

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

VOGUE

**Photographer Taryn Simon on Shooting Pussy Riot and the Politics of
Modern Media**

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Photographed by Taryn Simon, Vogue, July 2014

For *Vogue*'s July issue, artist Taryn Simon was asked to photograph Masha Alekhina and Nadya Tolokonnikova, formerly of Pussy Riot. Simon's portrait of Alekhina and Tolokonnikova accompanies *Vogue*'s story about their impassioned mission to reform prisons in Russia, and their recent media tour of the United States to promote their new organization, Zona Prava, which aims to expose the inhumane conditions in Russia's massive prison system. Though she rarely shoots for editorial publications, Simon, whose work often deals with flawed governmental and social systems, was a perfect fit for the portrait. She has spent much of the past decade creating art that combines photography, text, and graphic design to explore societal ambiguities and injustices.

In one of her earliest projects, *The Innocents*, first exhibited at MoMa PS1 in 2003, Simon photographed wrongfully accused men, released from prison, either at the alibi location or at the scenes of the crimes they did not commit. Her interest in injustice is a thread throughout her subsequent work, and can be found again in a more recent book and exhibition, *A Living Man*

Declared Dead and Other Chapters, which documents, among other stories, the saga of an Indian man who is alive but declared dead in governmental records so that his relatives can claim his property. The subjects of the series are captured against a pale beige backdrop—one of Simon’s unmistakable aesthetic choices, used also in *Vogue*’s portrait of Alekhina and Tolokonnikova.

Simon is now in the midst of working on a whirlwind of upcoming projects, but took time to speak with *Vogue.com* about her work and future possibilities for the photographic image and disorienting narratives of our time.

As a fashion publication, *Vogue* may not always be associated with the stories of people like Masha and Nadya. I can’t help but wonder if *Vogue*’s inclusion of work like your own, which is often politically and socially charged, has positive effects and can incite change for these subjects or situations?

Context and audience are integral elements in this equation. In my past work, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, the title chapter highlighted several men who were listed in their local village registry in Uttar Pradesh, India, as dead. According to all official paperwork, they did not exist. I spent time with them and photographed them. They were very much alive. Family members paid off officials to have them declared dead so they could interrupt the hereditary transfer of land upon their father’s death. That narrative and their photographs became a representative image of the project. It was reproduced in countless magazines and newspapers as the exhibition traveled. And they still are dead.

Have you photographed in Russia before?

I’ve produced works in Russia and exhibited at both The Garage and the Multimedia Art Museum in Moscow. My roots lead there as well.

In your project *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, you amassed and photographed an inventory of objects and places that are hidden within the borders of the United States. What do you think a project like this would look like in Russia or similarly opaque parts of the world?

I doubt it would exist. For that matter, I’m not sure it could exist in America today either.

As human rights violations and conflict intensify in all parts of the world, what do you see for the future?

In a time capsule embedded in the grounds of the New York World’s Fair in 1939 was a book published by Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing Company that listed the contents of the time capsule along with three letters from notable figures (Albert Einstein, Robert Andrews Millikan, and Thomas Mann) to the future. Thomas Mann wrote the following:

“We now know that the idea of the future as a better world was a fallacy of the doctrine of progress. The hopes we center on you, citizens of the future, are in no way exaggerated. In broad outline you resemble us very much as we resemble those who lived 1,000 or 5,000 years ago. Among you too, the spirit will fare badly. It will never fare too well on this Earth, otherwise men would need it no longer.

That optimistic conception of the future is a projection into time of an endeavor which does not belong to the temporal world, the endeavor on the part of men to approximate to his idea of himself the humanization of man.

What we, in this year of our lord 1938, understand by the term culture, a notion held in small esteem today by certain nations of the western world, is simply this endeavor. What we call the spirit is identical with this culture too. Brothers of the future, united with us in this spirit and this endeavor, we send our greetings.”

My favorite section of the book is labeled, “A Key to the English Language,” which attempts to describe the English language to a future in which it has disappeared—through illustrations and descriptions of sound and structure.

I have a work with this as its subject in my series *Black Square* based on the paintings by Kazimir Malevich.

What are you working on right now?

A performance piece.

When I type “Pussy Riot” into *Image Atlas*, the search engine you collaborated on with programmer Aaron Swartz, a variety of images pop up from various countries, including portraits of the members, as well as a sprinkling of cat photographs and other oddities. What is *Image Atlas*? And what does it reveal about communication?

Image Atlas explores the possibility of a universal language through images. People communicate more and more through abbreviated text and images. Its aim is to map cultural differences and similarities associated with different search terms. It questions whether visual language is subject to the same issues of translation that occur with the written word.