

GAGOSIAN



TARYN SIMON
An Occupation of Loss

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Installation view: Taryn Simon: An Occupation of Loss. Park Avenue Armory, September 13 – 25, 2016. Photo: © Naho Kubota.

PARK AVENUE ARMORY | SEPTEMBER 13 – 25, 2016

Renowned for her conceptually-driven photographic projects, the artist Taryn Simon recently teamed up with the architectural firm OMA for her first foray into the realm of performance and installation art as the creative director behind *An Occupation of Loss*, an event at the Park Avenue Armory in which professional mourners from all over the world were assembled to enact funerary rituals within a bleak, minimalist environment consisting of eleven concrete towers. Comprised of individuals or groups of mourners from eleven locales including Ecuador, Greece, and Cambodia, this heterogeneous ensemble invites us not only to meditate upon our own personal losses, but also upon the collective sorrows of the world at large and our culturally conditioned responses to them.

Starting after nightfall, ticket-holders are admonished to keep silent as they enter the building through a side entrance. Then, perched along the railings of a peripheral balcony, the spectators look down upon a foreboding semicircle of concrete towers as performers emerge from the shadows in their ritual outfits and sequester themselves inside their respective structures. The silence is first broken by the percussive sound of a woodblock, after which all the mourners unleash a cacophony of songs and incantations as the spectators are ushered down a narrow staircase toward the center of the installation.

Only after descending the stairs does one become fully aware of the two tall, thin, unidirectional strip lights (approximate in height to the cement towers they illuminate) mounted at the foot of the staircase. These blindingly bright vertical lines of light evoke the two massive floodlights that pierce the New York skyline every September in commemoration of the Twin Towers, providing us with at least one hint as to who or what is being mourned here—although Simon is never one to provide a didactic explanation for the significance of her work, preferring instead to allow possible meanings to proliferate through calculated ambiguity. The conspicuous absence of a designated loss to be lamented intentionally highlights the performative nature of these mourners' professional occupations, in which they are expected to manifest "real" displays of emotion for people they may not have even known, or in this anomalous case, for no one at all. However, we all have our own losses to contend with, and certainly the performers themselves are no exception.

The entrances to the cylindrical towers (described as "inverted wells" in the official documentation) are low, presumably serving to minimize acoustic overlap, but also causing spectators to duck inside if they wish to see the performers' faces. Once inside, the performers feel uncomfortably close, and can be seen singing, clapping, playing musical instruments, and in the case of one woman, laughing while crying very real tears. And then suddenly it all stops and the spectators are ushered out, receiving a seventy-page pamphlet as they exit the building.

The pamphlet is the crucial element that completes the artwork and keeps it within Simon's research-based oeuvre, which has often centered around the exploration of bureaucratic processes. Only after reading does it become clear that the seemingly Tibetan monks were from Bhutan, or that the weeping woman was from Burkina Faso. Rather than spelling things out in her own words, Simon presents us with a screenshot from each performer's visa confirmation page (with sensitive info redacted), and thus we can see that other mourners were also invited but had their visa applications denied. In the case of certain mourners, almost *all* of their personal information has been redacted, suggesting the sensitive political situation they may face upon returning to their home country.

The screenshots are also accompanied by excerpts from the copious "Affidavits, Testimonials, or Letters from Recognized Experts" submitted to affirm that the performers did indeed deserve a visa. These anthropological excerpts provide context on the traditions practiced by the various mourners, and give further indications as to what is at stake. For instance, we learn that Yazidi mourners perform laments not only for the deaths of individuals but also for events of collective suffering, and that Aziz Tamoyan (the mourner whose visa approval is depicted on the previous page) composed an entire lament commemorating the massacre and rape of the Yazidis at the hands of Daesh following the fall of Sinjar in 2014.

Although it ended too quickly and I didn't have time to poke my head into each and every alcove, I can still see the faces of the mourners before my eyes, and the sounds of their collective dirge are still ringing in my ears. This may be a cathartic or intriguing experience for us, the consumers, but for these cultural workers, the work of grieving is never done.