

# GAGOSIAN

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## TARYN SIMON

### The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection

July 14–September 11, 2021 | Gagosian, 976 Madison Avenue, New York

September 24, 2021–May 15, 2022 | New York Public Library, Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, 476 Fifth Avenue

Installation view, *Taryn Simon: The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection*, New York Public Library, 2020. Artwork © Taryn Simon. Photo: Rob McKeever

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June 14, 2021

Gagosian is pleased to announce *The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection* by Taryn Simon, an exhibition in two parts at Gagosian 976 Madison Avenue and the New York Public Library at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue.

In her work, Simon engages organizational systems—bloodlines, criminal investigations, mourning, global diplomacy—to reveal the hidden contours of authority. From photography to sculpture, text, sound, and performance, her projects involve extensive field research both on and with archives, individuals, and institutions.

Nine years in the making, *The Color of a Flea's Eye* foregrounds the history of the New York Public Library's Picture Collection, whose storied contents have been available, for more than a century, for patrons to sift through in search of visual references of every conceivable kind. In 1929, Romana Javitz became the collection's superintendent, shaping its ethos and the processes governing its growing circulation. Among her many pioneering efforts was a campaign to pointedly diversify the

collection's offerings by preserving a wide-ranging record of the country's overlooked subjects, including folk art, documentary photography, and portrayals of African American life.

Decades before the advent of Internet search engines, the Picture Collection's democratic classification system was designed, under Javitz's influence, to respond to individual users, whose daily requests and interventions created a manual algorithm by which materials were transmitted back into American culture, thereby reshaping it. Used by journalists, historians, filmmakers, designers, advertisers, and the US military, the Picture Collection has also been an especially vital resource for artists. Diego Rivera consulted it for his controversial Rockefeller Center mural, *Man at the Crossroads* (1932–33); Joseph Cornell drew from it to make his boxed assemblages of the 1940s; and throughout the 1950s and '60s, Andy Warhol sourced a trove of images, many never returned, that were foundational for his illustrations and paintings.

Intrigued by the Picture Collection since childhood, in 2012 Simon began to study its underlying patterns, codes, and orders. Starting with subject folders from the collection's open stacks—Handshaking, Police, Oxygen, Broken Objects, and Financial Panics, among others—she arranged and documented their physical contents in large-format photographs, overlapping images to reveal accidental juxtapositions that suggest abstract color fields, neural networks, or tiled search results. Simon's photography reveals the Picture Collection to be an inadvertent recorder of changing social mores, disclosing latent fault lines of power, race, and gender. At the same time, the works point to the invisible hands behind seemingly neutral systems of image-gathering, locating an unlikely futurity in the past.

*The Color of a Flea's Eye*—titled after one patron's request from 1930—examines the forces that compel us to revise which images we value. In the Gagosian exhibition at 976 Madison Avenue, Simon's photographs are accompanied by archival letters and objects from Romana Javitz, Dorothea Lange, Joseph Cornell, Andy Warhol, and Walker Evans, demonstrating the Picture Collection's critical role in the history of twentieth-century image-making, and that of American photography in particular. In the fall of 2021, a special installation of Simon's photographs will open at the New York Public Library's flagship Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. Together, these presentations focus on a forgotten period of public hunger for visual material, and in doing so provoke questions about the fate of—and our relationship with—the images we consume.

Organized by Simon with Joshua Chuang, senior curator of photography at the New York Public Library, *The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection* is accompanied by a comprehensive monograph of the same title, published by Cahiers d'Art.

**Taryn Simon** was born in 1975 in New York, where she currently lives and works. Collections include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Tate Modern, London; and Centre Pompidou, Paris. Exhibitions include *An Occupation of Loss*, Park Avenue Armory, New York (2016); *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark (2021); *The Pipes*, MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA (2021). Monographs include *The Innocents* (2003); *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007); *Contraband* (2010); *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I – XVIII* (2012); *Field Guide to Birds of the West Indies* (2015); *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* (2016); and *An Occupation of Loss* (2017).

#TarynSimon

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## Press

### Polskin Arts

Meagan Jones | meagan.jones@finnpartners.com | +1 212 593 6485

Julia Esposito | julia.esposito@finnpartners.com | +1 212 715 1643

### Gagosian

pressny@gagosian.com | +1 212 744 2313