



The Hard Pulse of Regularity

NIRA PEREG, winner of the 2010 Gottesdiener Prize for Israeli art, is exhibiting two video installations at the Tel Aviv Museum show featuring the finalists. **BORIS GROYS** sat down with her to talk about repetition, rest and keeping alive

Boris Groys: What is characteristic in both your recent works, *Sabbath 2008* and *Kept Alive* is that you refer to a certain kind of transhistorical repetitive time: Time that is not time of the event, it's not historical time of change, of progress, of revival, it's not lost times past, it's not expectation of the future, it's not experience of the present as being unique and unrepeatable. All these modern ideas, which are prominent from Heidegger to Badiou and contemporary philosophy. This kind of desire to experience a uniqueness of time, uniqueness of the moment, is actually what produced historical consciousness, or produced history as we know it. We need changes, we need progress, we need the event. What was interesting about these works is that you show people who actually defend the space of non-event – Sabbath – space as a time of non-event, time in which God didn't do anything, he rested.

Nira Pereg: You know that this mountain in *Kept Alive* is called Mountain of Rest (Har HaMenuchot).

B.G.: Well, your diggers actually also create

a space for rest. That is why I was fascinated with the idea of *Kept Alive*: It's not something that in itself is an event – as something which happens because one dies and gets this grave. What is interesting is that this void, this emptiness, is signifying your place in the world. Your space of rest is already created during your life. So while you are living, actively creating events, you are involved in history, but whatever you do in this fullness of life is actually regulated and controlled by this void, by this emptiness, by this form that the grave diggers already created for you. But, in a very interesting way, rest here is also labor. It's not something that is simply given, but through your involvement in life, you have to keep this void, you have to keep this emptiness from intervention of history, meaning from the event. In this case the event is your own death. The labor that you are showing here actually produces emptiness, since it keeps this emptiness alive, it keeps this emptiness intact, so that this non-labor, anti-labor, defends this non-historical, transhistorical, asynchronous time of repetition. Time of no time. If you

have a strong repetition then there is no difference between the "moment" and "time"; you can experience eternity and immortality at once. So you can enter or visit. When you visit a grave you are visiting the space of immortality, much like when you visit the Sabbath, you visit immortality, because you are visiting something that is absolutely repetitive and non-unique. So this non-uniqueness has its own promise – and it's, of course, a promise of the immortal.

Now, what's interesting to me is that on a formal level your video actually repeats this gesture of labor defending emptiness. If you make a sculpture, if you make a painting, you produce a material object that has material reality in the world. But if you make a film or a video, what you actually produce is emptiness. You produce a projection, which is fundamentally a light projection. Formally, technically, before every projection begins you have a kind of grave for this artwork: It's usually in the shape of a rectangular form on a wall. This empty space actually keeps alive your artwork. So the visitor of your video



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installation is also practicing this kind of visiting of eternity or visiting of immortality, by visiting a certain pattern of repetitive non-labor or anti-labor that actually keeps certain images alive. But this feeling is very unstable. For example, if you look at films of Andy Warhol like *Sleep* or *Empire* – they show the same image for many hours, so why not just do a painting or a photograph? But if you do the painting or the photograph you lose this “kept alive” feeling. You lose the feeling of that extreme instability of the image. It’s an image that can disappear any moment, and then somehow comes back, maybe as a shadow, but you cannot distinguish the shadow from the original – it is a shadow of the shadow of the shadow. So you have this kind of repetitive pattern that, actually, in the formal structure of the medium itself, repeats the same, repeats the repetition. That is what you actually show in your work. It is, in effect, a repetitive production of this anti-labor.

N.P.: The actual process of making these works is almost the opposite because I am working almost like a documentarist in the sense that I am attached to real events. I am almost like a hunter waiting for something to happen. I sense I am very much into the particularity of the event, almost in psychological terms, looking for the *sujet*: What keeps me filming for so long and again and again is how this specific person will take these barriers in a very different way than another specific person. The act is the same, the reason is the same, the location is almost the same, even the light is the same – but the only thing that changes is the particularity of the people who make the event.

B.G.: Yes, of course. You are involved in this event of creation. But I think that what attracts my attention is that artists naturally attempt to look at what they are doing from

the perspective of how they have done it. So if you explain your work, you explain it in terms of how it was done.

N.P.: Because we are workers. Once I decided in *Kept Alive* to take this position, to look at the living in that context, especially of being attached to the workers, I then became limited to whatever is being done or whatever is external/visible, because death, of course, is something that I cannot see. In a way, I have nothing to work with as actual “material” other than the things that I see being performed.

