

## The Burial Chamber

By: Philippe-Alain Michaud

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August 2003, during her first stay in Paris, as the scorching heat reached a climax, Nira Pereg discovered the artificial seaside area that the city sets up each summer along the banks of the Seine; a twofold paradox combining extreme (and vaguely worrying) atmospheric conditions with this artificial setting of a made-up beach. The three-screen installation, played in slow motion and framed near ground level (on eye level perhaps for the dog seen a number of times passing across the picture, below the line of meaning, as it were), composes an uncanny picture of the city. Half-naked bodies draped in loose wet linen move around along the wall closing off the riverside as though down a corridor, drowned in steam given off by atomisers, dazed and lost, making gestures made ineffective by the slow motion so that we cannot tell whether they involve purification, play, despair or imploring. The Seine embankments become the banks of the Ganges or limbo; movements are slowed down and sounds elongated, as in those dreams of inhibition in which the body is no longer able to snap out of its inertia. On the three screens, the bodies and actions become fragmented, lending the installation a kind of circular static or timeless quality; now and again, the filmed shots fade into incandescent red monochromes run through with continual rain before fading back in randomly, here and there, giving the images a theatrical, unreal dimension. These 'denaturalized' shots, all taken from the same source, are distributed over the screens in a loop or in parallel; the installation arrangement does not seek to construct a complex action by confronting disparate images, but on the contrary to fragment narrative continuity and compositional unity so as to avoid it being perceived in a synthetic or synoptic way. Thrown by the changes of emphasis from one screen to another, the visitor is caught up in a game of mirrors or visual and sound echoes.

In 2006, at the time when she was teaching video at the Karlsruhe Center for Art and Media (ZKM), Pereg produced two animal pieces at Karlsruhe Zoo, *1 Sleeps* and *67 Bows*. In the first, she filmed a pink flamingo standing asleep on one leg, its beak curled up in its feathers; somewhere between an organism and a plant, a ball of feathers wavering slightly on its stem. The second piece responds to the first as a group portrait answers a single portrait: a flock of flamingos make bending movements at the sharp crack of a rifle (the post-synchronized sound of the detonation is a special effect: for days on end, the artist taught the birds to react to her own gestures as one ritual responding to the other). The choreographed flamingos, bending in time, are stylized and turned into a decorative frieze, just as the single bird in *1 Sleeps* was turned into a flower, blurring the boundaries between the figure and the living thing. "To decorate," wrote Karl Philipp Moritz in the mid neo-classical 18th century, "is to animate things that are dead."<sup>(1)</sup> But the decorative impulse also answers an animist inquiry to ward off ill fortune. The decorative is linked to the supernatural and the ornament has

a magical dimension; its symmetries and repetitions are formulary rituals and, like the plant-like bird motif, the strip of images formed by the rhythmic cortege of flamingos takes on an inseparably vitalist yet funerary meaning. At the origin of this turning of naturalist figures into decorative patterns, there is always the story of a subject conceived as being a collection of precepts, and the desire to perpetuate for the dead person things seen and experienced by him. Thus the friezes that decorated the walls of the Egyptian tombs had the power to reactivate images, i.e. literally powers of *representation*: the world that reveals itself in this narrow many-colored chink stitching up the empty surface of the wall is not that of invention or knowledge but, as Ludwig Binswanger noted, that of *recognition*.<sup>(2)</sup> What is the affective mood, the special *Stimmung* that the ornamental stirs within us, and makes us divine underneath the hieratic or stylized composition the memory of some debarred experience? Probably the melancholy that Pereg takes as the title of a piece produced in 2009, in which, returning to places—six of them—where she has lived, she stages a fictional defenestration in front of a subjective camera (*And Melancholy*).

The cavity opened up by the screen in the partition of the black box is no different than the one the frieze digs into the surface of the wall; it shows an irreducible ambiguity between the stylized form and the referent from which it takes its origin—the figuration of objects and beings aims to replace them, but at the same time, it is a figuration of their absence. Facing the screens, we are like souls that have lost their adherence to their own bodies and in the thin films of pictures scrolling past and looking like the world, contemplate the very concept of their existence. Pereg's installations are given what I would readily term a frosty treatment; the figures are framed with no particular closeness or affinity, as if placed beyond reach even with a barge pole. They are isolated from each other and isolated from themselves. Due to the disconnections obtained through repetition, fragmentation and distancing, any linkages have been systematically broken. The images no longer have a history; they have come to a standstill. All that is left are compositions of masses of colors and sounds whose meanings have vanished. The scrolling of the pictures, on the model of the frieze, shows us things depicted in space the way flowers are arranged in a vase: it shows us the being of things by filling an already given space, as if they were only there as stopgaps at specific spots. The space appears to us in hollow relief like a receptacle, in advance of any material and any movement. Paradoxically, the purely decorative leads to pure absence or indifference, and the installation becomes a philosophical injunction.

At the beginning of the second book of *Meditations*, Descartes, undertaking systematically to cast doubt on the evidence of the world around him, imagines himself leaning out of the window as the silhouettes he observes moving around down below are mere ghosts or automata: "... and yet what do I see from the window beyond hats and cloaks that might cover artificial machines, whose motions might be determined by springs?". That might be the task of the image: to bring out from beneath the surface of smooth

evidences the enigma of reality and its charge of weirdness. Moving (the visit to another world lending the gaze fresh ingenuity), repetition and ornamental stylization are techniques of detachment uniformly aimed at making the gaze foreign to things and the world and the familiar unfamiliar. Hence the installation site will be this isolated, fenced-off space, whose construction is given by *Sabbath 2008*, describing the weekly shutting of the barriers to traffic in the ultra-orthodox quarters of Jerusalem and tracing a network of lines closing the space in on itself, and to which the mineral desert of Har Menuchot (*Kept Alive*, 2010) will serve as the final setting— at the gates of Jerusalem, a hill covered with regular scarifications that looks like something out of Botticelli's *Drawings of Dante's Divine Comedy* (1480-1500), a permanently expanding city of the dead, a negative city extending on the fringe of that of the living, like its ghost or image, handed over to grave-diggers and stone masons. In the space of the projection drowned in the sound of spades and cold chisels, hammers and sanders, the screens form blocks of images, comparable to the blocks of stone structuring the graveyard. The shot's documentary depth disappears; the installation arrangement, looping in on itself for the images to appear, becomes a burial chamber.

1 Karl Philipp Moritz, "Vorbegriffe zur eine Theorie der Ornamente," in *Klassik und Klassizismus – Position und Opposition*, eds. Helmut Pfotenhauer and Peter Sprengel, *Bibliothek der Kunstliteratur*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker, 1995).

2 Ludwig Binswanger, *Das Raumproblem in der Psychopathologie* [1932], in *Ausgewählte Werke*, Band III (Heidelberg, 1994).

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