

The Object of Applause: Producing a Public

Taryn Simon & Charles Shafaieh

In *A Cold Hole* (2018), artist Taryn Simon creates what at first seems like a private experience at its most elemental. Participants enter a bright white, ice-covered room, alone. Their purpose there is singular: to drop into a five-by-five-foot void filled with frigid water carved out of the gallery floor. In the piece's accompanying text, Simon writes that cold plunges like this, considered healing and restorative across cultures, have been practiced for centuries, from Shinto and Eastern Orthodox purification rituals to Geronimo's training of Apache boys. "The body is thrust into an extreme state," she says. "The shock overrides the body's automatic response. The initial gasp of submersion reflects the sharply drawn breath experienced during sudden death, sleep arrhythmia, and birth. The physical stress disrupts and alters thought processes, inducing a flight response that individuals must meet with vigorous determination in order to endure." In the act, a person can be aware only of themselves. This total and uncontrollable involution perhaps elucidates why Simon has described the work as a "self-portrait."

The plungers are not the work's sole participants, though, and arguably are not even the performers. In an adjacent room, onlookers gather. When large in number, they press close together as they move toward the space's only light source: a window, intentionally designed to appear like a camera's aperture, which looks into the starkly lit chamber where each diver disappears into the hole.

When asked about this group, Simon repeats one adjective: "rabid." "The idea of consumption becomes such a large part of the piece," she explains, speaking from her home in New York City. Echoing her characterization of the cold plunge as a potential "quick fix," she sees these visitors as seeking

their own type of "quick delivery." Atomized and anonymous to each other in the dark, they watch, expectant, as plungers stand poised at the precipice, sometimes silent and still for 15 minutes or longer. The wait makes the crowd impatient. Their intense desire for spectacle can manifest as irritation. But then, Simon says, when the desired action eventually occurs, "there's an ecstatic response, a sound of cheer and elation." At that moment in this barely illuminated room, a public body materializes through a shared vocal response.

Yet this public has a doubly perverse foundation. It is unlike the temporary community created in a theater, for example, which arises through an acknowledgment between audience and actors of a shared space and experience. The status of each plunger as a performer is questionable: In submergence, they lack all public awareness; their experience is totally their own, unknowable and unaffected by the onlookers. Furthermore, the audience comes together at the instant the plunger disappears, coalescing around an absence. Their applause rings out at nothing at all. Simon's sharp delineation of three material spaces (white room, black room, and hole) and the restricted viewpoints therein reveal the ease with which a public can be created and manipulated—one whose members, if asked why they actually cheer, may not be able to explain their actions.

