boxed the chapters in her Berlin exhibition; let us make sure it will not be a lasting success. In all, the various ways in which the work has been received, may be understood as similar to what goes on in the laboratory. Either someone ignores it to detract, cites it positively, cites it negatively, questions it or ignores it because everybody accepts it.

One of the aims of the work is described as being to create a map or order in chaos, in order to result in beginnings of new stories. I believe it might achieve the latter, but these stories will center around the idea (!) of genetics and will not be new to its core but dependent upon the assumption of the relevance of genetics to understanding the tragedies.

In my first encounter with the work, I felt a heartrending dissonance while binding the chapters to one another. Now as then, I am continually forced to ask if *A Living Man Declared Dead and other Chapters I–XVIII* is one work or 18 works. It is sometimes referred to as “the works” meaning perhaps the different case studies. What do the different chapters belong to? One book? What is this book about? Why were the disparate chapters brought together? We are left to wonder or are forced to draw conclusions from the material that is offered.

The work is said to be arranged in a way that eliminates race, environment and contexts. Is it really true that it eliminates a factor like race? It does not seem probable, since race is a stereotype category and it is easily evoked by mere fantasy and a lack of knowledge. One could argue that race actually functions better, is adopted more easily in a social context, to confirm and build an US and a Them, when nuances and particulate detail is withdrawn from the picture. A blank space is more open to projections. Race biology has a long history of arranging bloodlines to account for various traits and actions. Why is there reason to argue that the bloodlines of *A Living Man Declared Dead* lead us in more open directions? Does the work not actually evoke the factor of race?

Now let us consider the other two aspects that are said to be withdrawn: environment and context. Yes, we must admit that Simon was successful in this matter, and soon arrived headlong in the major issue of psychologism. Considering Rosler's argument, we understand that Simon is in good company and follows the current mainstream tendency of documentary photography. The psychologizing of social and political questions in documentary photography means abandoning the analysis of structural power relations. The two factors environment and context are of great importance for such an analysis. We are left with what is said to be a family business.

Why may it be relevant to try to structure an artwork scientifically? As Porter points out, not science, but politics demands narrow rigor. Hallberg describes that the picture of the asocial objective registering scientist out of contact with the world he is studying, still haunts like a ghost in areas where the natural sciences are put on a pedestal. May we then assume that Simon's urge to mimic an idealistic natural scientist is the offspring of such a milieu? And if it is, where does her move lead? And might there be a reason for carrying it out? My suggestion is as follows: Where natural sciences are put on a pedestal, the gesture to resemble it, would perhaps result in gaining credit from the same milieu. Would we then expect productive criticism from this milieu in regard to the set-up of the work, one that relies on a common foundation? I do not find this probable. By underpinning the exhibition with references to science, itself a creative act, the work can in such a milieu maintain a high status and its claims can elude a critical review. Only here can its self-description be successfully one of neutrality and its results regarded as obvious. In all, this milieu, including the work by Simon, mobilizes politically since it upholds a certain set of values and claims of knowledge – with practical, financial, political as well as medical or legal implications. The decision-impregnated construction becomes, of course, decision impregnating. We should also ask what decisions the work may fuel. If we want to draw some conclusions about the different problems that we meet in *A Living Man Declared Dead*, what would they be? And what actions should we take to limit the destruction and interference from harmful repetitions? If the conclusion

is that genes determine the outcomes, if tragedies are founded in bloodlines, and there is an unmediated relationship between genetic inheritance and, for example, murder, there is a limited number of responses open: DNA manipulation, lifetime imprisonment, death penalty or sterilization.

Once again we ask the question, is *A Living Man Declared Dead* really science or is it art? Simon's work fluctuates in our attempts to understand it, between an important joke – an ironic gesture riding on the stereotyped logic of scientism, and a badly-designed scientific catalogue, though carried out with serious intentions. Who should judge?

Let us now turn to the question of interpretation. The historic longing for the perfect, pure image was apparently a strong one. We learned how this ideal constituted the mechanical objectivity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Maybe today we need to deal with its renaissance. This ideal, or what might be described as Simon's wish to act machine-like in order to grasp something machine-like in her human objects of study, was in the prehistory of this debate, countered by the postulation that since man is not a machine, man is not capable of rendering objects like a machine. Hence, the reproduction of nature will never be proper reproduction or imitation but interpretation. It seems appropriate to call for this again.

