Lorna Simpson (American, b. 1960)

*Counting*, 1991
Photogravure and screenprint, 73 3/8 x 38"
University purchase, 1992

Made in 1991, Lorna Simpson’s photogravure and screenprint *Counting* arrests attention with its large scale, rich tonality, and suggestive juxtapositions. About six feet high and three feet wide, the work consists of three black-and-white photographic images, arranged vertically to form a tall column: a woman’s mouth and neck, a round brick smokehouse, and a tightly coiled braid of hair. Each image is accompanied by black boxes containing crisp, white, printed text and numbers. The text to the right of the cropped portrait lists a series of time spans: 9 am–1 pm, 2 am–6 pm, 11 pm–4 am, 8 pm–10 pm, 9 am–11 am. Two boxes of text flank the photograph of the brick hut: the one on the left reads “310 years ago;” the right side reads “1575 bricks.” Below the image of a braided coil of hair lie three boxes that contain the words “25 twists,” “70 braids,” and “50 locks.”

Much of the scholarship of Simpson’s work, especially in light of the critical emphasis in the 1990s on social politics in art, has tended to focus on notions of black female identity, understanding her art through Simpson’s own identification as an African American woman.[1] From today’s vantage point, however, it is clear that Simpson’s work, far more than a straightforward linkage of biography and art, in fact invites viewers, regardless of identity, into a highly ambiguous matrix of history, memory, and subjectivity. Simpson’s choice of visual strategy in *Counting*—her careful pairing of photographs with text and numbers that subverts the documentary tradition—foregrounds the precarious and personal nature of memory and demands that viewers participate in a deeply relational encounter with her work, actively engaging in the process of uncovering the work’s layers of shifting meaning.

Though comprised of distinct components, *Counting* forms a coherent visual whole. In addition to the limited palette and the recurring boxes of numbers and words, a subtle repetition of curves within the images creates a sense of visual rhythm: the upward sweep of the blouse, collarbone, chin, and lips, the coil of hair, and the suggested curvature of the brick hut. Similarly, the pattern of the braided hair echoes the scalloped neckline of the blouse and the rows of bricks comprising the hut. The formal logic, however, does not afford an easy or straightforward interpretation. Instead, *Counting* functions as a kind of puzzle where visual and textual cues constantly redirect viewers’ attention back to the work and to the relationships between each of its pieces.

In both the photographic style she employs and her pairing of images and text, Simpson recalls traditions of documentary and anthropological photography, practices predicated on a belief in
the empirical veracity and indexicality of the image—the one-to-one correspondence between an image and object, representation and the represented.[2] The photographs in this historical tradition continue to powerfully shape cultural memory and expectations today, visually reiterating the presumed inferiority of poor or nonwhite subjects.[3] But even as Simpson references this history, she also subverts it. The images in Counting—the simply lit, frontal image of a dark-skinned woman, the overexposed photograph of the brick hut and the braid of hair, carefully coiled and shot from above as if in a display case of curios—are each reminiscent of the cool objectivity of the documentary aesthetic. The photograph of the woman’s mouth could well be a fragment of the purportedly dispassionate images taken by nineteenth-century slave owners or colonial explorers to catalogue or categorize black subjects.[4] Yet Simpson obscures her subject’s particular identity. The cropped features and the woman’s closed, set lips stymie attempts to identify her, much less identify with her. By denying viewers access to her subject, Simpson rejects the fetishization of the female body—especially the black female body—so prevalent in documentary and anthropological photography.[5]

Simpson further extends and complicates her critique of evidentiary photography through her use of text.[6] The pairing of words and images is familiar, and even expected, when seen in conjunction with documentary-style photography, but Simpson, unlike her predecessors, does not offer clear, denotative meanings. Instead, her phrases and numbers assume a disorienting and ambiguous relation to the images. Though at first apparently simple, the text grows increasingly complex with each reading. The uppermost list of times, for example, suggests, through its proximity to the woman’s portrait, a shift worker’s hours. But such an assumption is quickly drawn into question by the particulars of the time spans, which range from two to fourteen hours at all times of the day and night, creating an impossible if not absurd schedule. Similarly, while the numbering of bricks and the phrase “310 years ago” recalls the empirical pretensions of documentary photography and locates the structure in the seventeenth century, it provides neither a familiar historical date nor any useful information about the building’s location, function, or significance.[7] Finally, while the texts below the photograph of hair might simply enumerate methods of hairstyling, the verbs “twist,” “braid,” and “lock” also carry violent connotations that are exacerbated by the uncomfortable separation of the coil of hair from a body. Simpson thus highlights the complicated relationship between word and image in her work, uncovering and critiquing the frequent exploitation of subjects in documentary photography, where the presumably efficacious meaning of an image is largely constructed by the text.[8]

