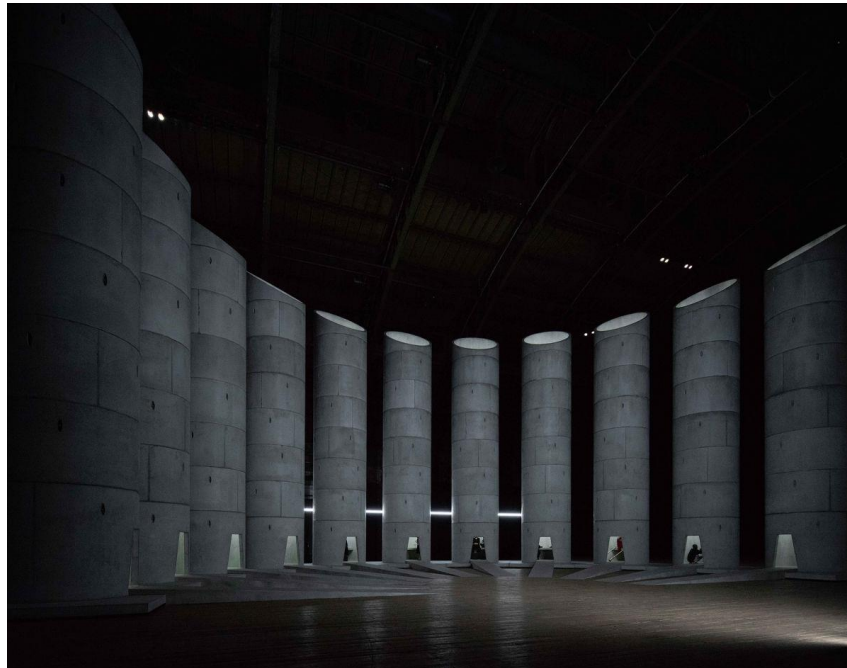


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Taryn Simon's Varieties of Mourning

Emily Witt



“An Occupation of Loss,” Taryn Simon’s performance piece at the Park Avenue Armory, draws on themes of government bureaucracy and social realism. Photography by Naho Kubota

“An Occupation of Loss” is the first performance piece by the artist Taryn Simon, who usually works with photography and text. In the installation, which Simon designed in collaboration with the architect Shohei Shigematsu at the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (oma), professional mourners from fifteen countries sit in a half circle of eleven concrete towers at the Park Avenue Armory. The towers recall the pipes of an organ, Zoroastrian exarnation structures, and the architecture of surveillance. During half-hour performances, visitors enter the towers, activating the dirges, songs, and weeping of the professionals within.

On a Friday night in September, a few days before the performance opened to the public, a somewhat exhausted Simon met with me for an interview in a windowless room in the Armory. Since 2007, she had collaborated with linguists, musicologists, anthropologists, and field workers, hiring the mourners and arranging their travel over Skype with the assistance of translators and fixers. The “occupation” of the show’s title evokes invasion and displacement and also the idea of mourning as a job. What drew Simon to the hired mourners, she said, “was this idea of mourning in an everlasting form and then the professionalization of it, and then thinking about the links between commerce and that sacred space of loss.”

Like nearly all of Simon's body of work, the performance is an artistic consideration of state power. In "Contraband" (2010), she photographed a week's worth of prohibited items seized from passengers and the mail in customs at John F. Kennedy International Airport. In "Paperwork and the Will of Capital" (2015), she re-created the floral centerpieces from the signing ceremonies of thirty-six global treaties of the post-Bretton Woods era.

"An Occupation of Loss" similarly draws on themes of government bureaucracy and social realism. Bringing thirty people from fifteen different countries to New York City demanded an engagement with paperwork daunting even to Simon. Each mourner who performs in "An Occupation of Loss" was granted a P-3 visa, a category for "an artist or entertainer coming to be a part of a culturally unique program." The establishment of "cultural uniqueness" depends on "affidavits, testimonials, or letters from recognized experts"—mostly descriptions by anthropologists of the different traditions of mourning. The resulting stack of paper, Simon told me, was more than a foot high. The documentation of the visa process serves as a shadow accompaniment to the show, both a reminder of the administration that often accompanies death and, Simon said, of "authority and how it's established and the systems that we create and also adhere to, to organize ourselves."

"The installation is in many ways curated by the U.S. government, because the determinations of who is and isn't here were subject to U.S. Customs and Immigration granting a visa," she explained.

The absurdity of translating otherworldly cosmologies to a bureaucratic end is apparent on the pages of the visa applications, excerpts of which are handed to audience members as they exit the performance: "The spirit of the deceased person is believed to see many visions, hear sounds, and experience other sensations based on their karmic propensities," reads the affidavits corresponding to the applications of three Buddhist monks from Bhutan, one of whom was denied a visa. The mourners from Venezuela "send the soul off to the Milky Way, where it is transformed into water and returned to Earth as rain."

