

The Spectacle of Loss

Taryn Simon

BY CAROLEE THEA

In the fall of 2016, Taryn Simon presented a unique interactive work, *An Occupation of Loss*, at the Park Avenue Armory in collaboration with Artangel, London. (Loss, in the work's title, represents the fugitive nature of things, a theme that runs through all of Simon's work.) The Armory is a historic red brick structure that fills an entire city block on New York City's Upper East Side. It was originally built for New York State's first volunteer militia, the Seventh Regiment of the National Guard, raised in response to President Lincoln's 1861 call for troops. Designed by regiment veteran and architect Charles W. Clinton, the structure, with its soaring 55,000-square-foot Wade Thompson Drill Hall, is reminiscent of 19th-century European train stations. The drill hall, along with an array of exuberant period rooms, has been offering an alternative platform for creativity across all art forms—music, visual art, and performance—since 2007.

Some of the installations over the years have cohabited with the audacious space of the hall; others have invaded or obliterated it. *An Occupation of Loss*, a performance/installation, offered as complete a gestalt as any I've experienced. Simon's purpose was to engage and reveal little-known global mourning rituals. She spent years working with anthropologists and scholars to explore the nature of death and grief across international borders, and the resulting work challenged visitors to confront preconceived notions about how we process pain and sorrow.

Opposite: 2 views of *An Occupation of Loss*, 2016. Concrete, 11 inverted wells, 45 ft. tall each. This page: *An Occupation of Loss* (detail), 2016.





Above and detail: Installation view of "Paperwork and the Will of Capital: An Account of Flora as Witness," 2016.



Simon's multi-disciplinary practice always involves extensive research, guided by an interest in systems of categorization and classification that hinge on sociology, history, anthropology, endurance, philosophy, politics, and constructed authority. Born in the 1970s, she was influenced by her grandfather and father, who photographed his travels while working for the State Department in countries such as the USSR and Vietnam, a practice that provided his daughter with an interest in first-hand accounts of places and people.

Simon majored in semiotics at Brown University and took photography courses at the Rhode Island School of Design. She

then worked for years as a photojournalist for the *New York Times* and other publications. She photographed Fidel Castro at the Museum of the Revolution in Havana and documented injured Chechen rebels in the Caucasus. In 2001, she received a Guggenheim Fellowship, which encouraged her to expand her career as a photographer. Today, Simon no longer limits her practice to any one medium. Working in sculpture, photography, and installation, she chooses her medium to suit her project.

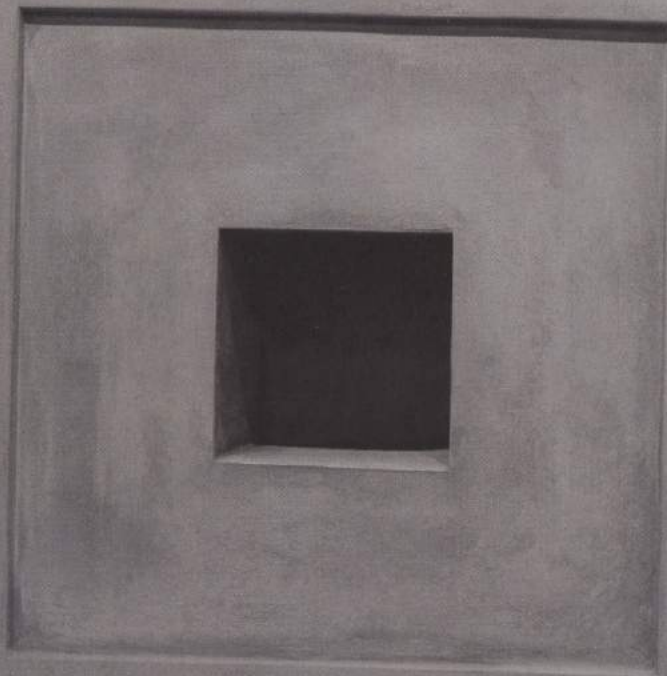
An Occupation of Loss was Simon's first performance/installation. Viewers lucky enough to score a ticket were directed to avoid the Armory's lavish Park Avenue entrance and instead use a door into a waiting area on the far side of the drill hall. Inside, 11 huge columns resembling grain silos or giant organ pipes reached high into the rafters, arranged in hemispheric formation and bathed in dim white light. Simon and the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) collaborated on the design of the 45-foot-tall towers, each one made of 675,000 pounds of cast concrete. From a center point in the space, radiating ramps arrayed like a sunburst led into small openings cut into the column bases.

