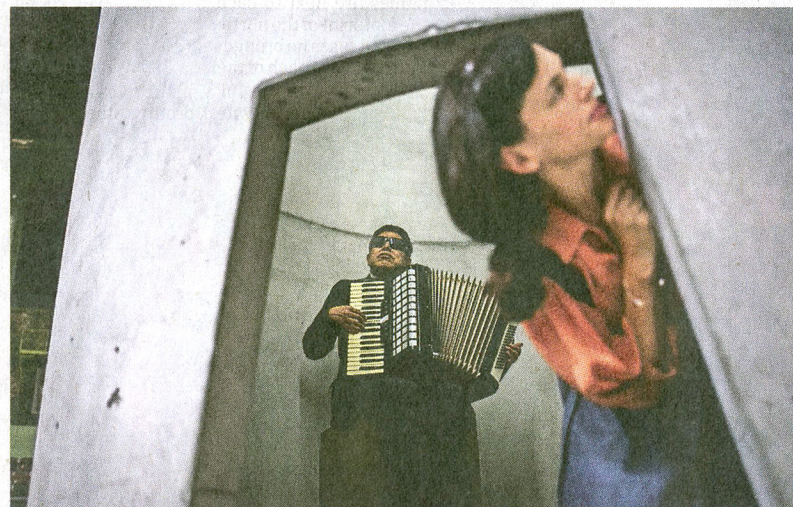


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times



PHOTOGRAPHS BY HILARY SWIFT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Aníbal González, a professional mourner, rehearses in the background while the artist, Taryn Simon, peeks out of her installation at the Park Avenue Armory, where her exhibition, “An Occupation of Loss,” opens on Tuesday.

The Sounds of Grief Circling the World

By WILLIAM L. HAMILTON

It might be easier to get a soul to heaven than to get a professional mourner to New York City.

“There’s a brick of papers this tall,” the artist Taryn Simon said of the immigration applications she’d submitted, making a foot-high gesture above the table where she was sitting. “Two stacks.”

Ms. Simon has brought 30 professional mourners to Manhattan from Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Russia, Venezuela and other parts of the globe as the centerpiece of her multidisciplinary artwork, “An Occupation of Loss,” which opens Tuesday at the Park Avenue Armory and runs through Sept. 25. It explores responses to grief, touching on the empty

spaces, private and public, that loss produces, and the chaos, ritual and ceremony that help people fill the void.

During the last week— with the mourners only just arriving — Ms. Simon’s anxious face suggested another title for the work: “An Impossibility of Knowing What’s Actually Going to Happen.”

Traditionally, professional mourners are hired by families of the deceased to mark the occasion and to guide the dead to the place where they will lead their afterlife. Mourners are called upon to mark larger losses within their communities, like displacement or exile, in a cultural role that is part witness, part historian

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Amplifying the Sounds of Mourning That Encircle the World

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and part poet.

At the Armory, their laments, wails and cries are also testament to their own bereavements. They can be political testimony, too.

Aziz Tamoyan, conducting a sound check with Ms. Simon last Wednesday evening, gave voice for the first time in the 55,000-square-foot Drill Hall.

His “kilame ser,” or “words about,” addressed the Sinjar massacre in 2014, when 50,000 Yazidis, ethnic Kurds, fled to the mountains of Iraq to escape the Islamic State. His strong-throated lament, underscored by an oboe and a small amplifier which produced a droning baseline, rose up into the 80-foot vault of the Armory like fire turning softly to smoke — an incineration of the heart’s earthly bonds. Mr. Tamoyan, from Armenia, is president of the Yazidi National Union, which works to preserve the group’s cultural heritage.

Ms. Simon’s mourners, with 13 companions, arrived, by somber happenstance, on the eve of the 15th anniversary of 9/11. They came from Azerbaijan, which banned mourners when the country was a part of the Soviet Union; Cambodia, where mourners were targeted by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s; and Kyrgyzstan, in Central Asia, where mourners are heard on radio and television announcing tragedies and the deaths of well-known people.

Three out of four applicants from Ghana were refused entry, without explanation, Ms. Simon said; she declined to rock the bureaucratic boat by extending invitations to people she had identified as likely to be refused, like mourners in Syria.

Something of an art-world star, Ms. Simon has had solo shows at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate Modern in London and venues from Berlin to Beijing, primarily as a photographer investigating the stories behind her images. She is represented by a star gallery, Gagosian.