Who will be the interpretator of Simon's work? The single viewer? (Who will listen to the unknown man in the street as he goes along interpreting as he wishes?) The scientific community? The political forces? Mighty interests of an established elite? *A Living Man Declared Dead* freely gives away its content to who ever succeeds in benefiting from it, and therefore supports structures and institutions that are dominant. It does this since it fails in, or even does not want to, account for structural causes behind what is depicted.

Uncritically placing *A Living Man Declared Dead* as science of a positivist kind observing standards of objectivity, (blurring the fact that it does not meet what is asked of it from an "intellectual conscience") would mean to let it become opportunist within a

dominant western scientific agenda, namely by distributing the judgment of its content to another (the agenda of an influential dominant overwriting field of research, offering to explain and determine, while profiting from its setup). I am in the case of *A Living Man Declared Dead* referring to a popularized version of genetics, and its tendency to draw causal explanations from blood/genes to actions, thoughts and ideas.

Simon states that if anything is to be established, it is in the gaps in all the information that she presents. We are in a way encouraged to search out what is conveyed in the space between what is given. We have to make an interpretation on our own. We learned from Taylor that an interpretation aims to bring to light an underlying coherence or sense. In the case of *A Living Man Declared Dead*, the audience must lay out bridges in between the different chapters and their fragments ordered in bloodlines. Given the basic assumption of the logic of a bloodline structuring the information about disasters, I regard it an important act to refuse seeking coherence according to its premises. An ethical response towards the work seems to be to refuse being the human medium flattening the image into one of harmonic sense. These things or phenomena, these objects of understanding need really to be understood. The different components of the work on offer either repel each other or make a horrible noise when connected.



## VII. Media reception of the Work

By including the responses to a piece of art, in the work itself, some major problems arise. I put a strong emphasis on them to be separate but connected categories, more or less linked depending on the type of artwork. The reason for this is that I look upon the border between them as making a critique possible as well as other foundations and perspectives. To me it seems inappropriate to treat an objection towards a phenomenon as a wished-for thus harmless response belonging to what was in fact objected. By separating the two categories one can probably more easily identify and place responsibilities that might otherwise have been displaced. Nevertheless, it is important to pay attention to the reception for a number of reasons. After all it sheds light on the cooperation of interpretation that it is invited to. I find a variation in different styles of reading *A Living Man Declared Dead*, and in the description of what the work is about. Will we perhaps need to retreat to a position where we are forced to say that the work only in the reception of it, either gets problematic or a relief?

In dealing with my understanding of *A Living Man Declared Dead*, I started reading extracts from the media reception of it, and have to date only read one review that is not overtly positive towards it. A significant part of the articles about *A Living Man Declared Dead* focus on the artist herself. One formulation is extra interesting, since it uses a popular expression, which flirts with the topic of the work. *The Guardian/The Observer* finds out that Simon's grandfather and father were avid photographers and therefore conclude: "Photography, then, is in her blood [...]". From this we learn that in *common sense* profession can be inherited through a bloodline. What else can?

*The Guardian/The Observer* writes that the work of art is "hard-wired to the real world" and moreover shows "the nature of genealogy and its consequences".<sup>138</sup> This formulation is somewhat revealing. The genealogies here are described as having

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<sup>138</sup> Sean O'Hagan (2011) "Taryn Simon: The woman in the picture", in *The Guardian/The Observer*, 22.11.2011.

consequences (tragic ones), instead of being seen as constructed and as claimed in the archival arrangement. I must therefore ask what is lacking until the work becomes read as a kind of biology of evil, or as a narrative of the genetics of victimhood?

Here there seems to be a gliding shift regarding what is meant by genealogies repeating and having a nature. One could hear this as merely meaning that people live and give birth and die. That this is repeating. Or one hears that some virtues, destinies, acts or even occupations repeat themselves, as if no other option was available. Taking this version completely literally, it would mean that if a child of a murderer inherits by obligation through blood the destiny to become a murderer, then how should we prevent it from happening? Forced sterilization, DNA manipulation or death penalty? Just as natural as giving the baby a camera if the ancestors liked taking pictures. Our daily language is not of an innocent kind. If the only thing *A Living Man Declared Dead* intends to say about repetition, is that people live and die, then this information is banal. If repetition is suggested as being that of a disastrous kind founded in genetics, it is disgusting.