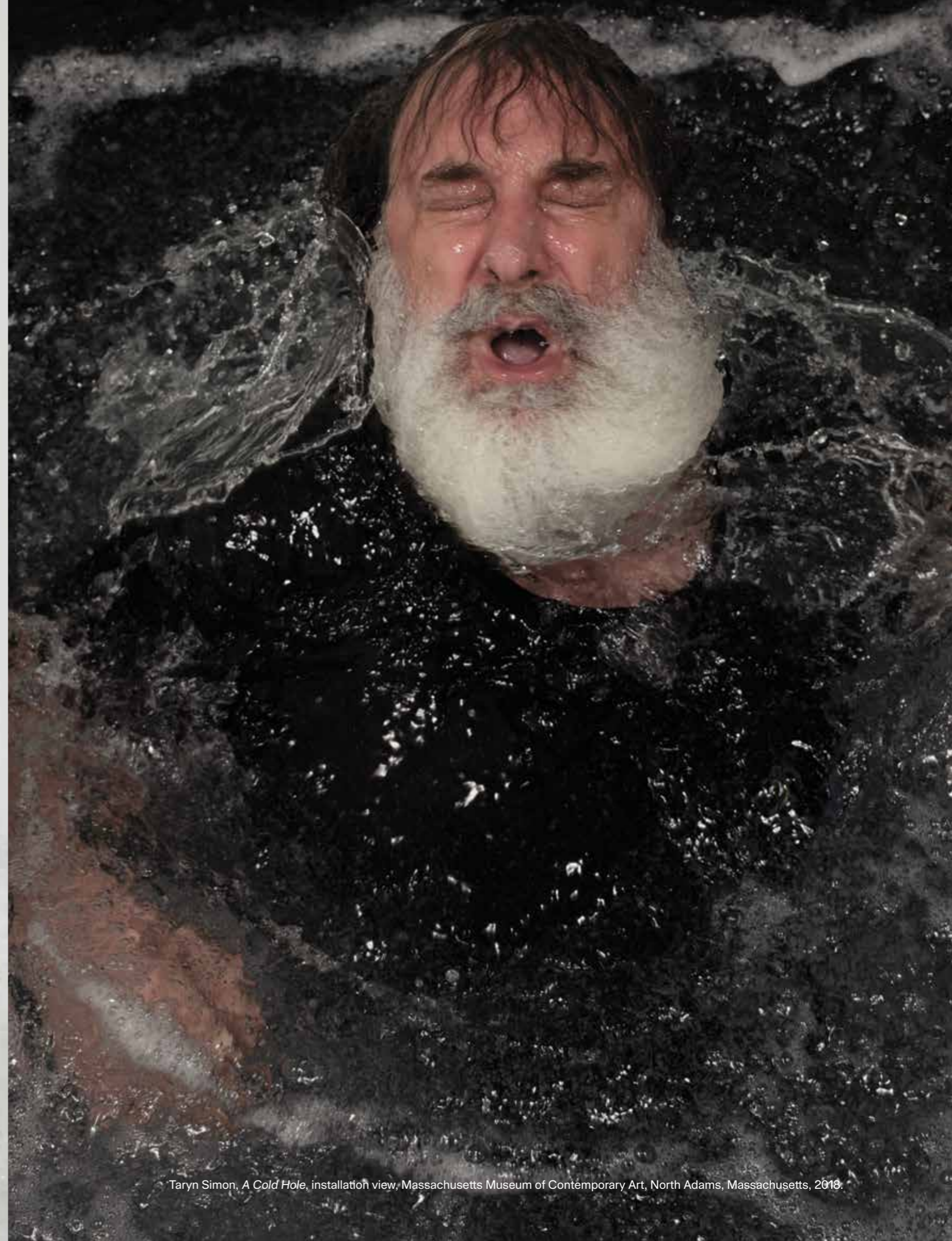
Simon's *Assembled Audience* (2018), which was shown contemporaneously with *A Cold Hole* at MASS MoCA, makes even more explicit the power and strangeness of collective praise. For that work, Simon and her producers recorded individual applause tracks of attendees at events at three major venues in Columbus, Ohio, which was chosen because of the perception of the city as a microcosm of the country.



Taryn Simon, *A Cold Hole*, installation view, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, Massachusetts, 2018.



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The events were myriad in nature and included a rodeo, pop and country music concerts, a religious congregation, and a furniture expo. When *Assembled Audience* is exhibited, a computer program selects a random combination of these tracks and creates fictional crowds whose adulation, played at fluctuating volumes, fills a darkened room.

“As the algorithm rotates through different individuals, you have the melding of different ideologies and intentions,” says Simon. “Scale morphs also. Your surroundings in the darkness start to shrink in response to weak applause, like that at an office presentation, and expand when it gets to a stadium setting. Then, when the applause gets really loud, even beyond that in a stadium, it sounds like rain.”

The visceral effects of mass applause on a group can help create a public, even against its will, as politicians have long understood and which Simon reveals in *A Cold Hole*. The spectator of *Assembled Audience*, however, becomes primed to interrogate rather than to participate in this public praise due to its isolation as pure sound. “You start to consider who is there and who is the object of applause,” says Simon. “All of those celebrated figures we praise and relegate to a higher position are missing and become interchangeable. Sometimes you become the object of applause.”