B.G.: If you look at what you have done, what’s interesting about it is that it is, in itself, uneventful. Maybe the production is eventful, but in itself it’s not eventful. And I think it’s very good because being uneventful, it underlines or stresses this kind of repetitive pattern. Of course, I think in general, all video works can be very roughly divided into eventful and non-eventful. For example, Andy Warhol’s movies are non-eventful, but there are a lot of videos that document something – they are eventful, they have a clear beginning and end. I think your work is kind of soft uneventful. It’s not simply uneventful as still life; there is a lot that happens, but what happens creates this feeling of a “quotation from a process” that obviously does not begin or end with the end of your film, but is part of this repetitive historical chain of events.

N.P.: I have decided to kind of dig into real events in order to expose their un-reality or their artificiality or, as you said, their transhistorical quality. It happened during editing and also during the installation of the work in the exhibition. Every segment is an event that is being either contrasted or erased by an event that happens simultaneously – especially in *Kept Alive*, because of the three channels. I think one is not necessarily

Images

Previous page:

[Kept Alive](#)

2009, three-channel high-definition video with sound
Courtesy Braverman Gallery

Opposite page:

[Sabbath 2008](#)

2008, one-channel high-definition video with sound
Courtesy Braverman Gallery



“It is not so much that art imitates life; in fact, our life imitates art. Thus, you produce videos that are shown in loop, under the regime of permanent repetition, but at the same time you practice this repetition already in your life” (BG)

competing with the other but repeating – and therefore erasing – whatever you can be attached to.

B.G.: You can't concentrate – one image does not completely capture that.

N.P.: No, it can't, because the sounds are creating this spatial situation in which you have a competition of events that are happening at the same time, which is kind of similar to what was happening all around us most of the time.

B.G.: But a repetitive event is like no event.

N.P.: Yes, exactly. I guess this is how I kill the event. I don't believe in it or I don't want to be attached to it. I avoid clear narrative progression, I avoid a cinematic peek, since I want to re-create a space which holds this intensity as a constant pulse. I am looking for that switch, so at first it can appear dramatic but the repetition kills that, so that you are left with the hard pulse of regularity.

B.G.: Precisely. I think you de-neutralize this eventfulness of event, because you look at the events that are so repetitive and are actually related to something that is metaphorically associated. Sabbath as a stop, rest, which comes every week, so it is a kind of “event as non-event,” “non-event as event.” It's in that logic.

N.P.: Both in *Sabbath 2008* and *Kept Alive* I am dealing with events that have in themselves a repetition which is not my doing, but in works like *67 Bows* it was me who repeated the same gesture 67 times and, more recently, in *And Melancholy* I repeated the same act of a jump from six different rooftops in Tel Aviv. They are much more performative. What difference does the source of repetition make?

B.G.: I think that the difference is not so big. It is not so much that art imitates life; in fact, our life imitates art. Thus, you produce videos that are shown in loop, under the regime of permanent repetition, but at the same time

you practice this repetition already in your life – at least, in your professional life. Here we have a kind of anticipation, the anticipation of the conditions under which the work is shown. However, these conditions are anticipated and reflected already through the way in which the work is originally produced. It is actually a procedure of modernity: to reflect on the way in which the artwork is demonstrated in the structure of the artwork itself. In the case of video art, one can do it by practicing the repetition oneself or by looking for the repetitive in the world.

N.P.: One of the main things that you don't see in *Kept Alive* is death; you don't see burial or a funeral. This was an important decision, so that I actually don't have the event that makes this whole machine tick, somebody dies and then somebody is buried, somebody dies, somebody's buried. I took out the reason that all this exists and I am left with its implication.

B.G.: Yeah, because somebody dying is an event, and it's actually inscribed in life. Sartre said that only others are dying. You never die. You never die because death, historically speaking, is only death of other people, you can't experience your own death as an historical event, in retrospect of your own history. So others die, but in your work, you yourself can die in a certain way, because there is a void, you create that empty space for you to lie in, so you make an opposite movement and turn your life into the moment of death. So already by living it's not death turned to the moment of life but it's life turned into the moment of death, because this place is already there and you know that.

N.P.: Museums are places of void to be filled, or certainly places that preserve, “keep alive” certain perspectives.

B.G.: Preservation is almost a false promise today, since we have all these financial

problems, it can all collapse in every minute.... But inside our system, the art system as it functions today, museums are a void, a place that you desire/want to fill. One has this thought, as an artist, that after one's death you will still be exhibited there, precisely as you expect that you would, eventually, fill this void at the cemetery. So it's a cemetery but it's a kind of symbolic grave and people actually want to taste this grave, they actually fantasize about it. But, at the moment, we have Internet and digital, and we can look at your work now in my office in New York on a computer screen. This kind of existence of a cinematic and a visual image doesn't need any museum, it's a museum in itself. So it has this kind of pure emptiness, pure void, pure light, this kind of structure that is already there.

N.P.: I find that the act of presenting or showing is already there in the act of filming.

B.G.: One can say that video takes its grace with itself, it doesn't need to be buried, it's already a grave. It needs context, it needs space.

