

HYPERALLERGIC

PICTURING AMERICA'S WEIRDEST LAWS BY BREAKING THEM

By Claire Voon, November 1, 2017



In photos that range from silly to unsettling, looking at the US's oddest, most surprising, least sensible — and sometimes outright fake — laws.

In 1948, a pickle packer in Hartford dropped one of his briny wares in front of reporters to prove it was fresh enough to bounce. It didn't, and police arrested the man and slapped him with a fine of \$500. Also, they destroyed his vegetables.

Over the years, the one-off health violation of Sidney Sparer has sprouted a law of lore: in Connecticut, a pickle must rebound if dropped to officially be considered a true pickle. Local librarians have done the good work of proving this is but a warping of reality — and that the pickle law is just one of the countless erroneous misunderstandings of the American legal system that are hilariously absurd, and thus make for great viral material.

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Fifty of these laws are highlighted in *I Fought the Law*, a new photobook by Olivia Locher published by Chronicle Books. Locher pairs 50 of America's strangest laws she read about online, each from a different state, with photographs she staged to show someone breaking them.

A few, like the pickle-bounce regulation, are completely false or represent history misconstrued, while others are really implemented. Some came close to attaining legal status, but the majority of them are outdated. Locher doesn't tell you which laws are legitimate, leaving you to face the murkiness of government regulations and wonder if it is truly illegal in Wisconsin to serve apple pie in restaurants without cheddar cheese. (If you want to know, a law effective between 1935 and 1937 required the pastry to arrive with cheese and butter.)

Shot in her studio against colorful backdrops, the images are evidently painstakingly composed, all sleek and manicured. Their artificiality is fitting, as they recall advertisements, which proclaim truth through undemanding imagery yet invite a dose of our skepticism. Locher's careful construction of each picture also gives these allegedly law-breaking acts an air of surreality, highlighting the sheer absurdity of these regulations. Here, they exist in another world entirely.

Still, if these ridiculous laws are real, what consequences can come of breaking them? The poet Kenneth Goldsmith touches on this question in his forward for the book, in which he notes how America's history is infamously rife with police prosecuting people, citing reasons they claim are legal that others might easily deem absurd. In Texas, the lack of hallways with certain widths has shut down abortion clinics. In Minnesota, Philando Castile's cracked tail light set in motion the traffic stop where he was shot to death.

"All these little laws added up to big expenses," he writes. "Absurd laws became a very effective tool of political agendas." Those that Locher explores might be more comical — or mere myth — but taken together, they allude to the slipperiness of the legal system, which sometimes does warrant fighting.