

## Consecrated Spaces

By: Sergio Edelsztein

From the exhibition catalogue Nira Pereg - "All this can be reconstructed elsewhere"

Publishers: The Center for Contemporary Art at the Rachel & Israel Pollak Gallery, Tel Aviv | Centro da Cultura Judaica. 2012

Nira Pereg's video works are based on documentary filmmaking practices. Pereg shoots for extended periods of time specific locations whose nature informs singular human conducts that shed light on beliefs, history and rituals. Pereg's recent works focus on these behavioral aspects as they are reflected in Israel and the West Bank. On the editing table, looking at hundreds of hours of her own footage, she uses reversal, repetition, and elaborated sound track techniques to create her signature works .

The result of this *modus operandi* is video installations that - much like nature films - bring into view strange and far-from-the-eye situations. But while nature films tend to give an individual and "humanizing" view on animal life, Nira Pereg's works center on singular, ritualistic, and mechanical human behaviors.

The first in this line of works is *Sabbath 2008*. For this short single-channel work, Pereg followed and filmed over a period of seven months the activity taking place all over Jerusalem at the entrances to ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods on the eve of the Jewish Sabbath. In *Sabbath 2008*, this activity is repeated in endless variations showing the closing to traffic and thereby "consecration" of the city's ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods, which gradually become synonymous both with the sacred day and the restrictions associated with it. By means of the actions depicted in this work, these neighborhoods are transformed into a separate sphere, "holier" than the rest of the city.

In *Sabbath 2008*, Pereg has introduced an essential component that would run through, expand in and characterize all her works from now on: her special treatment of sound. This consists in discarding the original sound recorded on location, and re-creating selected noises, or Foley sound effects,<sup>(1)</sup> in the studio. Closely cooperating with her sound designer Nati Zeidenstadt, she conceptually chooses which sound to stress, and, disregarding all the rest, allots it a special place that has little to do with the empiric or with its relative position in reality.

Pereg's videos are eerily silent. *Sabbath 2008*, for instance, was shot in very busy crossroads in Jerusalem. We see cars, buses and people - but we only hear footsteps, a car honking, nervous tapping on the dial of a wrist watch, the dragging sounds of metal barriers, and so on .

Regarding the nexus of sound, space, and narrative in Jacques Tati's *Les vacances de M. Hulot* (1953), film historian Donald Kiriara wrote that

“sound techniques in the film help to defeat our expectations of a space at the service of the narrative [...].”(2)

Similarly to the French filmmaker, Pereg too tends to focus on one sound or noise by isolating and stripping it from any spatial coordinates. Thus, like the iconic image of the man walking down an empty corridor in Tati's *Playtime* (1967), the hasty steps of a man hurrying to close a “gate” in *Shabbat 2008* are audibly rendered without any depth. Devoid of any movement or articulation, they consistently sound the same irrespective of the distance between the spectator (or rather the camera) and the sound source. Pereg's treatment of sound makes it manifest that a “consecrated” space is one to which the usual narratives of time and space do not apply.

The surreal spatial relations of *Sabbath 2008* have set the parameters for the sound treatment in her next works, all of which deal with the theme of “consecrated spaces.”

*Kept Alive* (2009-10) was shot in one such space, Har HaMenuchot (Mount of Rest) cemetery in Jerusalem. The literal meaning of the work's title betrays an oxymoron – graves that are “kept alive,” namely, pre-purchased burial sites reserved for the living until their eventual death. These dedicated tiny plots of land are something in between real estate and spiritual resting places.

Pereg's view on the site and its surroundings accentuates the artificial nature of these consecrated enclaves. Located near a highway and a shooting range, and built completely by Muslims, this unique space epitomizes the paradoxes of the living and the dead in this land.

Focusing on what is alive in this cemetery, the installation shows an array of some of its most banal maintenance works, such as gardening, interspersed with long shots of the graves' unique layout and of the cemetery's surroundings. While the whole process of carving the words “kept alive” is displayed, the constant grave-digging is shown on an adjacent smaller screen.

