



FEATURE

Taryn Simon: An Occupation of Loss

24 Apr 2018
by [Sandy Di Yu](#)

I'm not great at dealing with emotions. I've been compared to a robot so many times that I could probably give even Zuckerberg a run for his money.

When I'm confronted with an onslaught of another's emotion, my first reaction is generally to laugh out of sheer awkwardness. But when I faced the professional mourners of [Taryn Simon's](#) *An Occupation of Loss*, in such close proximity, raw emotionality pouring out of each one, the stirring I felt was of a rare occurrence.

Arriving at the corner of Islington Green, I'm ushered into a building by someone wearing a black suit and a solemn expression. Upon entering, I find that this is the required uniform for everyone working there. I'm in an atrium along with other exhibition-seekers. [Another critic](#) called the atrium "horrible". I thought it was quite nice. Maybe it was bad weather with an uglier sky when he was there, but looking up, I see the blue London sky streaked with sun-soaked clouds. It's a dazzling contrast to where the performance itself was taking place, some stories below.



Venue of *An Occupation of Loss* by Taryn Simon, London, 2018. Photograph: Hugo Glendinning/Courtesy Artangel



Stations of An Occupation of Loss by Taryn Simon, London, 2018. Photograph: Hugo Glendinning/Courtesy Artangel

We are led down dark staircases, and I somehow managed to be at the very front. Without looking back at the crowd behind me, it felt like I was being led into my own sarcophagus, if only because it was dark and I knew that the exhibition was about grief and loss.

We emerged into a vast concrete chamber, with three stories and an open centre that showcased a stage-like platform and eerie vertical strip lights that mimicked doorways. The place looked like the type of defunct pre-war bunkers that held Berlin raves. The space was built by developers in the style of Shakespeare's Globe, but remained unused. After searching for four years, Simon chose this location, not for the brutalist, tomb-like characteristics but rather for the echo-y acoustic resonances that it provided. But again, the associations with death could merely be for the fact that I knew the performance related to mourning the dead.

Two mourners from Ghana had fresh tears covering their grief-contorted faces as they sang a wispy song. The lamenters from Azerbaijan individually performed their pre-Islamic chant. A solo performer from Ecuador sang a melodic tune with the help of his accordion. Questions of authenticity arose in conflating emotion and profession. What is the worth of human emotion if one can contrive it as a profession? Does ritualizing our finitude help the living or the dead?

The exhibition is about the abstract space generated by grief, and what can fill that space. But it's also about authority. There is a strange irony in that death is something which all the living has in common, but that the authorities in grief are regarded as starkly other. After we ascended and stepped back into the dying daylight, we were given a booklet of excerpts from the supporting documents that was used for each mourner to acquire the necessary Tier 5 Creative and Sporting visa. That each mourner had to cross a border parallels the borders they guide grievers across, negotiating the boundaries between life and death. But the living is less free. The biometric appointment that each visitor is subjected to exemplifies this. "Bio", the compoundable form that means "life", is still navigated by faceless governing entities, without the emotionality and romance that the dead is given. The living goes on living without ceremony.



Anibal González in *An Occupation of Loss* by Taryn Simon, London, 2018. Photograph: Hugo Glendinning/Courtesy Artangel

The booklet distinctly smells of fresh linens from 4 star hotels, and I breathe it in as I flip through the pages that give insight to the performance I just left. That emotional stirring is still there, empty of real grief but prominent as I recalled one of the mourners. A woman from China in a white robe, kneeling on a red carpet, was wailing into a microphone. Although her hysteria distorted some of her words, the Mandarin she spoke was the first language I learned, and still a language I understood.

“Mother!” her throaty voice was crying, “Why?”

An Occupation of Loss by Taryn Simon

Site-specific performance, commissioned by [Artangel](#)

17 Apr - 28 Apr 201



EXHIBITION

An Occupation of Loss

17 Apr 2018 – 28 Apr 2018

London, United Kingdom

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Marisol Montiel and Ana Luisa Montiel in *An Occupation of Loss* by Taryn Simon, London, 2018. Photograph: Hugo Glendinning/Courtesy Artangel



Aziz Tamoyan and Kalash Tossouni Boudoyan in *An Occupation of Loss* by Taryn Simon, London, 2018. Photograph: Hugo Glendinning/Courtesy Artangel



Zamfira Ludovica Muresan in *An Occupation of Loss* by Taryn Simon, London, 2018. Photograph: Hugo Glendinning/Courtesy Artangel

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