Perhaps most compellingly, however, these juxtapositions prolong the viewer’s engagement with Counting and serve to expose the embedded, often unexamined, assumptions we make when looking at images. Few would hesitate to identify the subject of the topmost photograph as a black woman, yet the rationale behind such a claim—the dark skin, the full lips, the apparently feminine garment—serve as unsettling reminders of how particular, visible signs of difference are often extrapolated into racial and gender norms. Each assumption co-implicates interpretations of the accompanying images and numbers. Thus one may easily presume that the braided hair in the bottom image belongs to the faceless woman, but such an inference again hinges on coded notions of Western femininity and ethnic hair texture. Likewise, having identified her as a black woman, one might likely assume that the brick hut relates to African American slavery. However, while each image remains self-contained, its interpretation depends on viewers deciphering the content of the work as a whole. In this way the work implicates its
viewers, prompting us to reconsider assumptions about history, identity, and meaning that we may take for granted. Arguably, an interpretation of *Counting* thus hinges as much on the viewer as it does on the artist.

By asking us to fill in the gaps suggested by her pairings of text and images, Simpson prompts us to understand *Counting* in a reciprocal manner: the work presents itself not as an icon to be unpacked but as a place of exchange. Simpson’s own identity as an African American woman and the work’s manifest African American content thus serve only as an interpretive departure point for repeated and varied approaches to the work—a requisite interaction that draws attention to our own role in making meaning of the work of art. The evocation of history in the photographs’ documentary qualities, combined with the phrases and numbers that measure time by hours, years, or the rhythm of counting bricks, twists, braids, and locks, relates the recursive act of counting to the ways that we recall our memories and construct our identities. *Counting* compels us to recognize and address our latent beliefs—about history, subjectivity, ourselves—bringing to the surface processes of identification and understanding that we so often uncritically accept.

NOTES

1 Prominent examples of such scholarship include Deborah Willis, “Eyes in the Back of Your Head: The Work of Lorna Simpson,” in *Lorna Simpson* (San Francisco: Untitled 54, The Friends of Photography, 1992), 5–15; and bell hooks, “Lorna Simpson: Waterbearer,” *Artforum* (September 1993): 136–37. It is also important to note that in the context in which Simpson made this and other similar works—the late 1980s and early 1990s—many American artists were exploring notions of identity and the ways in which an individual recognizes him- or herself through a shared experience or condition such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, or religion. Artists who aligned themselves with oppressed social groups sought to raise consciousness and transform notions of self and community through their work. Among the better-known exhibitions that explored issues of identity, and in which Simpson’s work was included, were *The Decade Show*, a 1990 exhibition organized jointly by the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Museum of Hispanic Contemporary Art, and the controversial 1993 Whitney Biennial in New York, which foregrounded work by female, gay, and nonwhite artists, linking them through the presumably common experience of marginalization. Simpson’s work emerged within this broader interest in identity and subjectivity and was regularly cited as an example of art dealing with African American female identity.


Certainly the pairing of text and image is a visual strategy with multiple references. Works by conceptualist artists such as Joseph Kosuth and John Baldessari frequently employ text, playing with the slipperiness of languages and images. Additionally, the juxtaposition of texts and photographs is also a familiar strategy of feminist art. Eleanor Antin, one of Simpson’s teachers during her MFA program at the University of California in San Diego, captioned her photographs as an explicitly feminist means of upending patriarchal structures of representation. Second-wave feminist artists in the 1980s, particularly Jenny Holzer and Barbara Krueger, also incorporated text into their work as a potent political strategy.

Since *Counting* was made in 1991, “310 years ago” specifically signifies 1681, a year not singularly associated with African American history. However, the 1680s marked the establishment of black slavery as the dominant form of labor in the new American colonies; Simpson might then subtly but pointedly be emphasizing how long African Americans have endured disenfranchisement in the United States.