The three-channel installation refrains from actually showing any funerals or corpses. By highlighting the singular location of the cemetery in the middle of an astounding and uneventful landscape, it gives a friendly unique perspective on a place, ultimately consecrated to the living rather than to the dead.

While filming these works and striving to trace the border between the sacred and the profane, Pereg has been keeping track, for more than a year, of webcam footage from the Wailing Wall (available to all on the Western Wall Heritage Foundation website).

Her interest in the economy of spaces belonging to a sacred sphere, in visualized paradoxes, in the transitory within the eternal, and the profane inside the sacred, finally led her to the Cave of Machpelah, or the Cave of the Patriarchs, in Hebron. Here, at the traditional burial site of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, she shot her next two works.

As recounted in chapter 23 of Genesis Abraham purchased the cave as a burial place for his deceased wife Sarah. In Judaism, it is considered to be a most sacred site, second only to the Temple Mount.

In accordance with their messianic vision, Israeli settlers ascribe paramount historical and spiritual importance to the Cave, located in Hebron, the largest Palestinian city in the West Bank. Alongside the general claim of ownership to the Land of Israel based on divine promises, they seem to believe that the biblical documentation of the Cave's acquisition for its "full price" by Abraham entitles them to legally and unequivocally claim possession of the site. A poster, which Pereg had found in Hebron and now hangs in her studio, simply states: "We bought it. We paid for it. It's ours!!" The poster shows the iconic Herodian building sandwiched between two photos of contested modern apartment buildings. The settlers, who argue that Jews have the right to live wherever they choose in the "City of the Patriarchs," allege to have purchased the buildings from their previous Palestinian owners. Thus the story of the Cave of Machpela is replicated in the struggle over contemporary contested real estate.

Unlike the cemetery or the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood, which are contested only generally as part of the larger Israeli-Palestinian territorial conflict, the Cave of the Patriarchs, or the Ibrahimi Mosque, is also revered by Muslims. Abraham, or Ibrahim, is considered by Muslims as an ancestor of the Arab people, through his son Ismail (Ishmael), a prophet of Islam and an apostle of God, and the Quran attributes to him the building of the Kaaba in Mecca.

But despite the fact that this site is equally sacred to both Jews and Muslims, it was never a scene of coexistence. Instead, its history is one of mutual exclusion and bloody conflict. The last in the thousand-year-old string of fatal events witnessed by this holy place was the 1994 massacre perpetrated by Baruch Goldstein that left 29 Muslim worshippers dead and many injured. Since that event, Jews and Muslims are strictly kept apart within the shrine.

Today, the original Herodian building, with its six cenotaphs, is split in two. Jews have access only to its southern halls, while Muslims are restricted to its northern part. Separation is strict, enforced by dozens of Israeli soldiers. Only in special religious holidays (10 days a year for each religion) worshippers of one faith are allowed to enter the other religion's space to pray in the otherwise inaccessible graves. For twenty four hours each time, in selected days, one of the faiths takes control of the whole compound.

*Abraham Abraham* (2012) documents “Muslims irregularity” - Jewish worshippers preparing to evacuate their space. The process (hitherto always kept away from the public eye) was shot in July 2012 under the close supervision of the IDF. The men in charge of the site are seen locking bookcases filled with sacred books, taking off signs and tapestries, and clearing out furniture. After we, as viewers, verify that the place is completely empty, a pivotal moment occurs, when we see a woman soldier pushing open the door leading to the mosque. Subsequently, the space is taken over by men spreading Muslim prayer rugs on the floor.

*Sarah Sarah* (2012), which was filmed a few months later, documents a “Jewish irregularity” and is a mirror image of that video. It starts by showing the Muslim worshippers gathering and piling up their prayer rugs. This time, when the door opens, it is the Jewish faithful who come in with their plastic chairs and ritual objects.

Filmed months apart, these two works closely reflect each other. They have the same length and the same symmetrical structure, pivoting on the opening of the door connecting/separating the two spaces. Like in *Sabbath 2008*, the hectic activity generally seems well-rehearsed and matter-of-factly unemotional. The sound echoes the emblematic movements of dragging and clicking without any spatial characteristics, thus adding to the intemporality of the scene.