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The transformation of the spectator from subject into object prompts multiple questions: Would all these people, with their diverse backgrounds and opinions, clap for you? And if they did, would you welcome it? That the algorithm forces the praise of every recorded person for each spectator of the piece is not so far from real-world situations. “The contagion of participation,” as Simon puts it, depersonalizes action. “You can’t even process your own response in a crowd because it’s drowned out,” she says. Conversely, one person’s stillness in a cheering mass stands out to those around them just as a sole clapper does to a silent group. In these situations, personal emotion easily becomes subordinated to public agreement, especially when resistance to the norm risks ostracism or even incrimination.

Praise is not the only presumably private action and emotion which exterior pressures shape. Grief, too, has become increasingly controlled by public influence. “We’re guided in moments of loss,” says Simon. “In America, this guidance is often outsourced to a complete stranger, whether through the media or in religious ceremonies. A generating of emotion is often linked to the success of these figures.”

In the United States, this outsourcing goes unacknowledged, whereas in Yezidi, Wayúu, Darghin, and many other

communities, professional mourners perform rituals, often in the form of song, as a means for the bereaved to externalize grief or to catalyze their emotions. Simon brought 30 of these professionals together for *An Occupation of Loss* (2016), which was staged first in New York City and, two years later, in London. During the piece, the performers were situated in small rooms at the base of eleven 45-foot-tall concrete wells, designed in collaboration with the architecture firm OMA. They issued their lamentations in concert, which were amplified throughout the venue. Immersed in this soundscape, the audience negotiated the counterpoint of the transient aural performance of loss and the monumental pipelike structures, between and into which they could move, that gave this mourning its physical manifestation.

Many of these performers’ practices are prohibited in their countries as part of a long history of governmental restrictions on who, how, and when people mourn. Consider the US military’s de facto prohibition of public mourning when, from 1991 to 2009, photographs of service members’ caskets on airplanes were banned, as well as the American media’s near-total silence regarding the Iraqis, Afghans, and others killed during that same period. More recently, the eagerness of politicians worldwide to declare the end of the COVID-19

pandemic has implicitly prohibited further acts of collective mourning. It has also compounded the perpetual social rejection of groups—like the elderly and people experiencing homelessness—who have been cast aside as unworthy or less deserving of grief since the beginning of the crisis.

These prohibitions acknowledge the metamorphic potentials which grieving facilitates. As Simon writes in the text for *An Occupation of Loss*, “Individuals and communities [who] pass through the unspeakable consequences of loss... can emerge transformed, redefined, reprogrammed. Results are unpredictable; the void opened up by loss can be filled by religion, nihilism, militancy, benevolence—or anything.” In that metaphysical space, new ideas and identities can find their genesis, providing the potential for emancipation from governments and other power structures that seek to maintain a status quo. With this performance, Simon says, “I was really trying to imagine where this space is and a response to it that is outside those influences. Can it even exist?”

Simon, whose optimism is evident when she speaks, needs to believe it does. This philosophical position connects her entire oeuvre, including her image-centered pieces such as *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*,

The Picture Collection, and *The Innocents*. She continually engages in meditations on framing—figuratively or, as in her photography and performance work, literally—and provokes audiences to interrogate how material is presented, the ways in which they are programmed to receive it, and how they navigate the thresholds established by such framing which prohibit or encourage specific thoughts and actions. That process, facilitated by her work, can enable a liberated consciousness, aware of but free from public interference. “No matter how much a piece is bound to a text or an image, these are magical objects that can go off into other spaces,” she says. All art worthy of the name, in other words, has the ability to function like the void in *A Cold Hole* in creating, for the spectator, a private space with anarchic potential beyond state or other public control.

This requires an active audience who is receptive to shock and transformation—spectators who do not view an encounter with art as a passive experience separate from everyday life. Just as Simon expresses belief about the possibility of private experience, she has confidence that her audience will meet her on these terms. “My work has often been up against the assumption that, somehow, I was going to be asking too much. With the use of text, for example,” she says. “But I believe in people’s desire to work in those ways and always have. I see it when the work is on the walls. It’s how I think, it’s how I want to engage, and it’s how I hope others will operate. I can’t imagine doing it any other way. It would feel like a waste.”



Taryn Simon, *An Occupation of Loss*, installation view, Park Avenue Armory, New York, New York, 2016.