The mourners had begun arriving earlier that week. Simon met many of them at J.F.K., and had since coordinated the management of dietary restrictions, prayer rooms, and "outrageous jet lag." The following Sunday, the mourners gathered for a rehearsal dinner on the second-floor hall of the Park Avenue Armory. Each mourner was accompanied by a companion who serves as his or her translator; as a consequence, dress rehearsals resembled United Nations conventions, with slowly issued directives followed by a pause for a cacophony of interpretation. Beneath staid portraits of cavalymen, the mourners ate from a buffet of chicken, rice, beans, and salad, then descended to the main hall for a group photo.

"We're going to do a photograph so we can all remember being here," Simon, whose words were then translated to the mourners in several languages, said. As the photographs proceeded, Aziz Tamoyan, a Yazidi mourner from Armenia, began a traditional melodized speech known as a *kilamê ser*—half song, half narrative story. The mourning tradition can apply both to deceased individuals and to larger cultural-historical events—one of Tamoyan's laments describes the massacre of the Yazidis in 2014, during the occupation of Sinjar Province, in Iraq, by the Islamic State.

Outside, the light was fading, and the hall grew dark, lit only by two vertical strips of white L.E.D.s. The Sunday of this particular dress rehearsal happened to be the fifteenth anniversary of

the 9/11 attacks. On the streets of New York, acts of mourning were generating nationalist sentiment, fuelling political ambition, and marking absence. The Tribute in Light would soon be turned on for the night, and Governor Andrew Cuomo, of New York, had taken a commemorative bicycle ride. Here in the Armory, these mourners, their uniqueness having allowed them to circumvent post-9/11 strictures, prepared for a dirge with no object. More than one mourner napped on a cot provided by the Armory.

When I asked Simon if she was mourning something particular herself, she laughed. “Aren’t we all?” she said. “There’s an unbelievable broadcasting of tragedy at the moment, and a broadcasting of it where there’s sort of not often a discernible center to it. So in this there’s no body in the center. The object of mourning is abstracted, and that was purposeful.”

After the photo shoot, the mourners moved to dressing rooms adjacent to the Armory’s main hall to prepare for that day’s rehearsal. Their respective rest areas were organized by nationality, their names below designations of their respective countries on world maps. Some mourners had decorated their areas—the Cambodians, for example, had set up an altar with bowls of rice and incense. A half-empty bottle of Russian vodka stood on the table of the area with lint rollers and safety pins and a sign for “Wardrobe.”

Simon, wearing a pink peasant blouse and a long ruffled skirt, said hello to Tamoyan, the Yazidi mourner, who was recovering from an ear infection. Hugo Anibal Gonzalez, an Ecuadorian mourner who sings accordion-accompanied laments known as *yaravies*, and who is blind, had caused some alarm earlier in the week by going out by himself to buy a phone card. Simon introduced Son Seng, who had travelled from Cambodia with two grandsons, and was one of the few practitioners of the ceremonial music genre known as *kantomming* to escape the Khmer Rouge. The companion to a group of mourners from northern Greece, a man named Kostas, explained that their tradition of pentatonic singing (in which, a visa testimonial stated, “they collectively ‘tear up’ their voices, expressing a common pathos”) dates to the second century B.C.

Many of the mourning traditions predated the standardized funerary practices of the world’s major organized religions, let alone the current system of nation-states. In the dress rehearsal I attended, audience members gathered outside the Armory and then were led upstairs to a balcony overlooking the hall. The towers stood empty beneath us until, one by one, the mourners emerged into the hall and took their places. Once inside their towers, a Romanian performer initiated the performance by beating on a wooden board. Then we were permitted to descend from the balcony and explore.

The mood was sombre, even frightening, and I worried about the children who accompanied their parents into the darkened space. I entered a tower in which Hanna Kadouah, of Ghana, sat on a bench. She wore a red sash over a winter coat and held an American-flag bandanna in one hand. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she murmured an unceasing stream of words in Asante Twi. In the tower next to her, the three Cambodian mourners were dressed all in white. They sat with their backs to each other, Son Seng hitting a large gong and his grandsons playing a reed instrument called a *sralai* and a xylophone-like set of gongs known as a *kong peat*. It seemed that mourning, in many cultures, was delegated to women: the sobbing and arm-clutching of two mourners from Venezuela, whose faces were shrouded in black-and-white hoods; the slow singing and clapping of two elegantly attired women from Azerbaijan, their black leather handbags sitting between them, jet rhinestones on their shoes and headscarves. The Bhutanese

monks recited sutras and blew low tones on horns. A mourner from Burkina Faso, his human form hidden under a bird mask and a thick, fibrous costume, sat motionless except for the slightest shuffling of his invisible ankles, to which bells had been attached. It was discomfiting to be in such close proximity with strangers, and knowing that their lamentations were a performance did not decrease the anxiety provoked by outbursts of raw emotion.

As fifteen minutes passed, the mourners ceased their lamentations one by one, until only the Greek singers could be heard. Their eerie pentatonic lament subsided, and in the vacancy of its vibratory aftermath my stomach dropped. Mourning, I understood then, is a distraction from loss; after bodies are buried and ceremonies end there remains only an empty and relentless silence.