

Guns and Roadblocks

By: Hans Haacke

From the exhibition catalogue Nira Pereg: Kept Alive

Publishers: Tel Aviv Museum of Art. 2011

About twenty years ago, as a student at the Cooper Union school of art in New York, Nira Pereg set a festive dinner table in a small room that served as seminar, faculty meeting, and student exhibition space. Soup plates with saucers of fine porcelain, together with ornate silverware and wine glasses, marked places for about eight guests. Candlesticks and an elegant soup terrine dominated the table's center. Incongruously, the napkins did not match the white of the tablecloth. They sported colors that, only very recently, had come into fashion: the "chocolate chip" camouflage pattern of Operation Desert Storm, lighter and tending towards ochre rather than the jungle green of the Vietnam War. Mechanical toy soldiers, one in each of the soup plates, were firing assault rifles, with sparks flying—and trying to crawl up the rim of the plates. None of them made it. The smoothness of the porcelain prevented them from getting a grip. They were trapped. The shooting and furious crackle of their guns made them look all the more desperate and pathetic, particularly with canned applause coming from an overhead sound system. Periodically, the room went dark and absolutely silent. The audience, mostly Pereg's fellow students, were stunned and speechless.

It is sometimes difficult to remember "what it was like," certainly after related but more dramatic events have occurred. During the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, Saddam Hussein had been treated almost as an ally by the Reagan and the early Bush administration. Western arms industries had a feast at his oil trough; and his use of chemical weapons against Kurds and Shiites received little attention or condemnation. In 1990, the U.S. ambassador in Baghdad appears to have conveyed to him that her government had "no opinion" on Arab-Arab border

disputes. Perhaps encouraged by this comment, his troops invaded Kuwait soon thereafter.

His defeat, half a year later, in what he had boasted would be the “Mother of all Battles,” was celebrated in the U.S. with frenetic flag waving. After the inglorious flight from Saigon in 1975, the victory of the American army’s vastly superior military machine over Saddam Hussein was widely understood as an overdue redemption. American fighter planes mercilessly strafed retreating Iraqi troops. They littered the “Highway of Death.” The term “collateral damage” entered common language. Norman Schwarzkopf, the victorious general known as “The Bear,” inspired toy-makers to market a new line of teddy bears dressed up in uniforms with the new camouflage colors.

Operation Desert Storm was also an occasion for Jean Baudrillard, who was then closely followed by the art world and graced the masthead of *Artforum*, to let the world know that “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.”

In spite of this exuberance, Washington’s leadership under then President George H.W. Bush had not lost touch with reality: it halted the advance into Iraq and did not proceed to conquer Baghdad. Twelve years later, in the opening days of “Shock and Awe,” the older Bush’s relative wisdom was derided as contemptible weakness, a stain that his son would finally wipe off the record. It took a while to fully recognize the cost of such hubris.

While in 1991, Pereg’s operating table was primarily understood as an expression of distaste for the prevailing jingoism, a sentiment shared by many of her audience, in retrospect, her toy soldiers caught in the soup plates proved to have been a clairvoyant metaphor for the American quagmire of the Iraq War that was to come—the loss of untold lives, unfathomable destruction of resources, and severe erosion of the moral capital of the United States.

After her graduation from Cooper Union, Pereg returned to Israel, re-familiarizing herself with the deep cultural and political conflicts of her native country and its relations with its neighbors. For a short moment, the Oslo accord appeared to bring some calm. It was brutally ruptured by a Brooklyn-born settler's murder of 29 Palestinians praying just a few meters from Abraham's tomb. The mutual violence that followed and the assassination, less than two years later, of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a religious student from Bar Ilan University, in effect, for more than 15 years by now, killed any chance for Jews and Palestinians to come to terms with each other.

While Pereg had responded to American triumphalism with a satirical installation, she eventually turned to video, an immaterial medium, for the articulation of what appears to be her fundamental disagreement with certain aspects of the Israeli present. Not surprisingly, guns remained a haunting source of "inspiration." She was not the first Israeli student at Cooper Union with this affliction. As unforgettable as her dinner table was an earsplitting sound piece "performed" at the School a few years earlier by a witness of the Sabra Shatila massacre—an attempt to exorcise the haunting experience of this former Israeli recruit.