Without fanfare, some 30 performers proceeded into the drill hall; in duos, trios, or solo, they entered the small caves in the monoliths. Viewers then joined the configuration, moving up and down the ramped paths as the unidentified performers/mourners expressed their laments, each in their own language and rarefied space. As witnesses, we became part of the work,

experiencing the isolation of each mourning group and the amplification of their grief.

The paid, professional mourners were chosen from countries around the world, including Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Russia, and Venezuela, to give a sense of the distinctions that remain between cultures despite all kinds of mobility. The idea may hint at exoticism, but it reflects Simon's method of collating the information and facts that emerge from her research and unique insights. At a specific signal—the opening of a small garage door that emitted light from the street—viewers were encouraged to exit with a "playbill," a pamphlet with the mourners' names, pictures, and visas. The luminosity, towers, quiet chanting, and the role of viewers as co-stars offered an enthralling, if fugitive, experience. The nature of the work as spectacle, however, may have masked its true meaning, which emerges in memory and in relation to the rest of Simon's work.

Simon has photographed everything from a white tiger breeding facility to hymenoplasty to airports. Although she is a successful photographer, this label understates the reach and complexity of her work, which involves writing, graphic design, reportage, scientific inquiry, and much else. Her subjects often make for fascinating images and objects, and her sculptures and installations derive from specific ideas, people, or things that pique her curiosity and imagination. As with her father's photographs from other times and places, her work signals impermanence and memory.



Black Square, 2006–ongoing. Collected objects and documents set within black fields of the same measurements as Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, 1915.

Simon first exhibited sculptures and photographs together in a 2016 show at Gagosian. "Paperwork and the Will of Capital" contained 12 unique sculptures and 36 editioned photographs. Here, Simon took empirical photography into the field of post-conceptual practice. Her inspiration came from official photographs documenting historical accords and treaties drafted to influence systems of governance and economics—from nuclear armament to oil deals and diamond trading. Many of these treaties have been superseded; supposedly permanent, they proved temporary, and the documentation bears witness to other times and ideas. In the original photographs of the signings, powerful men flank tables on which the documents sit together with floral arrangements. In Simon's show, photographs of the re-created floral centerpieces and 12 sculpted concrete flower-presses containing preserved botanical specimens and documentation of the signings laid bare the futile stagecraft of political and corporate symbolism.

Each sculpture forms an "impossible bouquet," a concept that emerged in 17th-century Dutch still-life painting. Then, the

concept represented an artificial fantasy of flowers that could never bloom naturally in the same season and/or geographic location. But now, the impossible is made possible thanks to the global flower market. Simon's photographed still-lives stood in contrast to the sculptural *natures mortes*, which were assembled and sealed in a race against time and decay. Even in their preserved state, the physical artifacts (the flowers pressed into archival paper, the historical photographs, and the printed texts) will transform as time passes, revealing their ultimate mutability while underscoring the instability of executive decisions and questioning the reliability of records. Simon said, "I'm trying to find things that keep twisting and disorienting, as disorientation feels like the closest thing to confronting a possible truth."

Such works reveal Simon as a storyteller who narrates the "instability of fact." The flowers, like the men and the treaties, will decay with time. This truth is echoed in *An Occupation of Loss*, in which Simon insists on impermanence. Her preoccupation with time also characterizes *Black Square XVII* (2015). In this collaboration with nuclear

physicists at Russia's State Atomic Energy Corporation (ROSATOM), Simon cast a black square of nuclear material containing a letter written to the future, which will be stored in a facility outside Moscow until its neutralization is complete. This is scheduled to happen in 3015, at which time *Black Square* will be exhibited at the Garage Museum in Moscow. There is, of course, no guarantee that the museum will still exist or that Simon's instructions will be decipherable when that time comes. If *Black Square XVII* does reach future viewers, they will face a dilemma. As Simon explains, "The nuclear black square may surely vanish underground as it passes through different time periods, political regimes, environmental conditions. And if it ultimately does resurface and the English language survives, one will have to decide to preserve the square itself or smash it to reveal its innards."

Carolee Thea is a writer who specializes in art and the exhibition. She is currently the Gund visiting curator/professor at Hunter College CUNY and has written three books on curating.