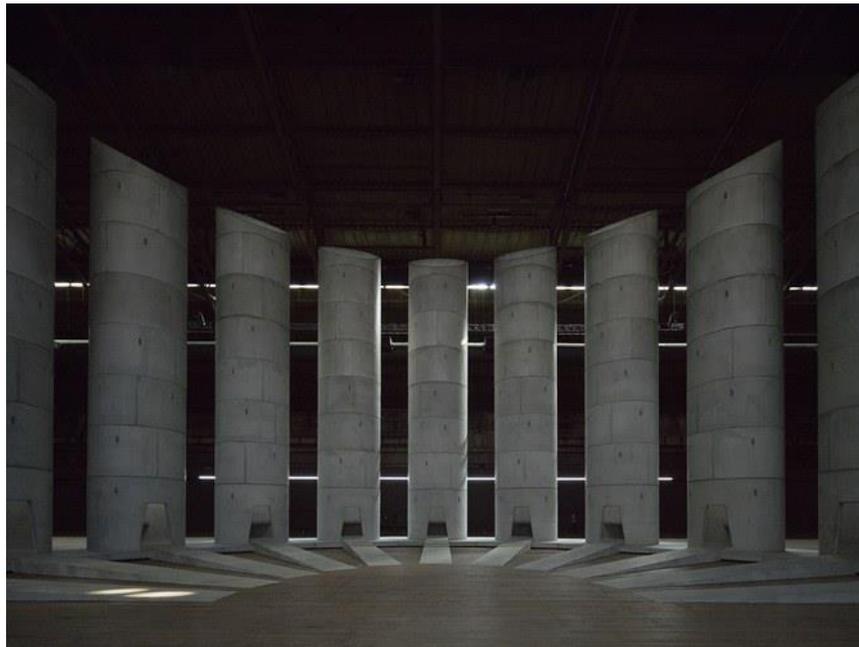


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

VOGUE

Artist Taryn Simon on Filling the Park Avenue Armory With Professional Mourners

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*The installation from Taryn Simon: An Occupation of Loss.*

The artist Taryn Simon has long been interested in the notion of abstraction: how a fact, a story, a symbol can be so divorced from its original meaning that it comes to represent something else entirely.

Her 2002 project, *The Innocents*, examined the way photography can indelibly alter eyewitness memory, change official accounts, and lead to wrongful convictions. And in last year's *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, Simon re-created and photographed the floral arrangements visible in photos of the signings of dozens of historical treaties and accords. What, she asked, did those bouquets represent out of context? And how does the ephemerality of flowers force us to consider the ever-shifting nature of political theater?

(For a lighter example, see *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, for which Simon inventoried odd, obscure artifacts, like a Library of Congress–produced Braille edition of *Playboy* magazine. “They don’t do the photographs,” she joked in a TED talk. “It’s just the text.”)

With abstraction comes loss, a missing center. That absence is what Simon interrogates in her latest project, the aptly titled performance piece *An Occupation of Loss*. It's a play on words: The occupiers of that loss are those who make it their occupation to grieve our losses. The artist identified professional mourners in cultures around the world—many working within pre-Christian, pre-Islamic traditions—and wrangled visas to bring dozens of them to New York City, so that they could perform in a series of happenings at the Park Avenue Armory.

The absence, in this case, is quite literal. Simon has organized a sort of vast, multicultural, United Nations-style funeral for no one. "There's no *body*," she clarified when we spoke about *Occupation*. "They're mourning that abstraction."

It's an eerie and emotionally dissonant idea: The project forces us into an uncomfortable confrontation with the reality that grief can be as public as it is personal, as performative as it is deeply felt. "The professional mourners are often paid to guide, shape, and even inhabit another's grief," Simon explained. "There's this endless duality to it; they're both audience and subject. Their role is so ambiguous."