*67 Bows*, the video Pereg recorded in 2006 at the Karlsruhe zoo, Germany, seems to have nothing in common with her Israeli peer's traumatic excursion to Beirut. Sheltered by a protective roof with windows that expose the northern sky, we see a flock of flamingos taking it easy on a mini-beach the zookeepers prepared for them, complete with big-leafed tropical plants in the background. As flamingos are prone to do, they enjoyed standing on one leg, and when taking a few steps, they gracefully compensated the precarious displacement of their centers of gravity with balancing movements of their long necks: a perfect image of elegant leisure. But something is off. Again and again, gunshots interrupt the peace on the beach in Karlsruhe. Every time we hear shots or the cocking of guns, the flamingos shudder for a moment, nervously take a few steps and seem to briefly

discuss amongst themselves what happened, only to resume their customary posture very soon, as if ignoring the disruption of their peace. This behavioral pattern is repeated every time a shot rings out. In a close-up we see the long-legged birds burying their heads in the pink plumage of their wings, perhaps comparable to the proverbial ostrich sticking its head in the sand.

Whether shots do, in fact, go off 67 times, is hard to tell. The viewers can't keep count. In retrospect, however, one may be prompted to think about what this odd number may signify, if anything. François Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* comes to mind. But why 67? – The year 2006, in which Pereg made this video, while teaching in Germany, could perhaps offer a clue. 67 years earlier, in 1939, German troops invaded Poland and the persecution of Jews spread beyond the nation's borders (Karlsruhe had a large Jewish congregation). But there are other possible readings. 2006 is the year of Israel's second invasion of Lebanon, and 67 could be an allusion to the Six Day War and the beginning of Israel's ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories. Pereg has given no hint on whether such interpretations are within the realm of what she would accept or, in fact, aimed for. If there is something to these historical allusions, the behavior of the flamingos would gain an ominous significance. Speculating on the number becomes a Rorschach test.

Two years after taking her camera to watch flamingos on a beach in Karlsruhe, Pereg recorded a very different tribal custom: the closing of streets in Jerusalem in observance of the Sabbath. At the bottom of a street leading up to an ultra-orthodox neighborhood, we see two little boys pulling steel barricades into place to block cars from entering. Both wear yarmulkes and traditional side curls. The younger of the two is too short to look over the barriers. The older boy can just make it. The only sounds we hear are the screeching of the barricades being pulled across the pavement and of car horns on the heavily trafficked highway at the foot of the hill. The two boys take their task very seriously, not allowing a car that turned off

the highway a few minutes too late to enter their neighborhood. As we see in Pereg's video, other public streets in neighborhoods of Jerusalem that are dominated by the ultra-Orthodox, are equally and promptly closed. In effect, they are privatized for 24 hours every week. Officially sanctioned, these barriers separate Jewish Israelis from each other. The location for the opening shot of Pereg's video and of one of the many temporary roadblocks being put into place is Ramot Polin, an ultra-orthodox housing project in East Jerusalem.

One of the most startling sights entering Jerusalem on Highway 1 from Tel Aviv is a mountain entirely covered with graves, Har HaMenuchot, the Mountain of Rest. This enormous cemetery is the location and the protagonist of the 3-channel video *Kept Alive* Pereg presented at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in March 2010, when she was a candidate for that year's Gottesdiener Award (almost across the street from the Museum's entrance is the Kirya, the Israeli Pentagon). Burials, visitors at graves, and the intonation of prayers by rhythmically swaying ultra-Orthodox Jews can be seen from a distance. With one exception, close-up views are reserved for the work and the workers who build and maintain the graves on the mountain. At one point, one of them speaks straight into the camera, explaining the job he and his fellow gravediggers perform.

We witness graves being dug, the serial production of markers "engraved" with the words "Kept Alive," and how they are installed on new burial sites. We see the mowing of weeds that grew on graves "in waiting." We observe large concrete structures of several levels being built to accommodate more graves. One view from above allows us to see through re-bars of unfinished concrete columns down and across the field of graves into the valley. In a hollow at the bottom we can make out where the gunshots that periodically interrupt the presumed peace of the cemetery had come from. There, at the foot of the Mountain of Rest, is a police shooting range. Pereg's zoom allows us to identify men jumping into pistol shooting positions and firing their weapons toward targets at the far end of the range, close to

the highway. Anyone who saw *67 Bows* cannot help associating the soundtracks of the two videos that were made only a few years apart in two different countries.

The same man who had explained the work being done on the mountain is with us once more, his weathered face almost filling the screen as he speaks. Casually, he recites the names of all who currently dig graves on the Mountain of Rest. They all have Arab names. At a separate moment in the video one of these men is visible in the distance, bowing toward Mecca, kneeling and touching a concrete duct with his head.

One close-up view of a person is not of someone who earns a living digging graves. It is introduced by a white car roof entering the frame from the right, eventually filling the entire screen. On the side of the roof an antenna appears to be an important element. In the shot immediately following, the driver of the car, a man in ultra-orthodox garb, addresses Pereg, the camera—and us—with an air of suspicion: “It is not by chance that you are here. You are looking for something. What are you looking for? What are you looking for?”

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Hans Haacke is an artist born in Germany; lives and works in New York since 1965