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Back to black: why US artist Taryn Simon is going into mourning
Her latest installation, which brings together professional mourners from 15 different countries, took seven years to create. The artist explains why the work is as risky as it is moving

Sean O'Hagan



Visions of grief ... Taryn Simon. Photograph: © Photograph by Taryn Simon.

In September 2016, as final preparations were being made for a carefully choreographed ceremony of remembrance at the 9/11 memorial site in downtown Manhattan, another kind of mourning ritual was being orchestrated at the Armory arts centre by artist Taryn Simon. The vast venue occupies an entire block of the island's Upper East Side, and entering it via a fire escape, visitors found themselves on a balcony overlooking a cavernous space in which 11 tall concrete towers stood in a semicircle. Far below, figures emerged from the semi-darkness and went into the towers, one by one. As the audience proceeded downstairs, the first of several shrill, guttural voices broke the silence in wild-sounding lamentation. Over the next 15 minutes, the space filled with a cacophony of loss: wailing, singing, chanting and keening. The combined force of the outpourings reached a sustained climax then fell away again to a single voice and, eventually, a deep silence worthy of Samuel Beckett.

For *An Occupation of Loss*, Simon gathered professional mourners from 15 different countries, including Ghana, Greece, Azerbaijan, Cambodia and Burkina Faso. Many came from families in which the art of mourning has been passed through generations. The Greek lamentations have been traced back to ancient times, to the formation of democracy and the state. Yazidi laments are expressions of collective exile, displacement and homesickness. In Borneo, female mourners are said to undertake a perilous journey to the other side and back alongside the soul of the deceased.



'It can sound like music, but it is not music' ...professional mourner Hugo Aníbal González Jiménez. Photograph: ©Taryn Simon.

“I have heard this kind of mourning referred to as melodicised speech and also as tuneful weeping,” Simon said after the performance. “It can sound like music, but it is not music. It is a heightened expression of loss that comes from a place beyond words, beyond language, a purely sonic experience.”

The installation was scheduled to come to the UK the following year in collaboration with commissioning body ArtAngel, whose previous projects have included Rachel Whiteread’s inside-out house (1993) and Ryoji Ikeda’s light sculpture *Spectra* (2014). But that plan fell through due to the difficulty of finding a suitable site and the complexity and cost of transporting the towers. (Their combined weight was 675,000lb.) Instead, Simon and ArtAngel will stage a radically altered version of *An Occupation of Loss* next month at a secret underground location in London. “The act of walking is now a bigger part of the experience,” Simon says, “as there is quite a long journey to reach the space, a passageway to remove you from the world of life and light above ground.”

In New York, audience members were free to engage with the mourners up close, by entering the towers, or sitting on the floor listening to the mounting wall of sound. Most people did both, but only after a long, slightly awkward interlude when no one knew quite how to react to the overwhelming, slightly threatening noise. There was reticence, even embarrassment, at engaging with something so visceral, and the sense that what we were witnessing was a performance: a mourning without a corpse.



Professional mourner Haji Rahila Jafarova. Photograph: courtesy Taryn Simon Projects

A Ghanaian woman wept profusely as she sang, but stopped abruptly, looking suddenly composed. In another tower, a blind Ecuadorian mourner played the accordion and sang with disturbing intensity. Simon tells me later that he performs at four to five funerals a day, and has done so for the last 40 years.

There is a tension, she agrees, between the potency of the experience and the fact that at a funeral the mourners are paid to articulate the grief of those present. “For the audience to think about how something that seems so pure and private is being shaped and performed scrambles everything.”

But even as an art installation, she argues, their work retains its participatory nature. “Their performance activates tears in the mourners – and sometimes in those who enter the heightened atmosphere of the towers.”

Simon, who is nothing if not obsessive, was present at every performance in New York. “It’s been painful for me to watch, because some performances feel so right and others just don’t,” she told me in the Armory, as the mourners took a break, gathering with their translators for a meal of rice and chicken. “Things have happened that are essentially uncontrollable. A security guard just walked into the middle of one performance with his keys jangling.”

The work casts light on the ways in which western rituals of collective mourning have increasingly been stage-managed by governments and organised religion to exclude any visceral or disruptive expressions of grief. Following the recent Parkland school shooting in Florida, says Simon, “there was not a unified voice of loss so the children had to step into that space”.

Even by Simon’s standards, *An Occupation of Loss* is a vaultingly ambitious project, and one that marks a departure from the photographic work for which she is best known. In 2007, she published *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, a book that defined her distinctive conceptual terrain. Combining deep research and a detached documentary approach, it comprised photographs of the interiors of organisations known for their secrecy, including the Church of Scientology, the Prisoner of War Interrogation Resistance Program operated by Team Delta – a private body run by former US military personnel – as well as a cryopreservation unit where bodies are frozen after death.



White Tiger ... *Simon's photography combines deep research and a detached documentary approach. Photograph: courtesy of the artist © 2014 Taryn Simon*

In 2011, she showed *A Living Man Declared Dead* at Tate Modern, in which she traced the bloodlines of 18 families across the globe. It took her four years to complete with only two months given over to the actual photographing of the subjects.

An Occupation of Loss has been seven years in the making, four of which were spent on gathering affidavits and references from anthropologists and academics to support her repeated applications for visas for each of the performers. By the time the installation opened, she had amassed a stack of official papers a foot high. "So many of the visas came through at the last moment," she says, "and there was this almost overwhelming sense that anything could have gone badly wrong. It was so fraught. At every point, I felt there was a possibility it might not happen. It is not," she says quietly, "a good way to make art."