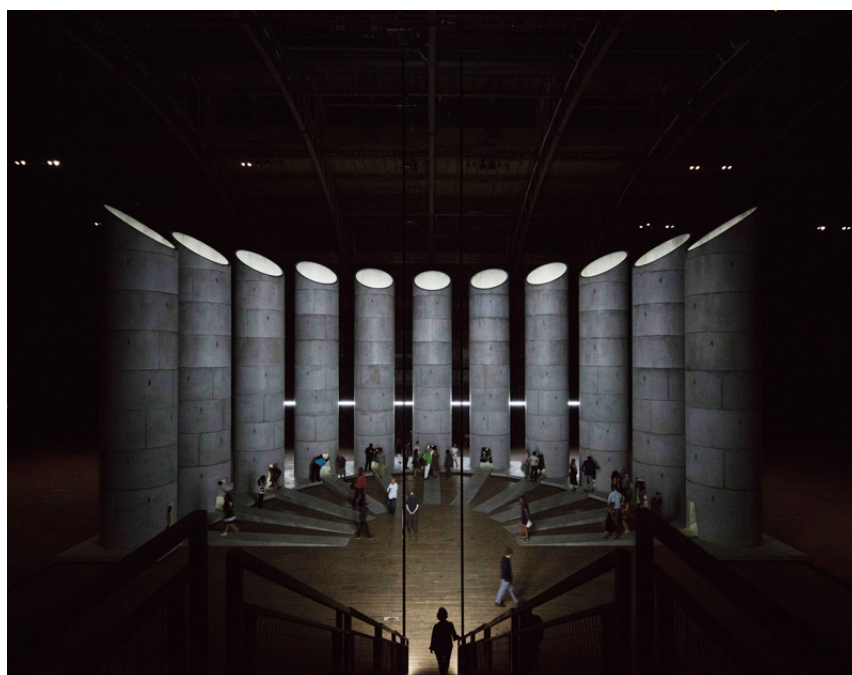


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Wallpaper*

The art of mourning: Taryn Simon explores performance, grief and death in Manhattan

John Martin



Artist Taryn Simon has brought 30 professional mourners to Manhattan for 'An Occupation of Loss', her first-ever directed performance, hosted at New York's Park Avenue Armory. Photography: Naho Kubota

Multidisciplinary artist Taryn Simon's work is known for its many layers of complexity, often requiring years of research and hours of intense organisation to realise. So when Simon describes the process behind her first-ever directed performance, 'An Occupation of Loss', as 'intense', it is not an understatement. The project began with anthropological research on how various cultures cope with grief, but quickly became entangled in bureaucracy.

Simon spent several years gathering and filling out paperwork for approximately 30 international professional mourners to perform their native rites in New York City's Park Avenue Armory Drill Hall. 'Ultimately, the government, unbeknownst to them, curated the exhibition because those that are here were ultimately determined by its decisions,' she says. 'Looking back, it is very interesting, but at the time it was unbelievably anxious.'

Every night for a week, the mourners will perform seven times within an installation of 11 cast concrete pipes created in collaboration with OMA's Shohei Shigematsu. Over 14m high and collectively weighing over 306,174 kg, the structures resemble inverted wells, organ pipes,

tombstones or any of the 'various markers we use to mark what is gone', Simon explains. Visitors are also free to explore the empty installation during the day.

'Taryn had a very strong image of these monolithic structures, each containing different mourners from different cultures,' says Shigematsu. 'The dimensions are intentionally intimate so that [the spectators] have to commit to the tight space to confront them.'

The weighty volumes, trapezoidal entryways, muted grey light and empty void conjure the precarious liminal area in which we, as humans, confront grief and death. 'Conceptually the whole thing exists in this line between distant past and distant future, authenticity and performance, the living and the dead,' Simon explains.

Wallpaper* was present for the first performance. During the piece, viewers are intentionally disoriented; entering through the Drill Hall's outside emergency stairway, they find themselves on a balcony looking down on the installation and the mourners enter below. The visitors are then led down into the void as the performance begins, and have to decide to either enter the concrete structures with the mourners or remain outside to hear the entire cacophony (listen below). Then, almost as abruptly as it began, the performance stops and a garage door swings up to reveal Lexington Avenue, compelling everyone to gather in the centre of the room, and return to reality.