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Taryn Simon, 'An Occupation of Loss': The art of mourning

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In September 2016, the artist Taryn Simon staged an act of collective mourning in New York City. It was 15 years after the fall of the Twin Towers; three years after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the shooting of Trayvon Martin, and the dawning of #BlackLivesMatter; and some way into an escalating migration crisis that would see thousands die in the waters of the Mediterranean as they made the crossing to Europe.

Titled *An Occupation of Loss*, the subject of the work was not the mourning of any one event or person in particular, but the phenomenon of loss itself, and the structures that surround it. Simon brought together 30 professional mourners from around the world: from Kyrgyzstan, Venezuela, Romania, India, Greece, Ghana, Ecuador, China, Cambodia, Burkina Faso, Bhutan, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Albania. She arranged them in chambers at the base of tall columns resembling organ pipes where each performed according to their own traditions, lamenting something absent and unnamed.

Jerry Saltz, art critic for *New York Magazine*, admitted to feeling “shaken” by the work: “I stood alone with a woman seated on a bench as she cried, tears running down her cheeks, rocking back and forth, thumping her thigh, moaning, singing, and speaking words I couldn’t understand. I knew this was a universal language of loss and inconsolability. I heard these sounds come out of me only once in my life; when I stood on Ninth Street and Fifth Avenue and wailed as I watched the first tower fall on September 11, 2001.”

As it happened, the New York staging of *An Occupation of Loss* took place just a month before another momentous event: the election to the presidency of one Donald J. Trump. Could the performance have taken place in New York today? “I don’t know that it would be possible,” says Simon, pondering the impact of the various travel bans imposed by the 45th president. “It was already fractured, but who knows what would have happened post Trump?” Simon is in London installing a new version of *An Occupation of Loss* with Artangel, the art commissioning body responsible for some of Britain’s most memorable cultural phenomena, from the art and readings commemorating Oscar Wilde at Reading Prison in 2016, to Rachel Whiteread’s *House*, erected in Bow in 1993.

She admits to feeling like she’s spent the day “in a dustbowl” – the work will occupy an unspecified (and unseen) underground location near Islington Green. A new architectural element will take the place of the pipe structures used in New York: “everything is designed for sonic reasons,” she explains. “The cacophony here is in fact going to be quite exaggerated.” While she is often described as a photographer, Simon’s work has always relied on an intense

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The research and bureaucracy behind *An Occupation of Loss* are formidable – there is no database of traditional mourning practices, or indeed of professional mourners. Simon found herself pursuing word of mouth links over years, between anthropologists, historians and musicologists. Once she identified the individuals she hoped to include in the work, she then had to tackle the US Department of State. A substantial volume, published alongside the work, reproduces just some of the paperwork generated by the visa application system: by no means were all successful (applications from Kenya and Colombia seemed to perform particularly ill). She has since described the US government's role as "curating" the work to a degree, in deciding who could and couldn't be included. The artist has had to start the process all over again in Britain. The work has thus been "further curated" by UK Visas and Immigration.

Simon's interest in loss came at first from thinking about the regimentation and social organisation of contemporary life, and what possibility there was for "space that is not programmed. Where is there potentially a space where we are truly ourselves?" she asks. "I thought that the only possibility of that sort of space would be in loss, in grief." It was in exploring how human experience this raw could itself become ordered and governed that she started looking into the professional performance of the act of mourning. The mourners hired for *An Occupation of Loss* "are exhibiting grief, but there's an exchange happening behind that. It's a performance but then also rooted in an authenticity and a history and a lineage," she says. "I guess it's that sort of duality I was interested in." Simon has been interested, too, in rituals of bereavement in the US and the UK: "how we respond privately, nationally, civically to loss," and

the protocols attached to formalised acts of grief and remembrance, such as the two-minute silence for Armistice Day. “You’re also confronting the moment that will be unprecedented, with the ageing of the Queen herself, and the protocols in place for that moment in the media and in operations.”

Despite being aware of the transactional nature of the performances, and in some cases their combination of scripted and improvised material, Simon’s own experience of the mourning rituals in *An Occupation of Loss* has “felt beyond text and beyond language,” she says. “The laments themselves would feel to someone perhaps like music, or language in written form but they’re not – they’re this other form of expression.” As an artist whose work hitherto has been grounded in “the collection of data,” and the attempt to “create a sense of logic and comprehension”, *An Occupation of Loss* is, perhaps ultimately “about the absence of that.” It seems horribly fitting, at a time when logic and comprehension themselves feel under threat, to throw ourselves into a collective act of grief that transcends either.