*Abraham Abraham* and *Sarah Sarah* depict the two sides of these unique periodical events. These temporary evacuations by no means attest to religious coexistence, on the contrary - they are the product of religious intolerance. In fact, half of each work shows the closing down, locking in , concealing, dragging and blocking furniture and religious objects. Not even a chair is left for the use of the rival faithful. The simultaneity of the works’ sound tracks when viewed together underscores this power struggle. In order to accentuate this counterpoint, Pereg had decided to eliminate all human presence from the sound track. There are neither sounds of footsteps, nor voices. Only inanimate objects produce noise.

In both films, Pereg focuses on hastily evacuated spaces that build up anticipation for the imminent takeover. In these distended moments, time and space sway between earthy conflict and spiritual elevation.

Negotiating the status-quo and the singularities, the worship and security arrangements, necessarily involves a massive military presence. In these works, we see for the first time the strange, yet inextricable, symbiosis between religion and the army, between worshippers and soldiers.

However, Pereg’s works dedicated to the documentation of extraordinary behaviors within defined areas are not limited to religious/sacred sites. While shooting *Abraham Abraham*, for example, Pereg was following a

completely non-religious situation: the preparations for a drill of Israel's Home Front Command.

The drill simulated a national disaster situation resulting from an earthquake, or bomb or missile attacks. The several-months-long drill included transformation of a condemned building into "disaster zone," placing dummy victims throughout its premises, its controlled demolition mimicking the desired pattern of collapse, and "rescue" of the dummies.

The resulting three-channel video installation, *Scenario* (2012), depicts the three stages of that process: on the middle screen, we see a group of soldiers preparing the scene; the left screen shows the demolition of the building; and the right one the "rescue" operations. The middle channel (which is also shown as a single-channel work (reveals the work's uncanny similarity to *Abraham Abraham* and *Sarah Sarah* :the redesignation of everyday banal space as "sacred" area. In a gesture much akin to the dragging of carpets in and out in *Abraham Abraham* and *Sarah Sarah*, set to practically the same sound, we see the soldiers dragging white or black overalls along corridors and placing them carefully in designated rooms of the doomed building. The overalls represent the soon-to-be-"rescued" casualties. The last scenes of this channel show the men sealing off a certain area with yellow tape, another kind of barrier meant to designate spaces.

*Scenario* draws a strange parallel between religious and military consecrated spaces. In Israel, the close link between religion, politics and security makes such an association more than just plausible. This strange connection is best seen in Nira Pereg's latest work, *Mandatory Passage* (2012-13).

After shooting *Shabbat* 2008 and *Kept Alive*, Pereg started wandering around the edges of Israel, in search for contested spaces, for "borders." Her wanderings ultimately led her to the West Bank with its roadblocks, and paths that lead nowhere, or stop in the middle of nowhere. These phenomena abound in the Occupied Territories, the infrastructures of which mainly reflect the logic of occupation and dispossession.

The five-channel video installation *Mandatory Passage* was filmed over a one-year period in Qasr el Yahud (Castle of the Jews) located on the west bank of the Jordan River, a few kilometers north of the Dead Sea and south-east of Jericho. The site is believed to be where, after 40 years of wandering in the desert, the Israelites crossed the river Jordan into Canaan, the land against which they were about to wage a bloody war of conquest. Just across the river from Qasr el Yahud, lies Bethabara (Beit Abara), where according to Christian tradition, John baptized Jesus Christ. Therefore, in the Christian sacred geography of the Holy Land, it is third in importance only to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

After Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967, the area of Qasr el Yahud was deemed prone to terrorists' infiltration and was declared closed military zone. Following that the neighboring monasteries were evacuated and the land around them mined. The only narrow passage clear of mines that was left was a path of about three kilometers leading to the river from the main road. A military road passing through minefields is known in Israeli military jargon as "mandatory passage."

The views of the desert land strewn with abandoned monasteries, and the drive along fences with yellow signs indicating that the area beyond them is mined fascinated Pereg. Revisiting the site time and again, she began recording the singular events taking place therein.

