

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



How Taryn Simon Created a Global Language of Grief

Visitors attending Taryn Simon's monumental installation piece, 'An Occupation of Loss,' which explores grieving rituals from around the world, will leave shaken and stirred.

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A loud bang reverberated throughout the hall of New York's Park Avenue Armory, like a gunshot, then the sound of mourning began: a dissonant chorus of sorrowful chants, cymbals and drums, humming, and caterwauling.

It was just after sundown, and a friend and I were experiencing Taryn Simon's monumental, visually and emotionally stunning performance piece titled *An Occupation of Loss*.

During the piece, more than thirty professional mourners hired by Simon from around the world enter 11 monolithic concrete cylinders—arranged in a glowing semicircle inside the Armory's vast, dark Drill Hall—and pray, sing, cry, chant, and play instruments for 30 minutes.

Throughout history, professional mourners have been hired by families of the deceased to bless their bodies and prepare their souls for transition to afterlife (in Christianity, that ritual would be performed by a priest).

They've also been called on to guide and support people in their communities through other losses—displaced people, for instance, or the loss of innocence in marriage.

Simon—who secured special visas to bring mourners to America for her show from countries like Cambodia, Venezuela, Tibet, Greece, Bhutan, and Burkina Faso—has made a name for herself as a conceptual artist whose work frequently examines objects divorced from narrative context.

Last year, for a project titled *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, Simon recreated and photographed 36, large-scale floral arrangements based on those visible in documented agreements between nations and governments throughout history, many of which ultimately fell apart.

The original bouquets were meant to be decorative and symbolic, but they lose some of that original meaning when reproduced in a more abstract context. Now, Simon is examining both the loss of meaning and the meaning of loss in *An Occupation of Loss*.

Originally, I had purchased tickets to see the show with a friend at noon, unaware that the mourners only perform at night.

The entrance is on 67th Street—the north side of the Armory—where a woman instructed us to read an information sheet before letting us inside. We climbed a narrow staircase and stepped out onto a balcony overlooking the 48-foot-tall, silo-like towers, each with long ramps that lead up to their small doorways.

Simon collaborated with architect Shohei Shigematsu of the firm OMA on the beautifully stylized installation, which—particularly from the balcony—looks like some sort of paranormal or post-apocalyptic kingdom.

We descended another long, narrow staircase and stood at the center of the installation, dwarfed by the brutalist concrete towers that now looked like giant organ pipes.

Behind us, two strips of LED lights facing the installation evoked the memorial Tribute in Light beams, an annual remembrance of the Twin Towers that were destroyed in the 9/11 attacks.

The setting is so overwhelming and quiet that one feels compelled to whisper, but daytime visitors are encouraged to sit inside the silos and fill them with their own sounds—a relief when my friend's hungry five-month-old son began to wail.

We ducked inside one of the towers, which were softly illuminated inside by a single strip of light stretching their length, and reclined on a semicircular concrete slab that took up half the space.

It was like being inside a bunker or a small holding cell, though plenty big enough for the two of us to recline comfortably while my friend fed her baby. We saw only two or three other visitors roaming around the space outside.

Returning later for an 8:50 PM performance with 50 other visitors was a decidedly different experience.

We watched from the balcony as some 30 performers walked into the Drill Hall and entered the silo alone or in pairs and trios. A knocking sound—slow at first, then increasing in tempo like a drumbeat, cued the beginning of a 30-minute performance and our march down the stairs.

All was eerily silent as we peered inside the towers and looked at each other for more cues. Then the bang, and that caterwauling.

Inside one tower were two women, one sitting on a chair with her back to the small entrance and the other rocking back and forth on the concrete slab, singing into a piece of cloth that she held over her face as if weeping into a handkerchief.

Elsewhere, several of us gazed up at a man in sunglasses and a black suit, trilling on an accordion and singing about “*la muerte*.”

Men weren’t allowed inside one of the cylinders, where two Azerbaijani women in long black robes howled and clapped their knees, one of them pausing every now and then to cover her heart and make discomfiting eye contact with visitors.

I struggled to keep track of time and had to tear myself away from these powerful mourners, remembering the performance lasted only 30 minutes.

Moving along, I found another woman in black, pacing back and forth and wringing her hands as she sang, her eyes cast downward. Behind her on the slab were two wooden mallets, a loaf of bread, and a small black water bottle.

The cacophony began to quiet down just as I stepped into another tower, alone, where a Ghanaian woman with a small, red blue and silver soccer ball dangling from her neck looked at me with intense, pleading eyes. I noticed dried tears on her cheeks.

Suddenly, all was silent again. She shifted in her seat, still holding my gaze, which I finally broke when I heard others shuffling toward the exit. We were directed towards the rear door of the Armory, where staffers handed us leaflets with copies of each performer’s visa application and short texts from various experts explaining the mourning rituals we’d just observed.

Time had passed so quickly that I only managed to go inside five of the 11 towers before being spit out on the street, shaken by the rawness and forced intimacy of my encounters with the mourners.

Thumbing through the leaflet on the subway home, I wondered where each mourner went to sleep that night, and how exhausting it would be to manifest grief on cue—six times a night and six nights a week, no less.

It was easy to forget during each encounter with the mourners that these were professionals—that grieving was indeed their occupation (hence the show’s title).

This didn't detract from what felt like expressions of very genuine, profound grief. Indeed, Simon designed the show with this tension in mind.

"Everything exists on this line between performance and authenticity," she said. "You can feel something quite extreme and also be conscious of the fact that it's a performance, and of the contradiction in our minds between those two states."

When conceiving the project, she thought of the "broadcasting of tragedy" over the last four years—the way that nations grieve together, the ceremonies that surround global tragedies, and the "abstraction when there's no body at the center, no identifiable or visible loss" in organized performances of grief.

Simon wanted to look outside conventional ceremonies in which the practice of grieving loss is often organized by government and religion. That's why most of the mourning performed in *An Occupation of Loss* is rooted in pre-Islamic, pre-Christian practices—something most observers won't know until they read the pamphlet after the show, or press coverage beforehand.

She was also interested in having the mourners in a space without context or language, where professional mourners could "claim agency and perform and guide and shape that abstract space."

We don't always think of the tension between spontaneity and script in organized grieving ceremonies, which is part of what Simon hoped to convey in her show.

The mourners are there to "embody loss, to direct grief, and to generate emotion," she said. It's a lot, but it's not that different from what we expect our nation's leaders to do when mourning national tragedies.

Think, for example, of the powerful response that President Obama elicited when he sang the first few lines of "Amazing Grace" during his eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney, who was shot dead during the massacre at Charleston's Emanuel A.M.E. Church.

The intensity of our response shows how desperately we want our political leaders not just to embody our grief, but to do so in a way that is at once appropriate and authentic.

Simon's show makes us confront that craving—and challenges us to be present enough to appreciate those moments of spontaneity in the performance.