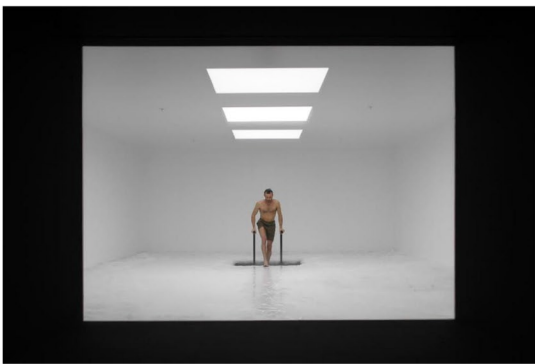


# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WHAT'S NEWS

## Artist Taryn Simon Invites You to Take a Cold Water Plunge Inside a Museum

Two new Simon works, 'A Cold Hole' and 'Assembled Audience,' are on view now at MASS MoCA



TAKE THE PLUNGE Taryn Simon, 'A Cold Hole,' 2018, as installed in Taryn Simon: 'A Cold Hole | Assembled Audience' (MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA) PHOTO: JACK CRIDDLE, COURTESY TARYN SIMON PROJECTS

By Lane Florsheim

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**COLD WATER PLUNGES** send the body into shock. Different participants report psychological and spiritual benefits—a reset of sorts—as well as physical ones, with some chronic pain sufferers crediting the icy waters as a cure. For her latest show at MASS MoCA, multidisciplinary artist Taryn Simon installed a 5'x5' plunge titled *A Cold Hole* in one of the museum's galleries, inviting performers and members of the public to experience a submersion, while museumgoers can observe from a neighboring gallery. Simultaneously, in a separate new work called *Assembled Audience*, thousands of recordings of individuals applauding, gathered over the course of a year by Simon and a local crew in Columbus, Ohio, are played at random to generate a crowd effect (and never the same pattern twice). “The initial lead-in was the conflicting emotions that prompt and are prompted by applause—and its role as a social contagion,” Simon said in an email interview. “Applause often stems as much from participants’ discomfort with non-conformity as it does from the urge to genuinely affirm what they have witnessed.”

Simon, 43, rose to critical acclaim with photographic projects such as 2007’s *An American Index of the Hidden and Familiar*, which documented little-known and sometimes secret sites—including a cryopreservation unit and a U.S. Customs and Border Protection contraband room—and 2011’s *A Living Man Declared Dead*, which traced 18 family lineages, each centered on an unusual individual story. In 2016, her first performance piece, *An Occupation of Loss*, debuted at the Park Avenue Armory, where professional mourners from 15 countries performed their grieving in 11 concrete towers.

Even when it may not appear so, her work often interrogates power structures and the hidden forces that shape our lives—part of *Occupation* involved documenting the visa paperwork required for the mourners, showing how the U.S. government had a role in “curating” the show



Taryn Simon. PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MASS MOCA

—as well as the meaning of truth. “I investigate photography’s ability to blur truth and fiction,” she said in a 2011 TED talk, “...Our eyes are easily deceived.” Her two new works consider our other senses. Here, Simon discusses her show at MASS MoCA, on view until at least March 2019, with *WSJ*.

**How did you develop an interest in cold water plunges? And in applause?**

When a participant is submerged in icy water, his or her physical response makes it impossible to think. The collision of a non-thinking state and a perceived betterment interested me. Cold water immersion has been used to cure illnesses, turn boys into warriors, correct perceived insanity, and provide a “quick-fix.”

The emotional response to roaring applause was the initial lead-in to *Assembled Audience*—but also, the way in which approbation operates in America in particular. Columbus, Ohio, where the applause used in *Assembled Audience* was recorded, is known among product developers as “Test City, U.S.A.” because its demographics—including age, ethnicity, income, and education—mirror those of the United States as a whole. Ideas and products from corporations including Starbucks, McDonald’s and Victoria’s Secret are tested here before being released to a broader American public. Similarly, presidential candidates’ successes are written through public response in this bellwether state.

**How did you form a connection between these two subjects that seem, at a glance, unlike each other?**

They are distinct works, but sonically, there is a strange flip-flop and bleeding that takes place. In *Assembled Audience*, the programmed applause starts to sound like rain and splashes. Likewise, in *A Cold Hole*, the viewers respond with an applause and aggression that mirrors the raw material of *Assembled Audience*.

**Both cold water plunges and applause have been occurring since ancient times. How do you think each has evolved over history?**

Applause has been used as a barometer for public opinion for millennia. It’s also historically been manipulated, generated, and used as a tool to manufacture the illusion of



In ‘Assembled Audience,’ thousands of recordings of individuals applauding are randomly played together to generate a crowd effect. PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MASS MOCA

public adoration. Written accounts as far back as the Old Testament and ancient Roman texts document this. Professional “ringers” or “clagues” have been used to induce crowds to applaud; loudspeakers at Nazi rallies in Nuremberg were used to amplify chants of “Heil Hitler!”; artificial bots leave likes and comments; firms like Crowds on Demand and Easy Work supply enthusiastic audiences for hire. Columbus, Ohio is a critical American gauge—in addition to being in the most accurate bell-weather state, it is seen to mirror the nation’s demographics

and is frequently used as a test site for new commercial products.

Similarly, cold water plunges have a long history of functioning as physical and psychic resets, though the circumstances demanding those resets have changed. In January 2017, Vladimir Putin chose to publicly partake in a cold-water plunge instead of watching Donald Trump's inauguration—a ritual that the Kremlin's press corps has documented and disseminated via the internet.

**Do you see *A Cold Hole* as relating to a photographic practice, or to something else?**

In *A Cold Hole*, the subject gets to pick the “decisive moment.” The viewers, watching through a cinemascopic aperture in an adjacent gallery, perform their lack of control, impatience, want, and irritation as they wait for the subjects to jump.

At the same time, the extreme state the body is pushed to in *A Cold Hole* also binds it to birth and death—the sharply drawn breath that accompanies submersion in icy water reflects the first gasp of life and the last gasp of sudden death.

*—This interview has been edited and condensed.*

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