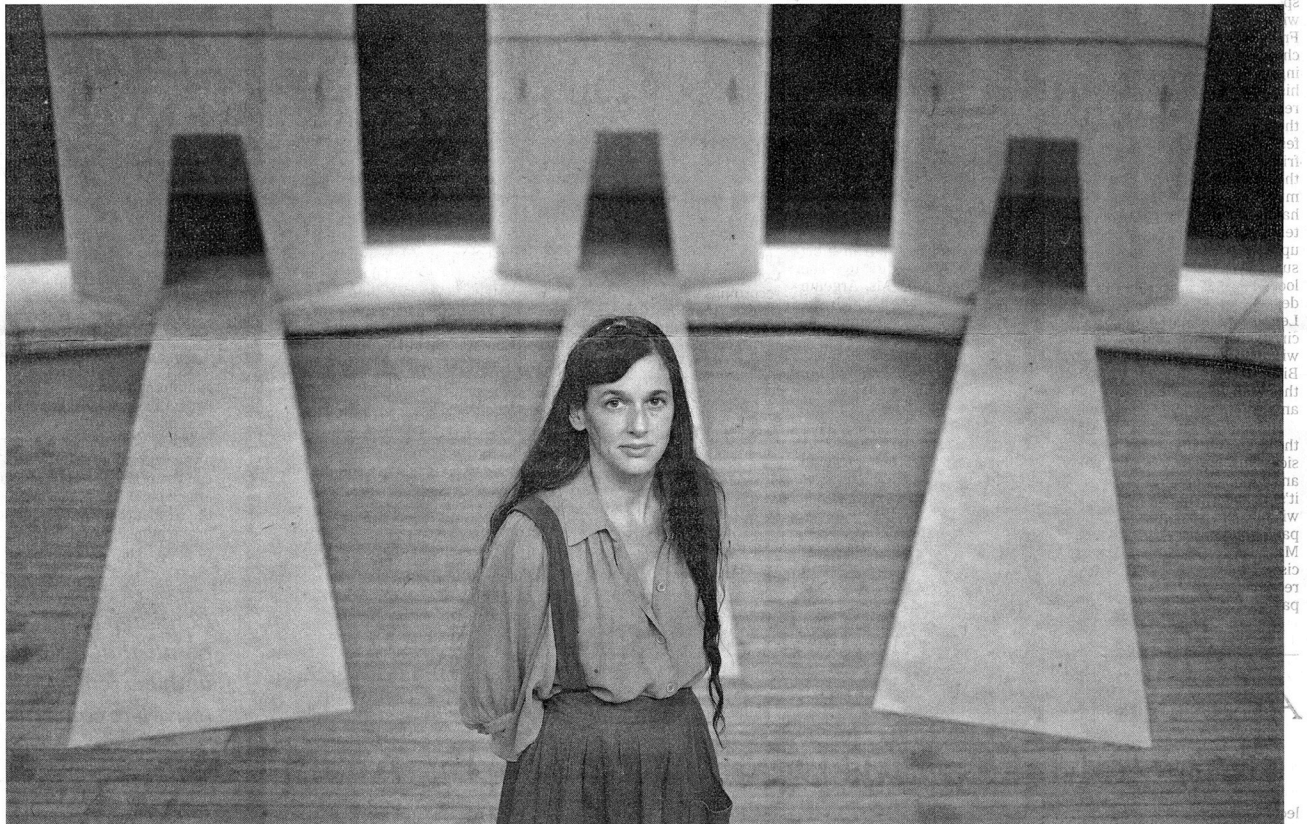
But “An Occupation of Loss,” a co-commission of the Armory and a London organization, Artangel, was an unsettling step out of bounds: performance, with many moving parts, a live audience, and the expectations that come with the Armory’s big-top presentations.

Ms. Simon collaborated with Shohei Shigematsu, director of the New York office of OMA, an architectural firm, on the installation: a cluster of 10 concrete towers, open at the top and 48 feet tall, that houses the mourners by nationality as they perform. It resembles a large pipe organ and operates acoustically as an instrument, giving harmony to the cacophonous language of loss.

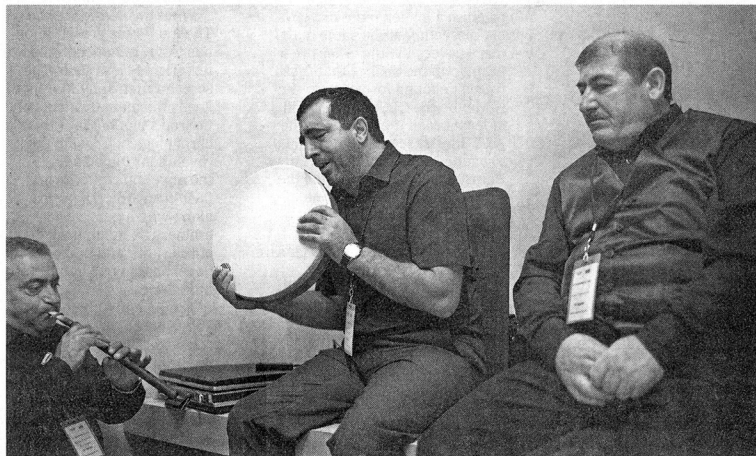
“People don’t understand how to scale or physically manifest the issue of loss,” Mr. Shigematsu said by telephone. “It could vary from a tombstone to the World Trade Center memorial. We were careful to not make it too monumental, or too personal.”