Her first trip down the Jordan River through minefields is documented in one of the installation's screens. However the taped event is projected backwards - beginning, as it were, with the artist leaving the site rather than entering it. In this instance, Pereg left the soundtrack untouched, thus we can hear her talking to the army reservist who drove her down there. But since the conversation is also reversed, it sounds like gibberish, or a mixture of Hebrew, Arabic...and Yiddish. The confusion, though, is seemingly minor, since the "dialogue" is subtitled. But actually the subtitles have no connection whatsoever to the words exchanged between them. As a matter of fact, the dialogue is freely edited out of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Visit to Palestine* (1965).<sup>(3)</sup> With this referent, Pereg reflects on the disappointment the Italian filmmaker had experienced in front of the bleak "modernity" of the Holy Land. <sup>(4)</sup>

In a like manner to the screen showing the grave-digging in *Kept Alive*, Pereg introduces also in *Mandatory Passage* a smaller screen that becomes the work's "rhythm section." Here the screen presents a young drummer, resembling Manet's *Flute Player*. The boy from Jericho, dressed in festive Boy Scout uniform, keeps drumming enthusiastically and incessantly, apparently utterly oblivious to the yellow-red sign forewarning from the nearby mines. He is setting the rhythm to the screen next to him, where we see hundreds of people marching between the fences. These people, who clearly belong to different churches - the Greek Orthodox, Coptic, and Ethiopian - are all marching towards the baptismal site on the banks of the Jordan River.

When Pereg started to film in Qasr el Yahud, the area was only open to visitors on designated Christian holidays - Epiphany and Easter - and merely to organized tours. About a year ago, Israeli authorities consented to open the site to all visitors throughout the year. The mines were not cleared, but the paved military road depicted in Pereg's video, was opened.

The prolonged closing of the area allowed certain zoological species to flourish there. One of the installation's screens shows the wildlife of the area: boars and porcupines. It is significant that this screen is edited out of

photos taken by infrared motion-detection cameras set by a researcher of the department of zoology at the Tel Aviv University.<sup>(5)</sup> Anyway, it seems that the animals are the only free beings in the area, but it's hard not to notice that these too walk the same "safe" paths over and over again.

The adjacent screen shows what happens at the river itself, which also marks the border between the occupied West Bank and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. We see idle soldiers – Israeli and Jordanian alike – and pilgrims filling bottles with holy water to take home with them. One more paradox of this place – while the soldiers smoke and drink coffee, the pilgrims "steal" the river's holy water.

Nira Pereg's consecrated spaces embody the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the mundane, divine love and extreme fanaticism. More than a critical eye, hers is a clinical one, poignantly unveiling the paradoxes of daily life in her part of the world.

1. According to IMDb Movie Terminology Glossary, "Foley [is] the art of recreating incidental sound effects (such as footsteps) in synchronization with the visual component of a movie. Named after early practitioner Jack Foley, foley artists sometimes use bizarre objects and methods to achieve sound effects, e.g. snapping celery to mimic bones being broken. The sounds are often exaggerated for extra effect – fight sequences are almost always accompanied by loud foley added thuds and slaps." See: <http://www.imdb.com/glossary/F>.
2. Donald Kiriara, "Sound in *Les Vacances de M. Hulot*," in Peter Lehman (ed.) *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism*, Tallahassee: Florida University Press, 1990, p. 162.
3. The originally titled film *Sopraluoghi in Palestina per il vangelo secondo Matteo* documents Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1963 trip to Israel, in which he was scouting for locations for his film on the life of Jesus.
4. Strangely enough, elsewhere in Pasolini's film, *Don Andrea*, the Italian priest that accompanies the Italian filmmaker to the Jordan River alludes to the importance of Qasr el Yahud when he states: "The Jordan [River] is the historical and religious reference point of all Jewish history because the Old Testament begins with the Jews Crossing the Jordan, and ends with the baptism of St. John the Baptist who invites the Jews to receive baptism in the Jordan and prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah."
5. Dr. Eran Levin, Tel Aviv University, in collaboration with the Mammal Center of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel.