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Taryn Simon's spectacle of sadness: An Occupation of Loss, London *A fascinating installation employing professional mourners from across the world — but are we participants or voyeurs?*

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Caption (TNR 9 Italicized)

You can't outsource grief but you can hire others to enact it. Across the world, from Latin America to China by way of Ghana, Cambodia and Azerbaijan, many communities employ professional mourners. These actors of melancholy are now the kernel of "An Occupation of Loss", an installation by US artist Taryn Simon that has been produced in conjunction with Artangel, the London-based no-profit which facilitates art outside conventional spaces, and New York no-profit the Park Avenue Armory.

Unfolding in an underground space in Islington, north London, each performance begins with the audience being ushered into a chamber that suggests Dante's hell as reimagined by a 1970s architect. Three balconied, concrete storeys encircle a central pit empty save for two rectangular portals, bordered by tall, thin silver tubes of light, through which the performers pass. Almost all of them are dressed in dark colours, except for the scarlet throws that brighten the costumes of two Ghanaian women; some carry handbags, others musical instruments. One is blind, his arm linked with a fellow mourner.

Slowly they take up residence in their different positions. Some sit on angular, faux-cement benches that are part plinth, part altar. One circles slowly around a solitary tube of white light.

Two have their heads and faces fully covered. Most sing or chant incantations that range, we are told, from Wayuu laments that safeguard the soul en route to the Milky Way to northern Albanian dirges that excavate “uncried words”.

As the dissonant, hybrid chorus writhes through the shadowy spaces, the strips of white light gleaming like the cosmic energies of an El Lissitzky painting, the experience for the audience is undeniably intense. Yet the power is that of spectacle, not sadness. The event is orchestrated with such rigorous discipline, from the choreography and installation of the performers to the rules for the audience — phones must be turned off, talking is forbidden — that there is no question that we are witnessing theatre rather than genuine misery.

Those familiar with the meticulous stagings demanded by Samuel Beckett will recognise this territory of sensory restraint: a place where intolerable emotion presses at the seams of the work yet is never permitted to seep through.

On one level, this is signature Taryn Simon practice. Best known for her conceptual photography, she has built a glittering career from her cool taxonomies of what is unspoken and unseen yet secretly dangerous or tragic. In her 2015 piece “Paperwork and the Will of Capital” she documented recreations of the official bouquets that accessorised the signatures of international political treaties. In 2002, “The Innocents” comprised photographs of men sentenced for violent crimes they did not commit.

Her work has always drawn its power from its refusal to emote outwardly. Her detached presentations — usually in black and white, often laid out in grids and geometries — force us to navigate without pointers. Refusing to engage with us, she obliges us to engage with her more effectively than if she pursued a strategy of sentimentality.

Given this history, “An Occupation of Loss” is a risky enterprise. On the one hand, its illusory rituals of lament are exercises in dispassion. In their own cultures they are intended to be enacted precisely by those who are not grieving, but now, in London, they are at yet another remove from their original context.

On the other hand, the elegies — so ostensibly heartfelt, so transparently staged — can verge perilously on the melodramatic, conspiring to hustle the viewer towards sensation rather than wait for them to arrive of their own volition.

Perhaps Simon is proffering a universal mourning for the way we live now. Despite the optimism of Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker and his kind, these are for many of us the darkest times we can remember. Should we read “An Occupation of Loss” as an expression of a worldwide, borderless grief? If so, what should we make of the fact that none of the mourners was performing in English?

Undoubtedly, Simon is wise to the dangers of cultural appropriation. She has elegantly woven the difficulty of acquiring visas for the performers into the work. As viewers leave, they are handed a booklet with details, many redacted, of the laborious official documentation required before they were allowed entry into the UK. It’s a remarkable read: not least because here you will find information on different mourning rites. In northern Albania, it transpires, bereaved parents have to show “that death has made no impression on them at all”. In Romania, one of the

worst curses is that “you have no one to lament you”. Such details are fascinating. Nevertheless, I’m not sure whether “An Occupation of Loss” made me participant or voyeur.

If I left the piece with more questions than answers, that is probably what Simon intended. But one thing I know: true grief, for most of us, entails loss of control. Simon’s authority never wavers.