But it does not necessarily need the museum because museums are traditionally spaces of conservation and restoration; museums were introduced by European civilization to keep things accessible. We don't need that for this kind of medium, because of its repetitiveness and because we can make a literal copy, what wasn't possible before, when we had to keep the original intact. So the exhibition space, like an empty burial place to be filled, is not understood negatively. It is a condition of actually keeping things really alive by showing, presenting, exposing. This kind of void is a condition of life. Let us assume we are eternal, so we can't end our life – it's an incredible limitation of our possibilities, because if you can't commit suicide, if you can't end anything, whatever you do, you do that all the time.

N.P.: It's a torture.

B.G.: Yes, not really an attractive perspective. So the possibility to end things is actually what keeps us alive. Marx understood labor as being involved in capitalism and he saw that in terms of progress and in terms of production – so the value of an individual is a value of the labor that it can produce. But I think what happens to us, in general, is that there is a lot of labor but it becomes less and less productive, especially in the West. It's a kind of repetitive labor that never leads to any product, to any result.

N.P.: But it is what keeps things alive and as a by-product creates something very temporal.

B.G.: A different temporality, but a different temporality of eternal repetition. It's this kind of everyday life, you know, it's like going to sleep, staying up, brushing your teeth...all these rituals. It's a repetition of the same, it's the same emptiness repeated and it's fundamentally not a paradigm of Marx's 19th century, it's not something going forward in fact.

N.P.: But we aspire for it to be different, or actually not?

B.G.: I don't know. I don't know to what we aspire. If somebody drops a nuclear bomb on us it will be different, but we also wouldn't like it. I don't know to what we aspire, I can only say we are de facto. And de facto we are in a phase in our civilization, our Western civilization, which is global civilization, that more and more shifts its attention from what is historically progressive to organize in some kind of eternal patterns of the same. This was actually what Nietzsche predicted in the 19th century: After you lose faith you start eternal repetition of the same. And it's precisely what our civilization is doing: It practices eternal repetition of the same and I wouldn't say we are descendants' of that – we are also involved. You know, for example, me being a professor is also a repetition, it's incredible how we do not

reflect on that. We are still thinking in terms of change, growth, but the fact our civilization takes a completely different turn. And in your works you investigate that. In some way our whole civilization begins to be a civilization of organizing basic patterns of existence.

N.P.: I think I felt that I joined it because I was doing this, especially while filming *Sabbath 2008*, because I had to be in a specific time and there was no argument about it, you know. I had to be in Jerusalem every Friday at 4 o'clock in a different location in order to follow this ritual.

B.G.: Self-ritualization.

N.P.: Absolutely. And the same as in *Kept Alive* – I made some rules for myself of keeping almost the same light conditions through out the work. I had to film a certain number of visitations and meetings and certain amounts of construction. *Kept Alive* took a year to make. Filming and editing took quite a long time. Not only was I filming it, I actually kept repeating what I had been looking at out there, in the editing process.

B.G.: I think it's very Jewish, indeed, because I recognize that in Derrida, for example, and many other thinkers, also of Jewish origin, also in myself maybe, this kind of love for repetition, eternity, transhistorical, synchronic, non-labor practices. Derrida is very obvious about that – always the same work of deconstruction that has no beginning, no end, so it's repetitive always and, of course, he sees that as a very good thing to do.

N.P.: It's the only thing to do.

B.G.: It's the only thing to do, so I think that the Jewish culture maybe has some kind of underlying feeling of inner identification with this kind of non-historical continuity, or non-historical repetitiveness is kind of encoded in it. People do not feel themselves so depressed as they are supposed to be. →

Body of Work

KEPT ALIVE is a three-channel video and photo installation focused on Jerusalem's Mountain of Rest (Har HaMenuchot) that was filmed on location for a full year. In it, Pereg investigates intersections between the living and the dead. While the cemetery is one of Israel's largest, its burial grounds are precious and expensive, due to lack of space. Despite the site's intense density, with just more than ten inches between graves, it is still possible to purchase and reserve plots. Pereg's multi-channel video installation reconstructs the mountain, in which all the cemetery's conflicting processes occur simultaneously. Alternating between close-ups and long shots, pans and stills, speech and action, *Kept Alive* provides a range of perspectives on how the living cohabitate with the dead.

(From the Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, CA, press release)

SABBATH 2008 documents the closing down of ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in and around Jerusalem on the eve of the Sabbath. In most cases, public access to these neighborhoods is blocked by means of temporary barriers, which stay put for 24 hours – thus creating an artificial border between these areas and the rest of the city. The city is, in a way, topologically transformed into two cities. Building on this ritual, *Sabbath 2008* is a photographic ritual that can only be performed at a designated time and in designated places. Although the value of these somewhat rickety barriers may appear above all symbolic, their presence is a source of friction and conflict; they delineate a clear-cut boundary between the sacred and the mundane.

(From the Braverman Gallery, Tel Aviv, press release)

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