

## Taryn Simon: An Occupation of Loss review – transfixing cacophony from a secret underworld

**Islington Green, London** A vast underground cavern that could be a Bond-villain lair is filled with the keening of professional mourners in this extraordinary exploration of grief

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**F**rom a corner of London's Islington Green, then under a horrible, canopied atrium overlooked by luxury flats, we are led into the dark, through a space of bare cement and concrete. Down we go, into a cavern sunk beneath the building, where a balustrade circles a deep circular pit. Two more levels of balustrades rim the emptiness below.

Artangel's venue for the American artist Taryn Simon's *An Occupation of Loss* took several years to find and procure. An unfinished performance or theatre space, it has only ever been used twice before (once as a set for John Madden's 1998 movie *Shakespeare in Love*).

The space seems both ancient and modern, a Piranesian vault, a sunken coliseum or even a buried theatre in the round. I thought of Ken Adam, the set designer of *Dr Strangelove*, and of classic James Bond movies. This space has the feel of a sci-fi fantasy set, or some chapel of an unknown faith driven deep into the Earth.



'Do I think about my own losses, the dead I didn't mourn' ... *An Occupation of Loss*. Photograph: Hugo Glendinning/Taryn Simon Projects

Thin columns of light spike the darkness. You can wander a succession of side vaults, with their open, concrete-walled triangular nooks, altar-like rhomboid-shaped platforms and arrangements of bare cubes. Unseen beats of wood against wood announce a slowly rising cacophony of voices and song. The only way to focus is to pass between them. Here, performers – if that's what they are – sit, stand and enact their ritual songs and chants of mourning. All are paid, professional mourners; women in black, handbags beside them; a man with a reed instrument, his companion with a tambourine, a small speaker amplifying the plangent, curling notes, the beat of fingers on the stretched skin, the low song.

A woman sits with a silent accomplice, her voice little more than a whisper, but coming from the gut with an authoritative, restrained force. There is almost too much to see and hear in these intimate, sometimes threatening corners of the underworld. A blind Ecuadorian accordionist plays and sings repeated melodic phrases to no one, or rather to us, the silent bodies that stand and watch and listen, before drifting on.

Alone, in couples and in trios and quartets, these singers and musicians - Armenian Yazidis, Cambodian performers of Kantaomming, Ghanaian women wailing and crying, performers of Greek polyphonic panegyri - are singing for those who are not here. Romanian singers mark the passage from the “white world” of the living to the “black world” of the dead. I was told to hold back from the pair of Azerbaijani lamenters (“They only mourn in the presence of women,” I was told). Women sit crying, their faces hidden under cloth. A woman wails at a wall, seen from above in her cloistered solitude, a loaf of bread sitting beside her. A Han Chinese mourner exhorts the dead, wailing theatrically into a microphone, prostrating himself. Their indifference to us despite our proximity is disturbing, as one is led by sound from one group to another, from culture to culture, language to language, ritual to ritual. Sometimes I feel like I am intruding on a stranger’s grief. At other moments transfixed and bewildered, like a lost anthropologist, a rubber-necker, a ghoul. Do I think about my own losses, the dead I didn’t mourn, my insufficiency of tears, my failed gravitas?



'Each encounter comes anew' ... Vangelis Kotsos, Nota Kaltsouni and Nikos Menoudakis in *An Occupation of Loss*. Photograph: Hugo Glendinning/Taryn Simon Projects

For all the polyphonies and cultural differences, there is an overall measure to the forms and sounds of lamentation, a register of sorrow that appears to cross times and places, religions and beliefs. What they mostly have in common, apart from a display of outward mourning and loss, is a sense of paying witness, and of being alive among the dead.

The small spaces for the performers are beautifully austere. Freestanding walls are positioned in such a way to create different angles of approach and carefully orchestrated degrees of intimacy. Each encounter comes anew. This alone is almost enough. The tumult is a lovely discord. Slowly, the sounds and voices die away. A door slams. Leaving, we are each handed a small book. Its pages show the documents the performers had to fill out to gain entry into the UK. Edited supporting documents, from musicologists, professors of art history and anthropology and other academics, give us some insight into the cultural traditions of the performers. I would like more of this, and find the pages and pages of redacted official forms add little, labouring a point about geographical and political thresholds, where bureaucracy is as much a rite of passage as the journey from the living to the dead; it can also kill you.

Simon spent several years planning *An Occupation of Loss*, first staged at New York’s Park Avenue Armory two years ago. There, the singers performed in a series of towers erected in the vast Drill Hall. Here, they have gone underground. Follow them down.

Taryn Simon: An Occupation of Loss is in Islington, London, until 28 April.

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