*The Independent* takes issue with Simon's methods and states quite clearly: "[...] we have simply a bunch of people who resemble each other [...] whose identical poses reinforce that resemblance. [...] Their homogeneity is both boring and frightening, which is part of the point. [...] Individuality is tenuous. Hans Frank who ran Poland for Hitler[...] certainly didn't differentiate between victims."<sup>139</sup> When Simon orders the family members the way she does, their individualities are made absent. Their resemblance with each other serves the vague reason to make a bunch out of individuals, and such a procedure is precisely a proper basis for harmful politics. By differentiating between humans and family members, by hearing what each has to say, their individualities are saved. Simon's methods are in *The Independent* being related to what is said to be the foundation for the crimes of Frank.

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<sup>139</sup> Nina Caplan (2012) "Taryn Simon: A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters, Tate Modern, London", in *The Independent*, 18.06.2012.

Rather than experiencing a repetitive determinism which causes claustrophobia, some art critics express feelings of freedom, speaking of a livable condition in “Taryn Simons New World Order”.<sup>140</sup> But this order is all but new. It seems to be the shrinking space of Humanity. It is repetition suggested and related to blood and thereby caused to occur again. In *Getidan* one reads that the work is very well organized. Simon is said to be strict, and she creates order and has a system. She really has an intention. Individuals who do not want to be part of a bloodline, who thus have gained a blank sheet in the line, are in this article said to have refused to participate. In the way this is described one gets the feeling that the photographer is someone who has the right to do just about anything. In a way it is as if she was the law and the individuals were obliged to be present. The article in *Getidan* has received one comment on the website from a reader who is skeptical to the article:<sup>141</sup> “It is impossible to leave the museum with an impression or an opinion. You leave with a demolition.”<sup>142</sup>

*Der Spiegel* turns the displayed determinism another way around which lands in a paradox of freedom: “She [Simon] seems to say: It could not have been in another way. At the same time she sketches, as a pictured counterpart, a skeptical credo of freedom.”<sup>143</sup> Well, if being demolished is considered a freedom. In the Berlin paper *Zitty* the exhibition is described as a desperate attempt to understand the backgrounds of human lives. *Zitty* claims that the neutrality of the artist leaves the audience to draw their own conclusions.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Simone Meier (2011) “Taryn Simons neue Weltordnung”, in *Getidan*, 14.10.2011. My translation from German.

<sup>141</sup> Manfred Koren writes: “Der Text hier ist viel zu aufgeblasen wichtiguerisch. Die Chapters sind doch beliebig, das Schema der Darstellung ebenso. Wussten wohl alle Fotografierten, dass sie mit australischen Kaninchen -zumindest formal- gleichgestellt werden? Die Ausstellung nimmt trotzdem gefangen. Man kann das Museum nicht mit einem ‘Eindruck’ oder einer ‘Meinung’ verlassen, sondern nur mit einer “Verstörung”. Nur gut, dass Rezensenten immer alles so genau wissen!”, *Getidan*, 14.10.2011.

<sup>142</sup> Manfred Koren (2011) Comment at *Getidans* website, 14.10.2011. My translation from German.

<sup>143</sup> Georg Diez (2012) “Taryn Simon, Fotografin: Zusammenhänge”, in *Der Spiegel* 30.12.2012. My translation from German.

<sup>144</sup> Karoline Kuhla (2011) “Verwandschaft: Taryn Simon”, in *Zitty* 06.10.2011 My translation from German.

In *FAZ*, I find a positive critique of the work, one which draws some interesting conclusions of its own. The theme of the work is described as how humans on the basis of genetics become victims of political interest and irrational traditions. The article claims that what we are witnessing in the work is not a suggestion that traits and character are in the blood, being genetically coded, but the contrary. The work is said to part with speculations in natural science, such as the ones we again and again are confronted with. Instead blood emerges here as a social construction, not as a biological category. *FAZ* sees the work as a critique of those instances that usually make use of genetic bloodlines for creating politics. It is also a reflexive work, which problematizes journalistic photography.<sup>145</sup> Notable is the fact that nothing that Simon herself has said points to her being skeptical towards science or politics based on biology. We are reminded of the initial differences and categories that we tried to establish between the art piece and the artist and statements made by the artist.

In an article in *Texte zur Kunst* Simon's previous works are contrasted with *A Living Man Declared Dead*. In them Simon is said to have asked some significant questions, not only to America that after 9/11 increasingly fell into an apodictic black-or-white-thinking, but to us all. In this work though, she gets entangled in a network of indissoluble contradictions. Its pseudoscientific looking format enhances the impact of the terrible examples and suggests an intrinsic coherence that it does not at all have. Not to talk about how hard it is for the artist to escape an accusation of Exoticism.<sup>146 147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Niklas Maak (2011) "Das Blut und die Ordnung der Menschen", in *FAZ*, 28.09.2011. My translation from German.

