

GAGOSIAN

The New York Times

A Virtual Tour of a Larger-Than-Life Art Installation

M.H. Miller



Hilary Swift for The New York Times

Taryn Simon’s “An Occupation of Loss” is a somber meditation on grief, exile and recovery. When the piece debuted last year at the Park Avenue Armory, it took the form of a row of 11 concrete towers, each inhabited by professional mourners, each enacting a grieving ritual from a different region of the world. Two Venezuelan women covered their faces as they sang about sending “the soul off to the Milky Way, where it is transformed into water and returned to Earth as rain.” A Yezidi trio featuring a duduk player and vocalist performed a traditional lament. Two women from Azerbaijan wept loudly as they beat their chests. Over the course of two weeks, 50 visitors were allowed into the Armory’s drill hall for 30 minutes at a time — and invited to circulate in and out of the towers while the mourners performed — giving the hulking space an uncharacteristic intimacy.

Simon is currently developing a new version of the project for an installation in London, in collaboration with Artangel, and a book about the work is being published by Hatje Cantz. Since its premiere, “An Occupation of Loss” has taken on an added resonance. As a means of getting the mourners — who hailed from countries like Cambodia, China and Ghana, among other places — into the States for the performance, Simon filed petitions with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services seeking P-3 visas (for people designated “culturally unique”) and

meticulously documented the application process. (Selections of the forms were made available as viewers exited the installation.)

There is still a question as to whether “An Occupation of Loss,” which opened in New York last September, would have even been possible in the same setting just six months later, given the changing state of immigration in this country. “In making ‘An Occupation of Loss,’” Simon wrote in an email, “multiple people worked for over a year to secure entry to the United States for the performers. In addition to a mountain of evidence and paperwork, each artist had a personal recommendation letter from a senator and house representative. Despite all that, we still had a number of groups that were denied entry. In those denials, the U.S. government took on an active role in curating the work. In looking back, I often think it was my last chance to realize this work, in that form, within American borders. Given all that’s transpired since January it’s possible the sculpture would have been empty today.”

More than just a retroactive critique of policy, Simon’s transparency in planning “An Occupation of Loss” grounds its more unknowable precepts. The piece examines how different people cope with the transition from life to death, from having a home to being displaced, but casts these questions in a more everyday understanding by focusing on seemingly insignificant banalities like paperwork and bureaucracy. As states one of the “expert letters” required for a Chinese mourner to obtain a visa to enter America: “The funeral ritual creates a bond between inside and outside, society and nature... Thus, people’s lives cross the boundaries between inside and outside, and life continues an unbroken succession.” The work is chiefly about loss, but its message is that life goes on. In T’s second virtual-reality film, “The Creators: Taryn Simon,” the artist walks the viewer through the New York installation.