

The Londonist: 'What Does It Feel Like To Listen To Others Grieving? Find Out At This Atmospheric Performance', by Tabish Khan, 20 April 2018

What Does It Feel Like To Listen To Others Grieving? Find Out At This Atmospheric Performance

Taryn Simon, *An Occupation of Loss* ★★★★★

BY TABISH KHAN



We descend into a multi-level concrete chamber and watch as performers file into alcoves. Before long, lamentations start to echo around us and we venture further down to come face to face with these grievers.

This haunting and atmospheric performance is the work of artist Taryn Simon, and the latest commission by Artangel — the arts organisation known for putting on remarkably ambitious projects. It's the same organisation that allowed a flat to be [flooded with copper sulphate](#), and more recently built an [interfaith charity shop inside Selfridges](#) and a [giant bird's nest in a south London library](#).

It feels strange to be watching someone else's grief. After all, this is London and the expression of emotions in front of strangers is generally frowned upon. When a person bursts into tears on the bus, we all look around at each other unwilling to engage and wishing they would stop so to ease our discomfort.



What's even stranger is that these performers are all professional, meaning that they grieve for a living. Just the idea of it feels alien to us. How can something so personal be a job — but then again, are actors any different?

The performers are from cultures across the world. Some use instruments, though most just vocalise their grieving rituals. Knowing that these are performers does take something away from the laments, and therefore we just can't believe all of them are truly channelling grief.



There are exceptions though. We can honestly imagine the veiled women have tears streaming down their hidden faces, and an elderly woman rocking back and forth has the far away glance of someone imagining the loss of a loved one.

Standing in the centre of the space, all the sounds merge into one echoing lament. We can move towards each and experience their own personal ritual as the others drown out into the background. The minimalist and fantastic setting really helps us to focus on the sounds and the subtle twin towers of light in the middle add a touch of religious symbolism to the event.



Most are vocalised but some have instruments as well.

The performance is just under an hour long and while it's definitely memorable and at times beautiful, it always feels a little distant. Our own recent experience of grief has been that it sucks the air out of our lungs and we can barely breathe, let alone vocalise anything. It may be a cultural divide too far but we can't identify with any of the performers because these sonorous vocalisations felt so alien.

We came in holding the view that all human grief is the same, but now we're not so sure. This project is challenging, but we were expecting more of an emotional resonance than what we experienced.

Taryn Simon: An Occupation of Loss is at the corner of Islington Green, Essex Road until 28 April. Tickets are £20 and must be booked in advance.

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