Audiences of 50 will be admitted for each of seven 30-minute sessions. Visitors are free to roam the hall and enter the towers during the unscripted performances. The site will also be open, unoccupied, during the day.

Visas and vetting are not typical



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The artist Taryn Simon at the Park Avenue Armory. Left, Aziz Tamoyan, center, with Yazidi mourners.

art-making tools. Ms. Simon’s team included Ida Nicolaisen, a professor emeritus of cultural sociology at University of Copenhagen, who helped to identify the mourners and their whereabouts through her academic network.

“When you look at how a culture grieves, you are looking at the core of that culture,” Ms. Nicolaisen said at the Armory.

Son Seng, a 74-year-old Cambodian, studied professional mourning with a master teacher as the Khmer Rouge took control, when he kept his instruments buried beneath his teacher’s house. After the Khmer Rouge withdrew and his master died, Mr. Seng, through an interpreter, said that he realized how important he was to the survival of the tradition, and de-

voted himself to reviving it. His two grandsons are performing with him at the Armory.

Can mourners, and their work, be taken out of their own cultural contexts?

“We went to great lengths in explaining this project to them,” Ms. Nicolaisen said. “And they said, ‘Yes, we would like to do this.’ They are very proud of their cultures.”

One night, Ms. Nicolaisen found herself grieving in the tones of the Punan people of central Borneo — subjects of her 40 years of study — while coping with the loss of her husband after a year’s illness. She said that it broke her stubborn widow’s silence and gave her peace.

“This was a very beautiful tone,

like opera,” she said. “Maybe one of the reasons people love opera is because you can sing about the big feelings, let your emotions out, give it a full blast.”

Ms. Simon acknowledged that she also had experienced personal losses during the seven years it took her to realize the project, but she declined to elaborate, saying that she didn’t want the piece to be interpreted as purely personal.

She pointed to the broader, public roles of mourning that elected leaders assume in the wake of tragedy.

“Look at Obama — the civic duty he has of leading mourning rituals for us as a nation when loss occurs,” Ms. Simon said. Referring to the president’s eulogy for the Rev. Clementa Pinckney —

one of the nine people shot dead in June at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston — she recalled, “where he sang ‘Amazing Grace’ — it felt spontaneous and real, yet it was completely performed and premeditated.”

The commemoration ceremony at the World Trade Center and its reading of the victims’ names, is a collective mourning that continues to be necessary.

Given what seems like an escalating history of violence, is it appropriate to make art of loss and grief?

The subject has been raised recently by the imminent opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, which will display the original coffin of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old African-American murdered in Mississippi in 1955.

“I remember struggling with, ‘Should we collect that?’ Lonnie G. Bunch III, the museum’s founding director, told The Washington Post in August. “Was that too ghoul-ish?” The museum will have grief experts on hand to help viewers confronted by pain.

Last week, at the Armory, as Ms. Simon greeted arriving mourners for the first time, questions of appropriateness were lifted away by the force of their performances.

(Rebecca Robertson, president and executive producer of the Armory, said that the mourners were being paid the “going rate” for nonprofit performers, not professional mourners’ fees, which are

likely to be far less.)

In one tower, Haji Rahila Jafarova and Lala Ismayilova, from Azerbaijan, dressed in black, slapped their chests and knees as they cried, an anguished response to the suffering of Shia Muslim heroes and martyrs, which they mix with stories of the deceased. Mourning is a profession for which women in Azerbaijan are particularly respected. Only female audiences will be allowed into their tower.

On a recent visit, the Drill Hall looked like an underworld city of the dead: The women’s disembodied voices echoed in it like something called to mind from deep memory.

Inside another tower, three mourners from Greece, dressed in comfortable travel clothes, sat together on a ledge like old friends wizened by life and sang in a kind of call and response, their voices made piercing by the acoustics in the soaring column.

Then, a carnival music hit the ear, like a distant radio station tuning itself in late at night. Festive, with a choppy, dance-hall sway, it came from Anibal Gonzalez, a mourner from Ecuador, introducing his “yaravi,” a song that speaks of the dead. In a dark suit and necktie, wearing dark glasses — Mr. Gonzalez is blind, as Ecuadorian mourners frequently are — he stood up on his ledge, his short body saddled by a huge accordion, confronting life’s great inevitability with singing.

It was a music you would have followed anywhere.