<sup>146</sup> Eric Eichinger (2011) "Blutgruppen, Eric Aichinger über Taryn Simon in der Neuen Nationalgalerie, Berlin", in *Texte zur Kunst*, 15.12.2011. My translation from German.

<sup>147</sup> In 2011, Eric Eichinger wrote: "Nun mag die Irritation oder sogar Dissoziation des Besuchers ein genau beabsichtigter Effekt von Simons Strategie sein, im Sinne des postmodernen Credo, dass nicht der Autor sich über das Chaos des vielfach überlagerten Textgewebes aus Informationsfragmenten zu erheben hat, sondern der Betrachter selbst Kohärenz schaffen und eine Haltung hierzu einnehmen soll. Nur hinterlässt diese Argumentation den schalen Beigeschmack von Effekthascherei. Warum derart haarsträubende, bizarre, blutrünstige Fälle ausbreiten und damit insinuieren, dass sich gerade von den anthropologischen Rändern aus etwas über die allgemeine *conditio humana* aussagen ließe, nur um dann den essentialistisch-fatalistisch aufgeblasenen Luftballon wieder platzen zu lassen und die Betrachter/innen zurückzulassen mit der banalen Einsicht, dass zu den sozio-politischen Faktoren, die unser aller Schicksal beeinflussen, letztlich doch auch die Blutsverwandtschaft gehört? Das fundamentale Problem dieser Arbeit besteht in

## VIII. Concluding Reflections

The outlines of the argument I have made, sketches that the created photographic catalogue of human bloodlines and related stories has as its core a traditional western approach to what is considered scientific. By keeping a relieving distance to its portrayed objects, by idealistically observing the standards of natural sciences, it can consolidate its own privileged position over that of the people depicted. With the same gesture, intrinsically a pseudoscientific one claiming neutrality, responsibility for the suggested causality between bloodlines and tragedies is distributed to whoever reads it this way. The artist fails to account for the content and goes undercover in a scientific masquerade. This means that the work is open to being annexed by the popular influential tendency to genetic determinism. The work inherently suggests that human tragedies are on repeat and that they should be understood in connection with bloodlines. By depriving the portrayed humans a chance to speak of their own diversifications, the work damages the human sphere (guaranteed and held in place by dialogue) and enhances the risk of repetition.

So, is *A Living Man Declared Dead* art or science or both? It will not be fully possible to answer this question here. But as a preliminary, let us say that it is above all conceptual art wishing to stir up the audience to innovative protests. If the intention was to provoke, it seems as it has most often failed in its attempts. A majority of art reviews seem to have swallowed the message in one tasty bit. But what if Taryn Simon herself suddenly one day would reveal: “I entered the scientific masquerade in order to show the absurdities claimed in the false name of science, to illustrate fundamental ideas firing aggressive foreign affairs.”? What if my dealing with the work in the end turns out to have been guided by the question whether or not I trusted my artist sister of having the courage and intelligibility of performing an act that discredits the inflated, stealthy

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ihrem Missverhältnis zwischen Aufwand und Erkenntnisgewinn”; see Eric Eichinger (2011) “Blutgruppen, Eric Aichinger über Taryn Simon in der Neuen Nationalgalerie, Berlin”, in *Texte zur Kunst*, 15.12.2011.

political scientific community of the West in such a manner and to such a perfect degree?

Regardless of whether this is the case, or not, *the work A Living Man Declared Dead* threatens to strangle and eventually kill the human condition which has already been seriously harmed. By refusing to accept the message as innocuous, we manage to declare mankind alive. Now, Norman Frank, Mary Atieno Nyamwanda, Erez Ruppin and Zumra Mehic – what is on your mind?

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## ***A Living Man Declared Dead Declared Alive***

**This essay analyses the photographic piece of art *A Living Man Declared Dead and other Chapters I–XVIII* by Taryn Simon, focusing on its references to science. When reading it in a context of science studies, as an artefact imitating a scientific procedure, specific problems with this gesture become visible. Questions arise related to scientism but also to ethics within the field of artistic practice. Furthermore it discusses the work's relation or distance to genetic determinism.**

**The essay is a master's thesis written in theory of science, at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.**

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