Their existence may seem foreign to us, but it shouldn't. Consider the joy the Internet expressed when President Obama tentatively offered the first lines of "Amazing Grace" at the funeral for the slain Reverend Clementa Pinckney. Think about the angst the Internet expressed when George W. Bush bopped and grinned while singing a hymn at a memorial for the slain Dallas police officers this summer. The intensity of both responses illustrates a deep craving: for our political leaders to govern tragedy, to embody our emotional response, and to do it in a way that seems not only appropriate, but also spontaneous and authentic.

I had a chance to see the mourners in action earlier this week at one of their opening performances. A group of 30 or so ticketholders waited on a balcony overlooking the Armory's cavernous, dark Drill Hall. Below us stood an array of 11 soaring concrete towers, arranged in a glowing semicircle, like a pipe organ waiting to be played, or an a cappella troop preparing to croon.

Then figures emerged from the shadows: duos, trios, and a few solo practitioners, there to make the towers talk. An insistent drum marked the beginning of the performance, and soon we were invited to descend and drift among the mourners, ensconced in their individual cement fortresses.

The cacophony was spooky and overpowering from the outside, mingling wails and cries, moans and beats, melodies and chants. But once I entered a tower—by ducking down to clear the half-height doorway—it was like tuning the radio dial to a static-free station.

Each lament had its own texture, each set of mourners its own style. In one tower, a trio of Greek polyphonic singers, dressed all in black, sat in a row, one man's loud, clear, tremulous voice rising above the drones of his female and male companions. In another, fragrant with perfume, two Azerbaijani women beat their laps and chanted in unison. One had her eyes screwed shut; the other kept glancing at me and smiling. A third tower, nearly silent, housed a single mourner, completely obscured by his costume: a head-to-toe robe of twisted black fibers—it resembled the dreaded coat of the Hungarian puli dog—topped with a carved wooden bird. He nodded his head, the bird pecking away at air, to the rhythm of tinkling bells.

I made my way around, lamentation by lamentation. In one of my last encounters, a Ghanaian woman with graying short hair, decked out in a winter jacket and running shoes, a miniature soccer ball dangling from her neck, stared me in the eyes, caterwauling and pleading as tears ran down her face. Minutes later, when we were walking out, I saw her heading backstage, her cheeks already dry.

“It’s unbelievable! I don’t know how she does it. It seems impossible that that can be performed, right?” Simon proclaimed when we met up to chat in a small room somewhere in the bowels of the armory. The artist, dark-haired, pretty, and palpably dazed, was dressed like a sleek ’70s schoolteacher on Halloween, in a burnt pumpkin blouse with winged sleeves and a long black skirt held up with suspenders.

Simon readily and repeatedly admitted to being exhausted. She’d watched the performance I saw from the shadows of the balcony, and had been doing the same for days at dress rehearsals. “It just never gets easier,” she admitted, shaking her head, mystified by her decision to dip a toe into the world of performance art (not her standard practice).

“I didn’t really intervene too much,” she said of working with the mourners. “It’s supposed to be this ungoverned, almost anarchic experience where anything can happen.”

Anything, that is, within a hyper-specific, carefully considered, mathematically precise environment. Simon created the concrete towers, which she thinks of as inverted “wells,” negative space turned positive, in collaboration with Shohei Shigematsu and his architecture firm OMA. “I was thinking about scale, and how scale corresponds to grief, and this idea of monument making and marking loss: how we try to make the invisibility of loss visible and permanent.” In Drill Hall, these wells function as national islands: toying with the tension between the isolation of grief and its universality across cultures. Backstage, reported Simon, there’s been plenty of cross-pollination. “We’re constantly inventing new forms of sound,” she said, smiling. “There is a lot of sonic communication going on.”

I asked if any of the practices in particular speak to her, but the artist wouldn’t play favorites. “They all do,” she insisted. “If you just sit with them. Someone said to me yesterday that he came and sat in one well for the entire time. I thought that was so great. If you give it that time, they’re all moving. And at the same time, performed and complicated. My hope is that it does move back and forth between that space of extreme emotion and awareness.”