

Rifts and Rituals

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From the exhibition catalogue Nira Pereg: The right to Clean

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In the fall of 1998, Nira Pereg moved to Jerusalem from New York City, where she had resided for almost a decade.⁽¹⁾ Several months after her relocation, the artist produced a series of fifteen Polaroid snapshots titled *Soil* in which she appears “hovering” at the threshold of clearly labeled Jerusalem landmarks.⁽²⁾ Pereg chose to photograph prominent locations venerated by the three monotheistic religions (e.g., the Western Wall, the Dome of the Rock, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher) as well as hallowed secular sites associated with lofty concepts or values – such as justice’ (the Israeli Supreme Court), ‘memory’ (Yad Vashem), and ‘art’ (the Israel Museum and the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design).

In hindsight, *Soil* may be read as a prescient roadmap that Pereg charted, foretelling the trajectories that her oeuvre would follow for many years to come. The series poignantly demonstrates the artist’s intense ongoing interest in consecrated spaces, both religious and secular; in physical barriers, invisible boundaries, and intersecting auratic sightlines.⁽³⁾ Furthermore, in *Soil* Pereg self-reflectively visualizes her own tenuous insider/outsider position as an artist, suspended in midair, casting a dark shadow, even as she casts a clear gaze upon the multiple rifts and rituals of an unheimlich homeland.⁽⁴⁾

Following the three-day photo shoot that produced *Soil* (April 9–11, 1999), Pereg continued to pursue the series’ original thematic foci with tenacity and force. Yet, as time went by, she modified her art-making praxis, forsaking the instantaneous Polaroid photograph and choosing instead to produce installations based on moving images. With this time-based medium she could more effectively capture the real and ephemeral transformations and the temporal and spatial liminalities that she sought to examine, analyze, and comprehend. Based on years of assiduous research, countless hours of filming, and a lengthy and laborious editing process, Pereg’s videos are informed by documentary filmmaking, even as they challenge the verisimilitude of the documentary genre.⁽⁵⁾ Displayed in dynamic, site-specific configurations, they also implicate, engage, and challenge audiences, in ways that conjure up interactive and experiential performance art.

Sixteen years after producing a Polaroid snapshot of herself “hovering” in front of the doorway that leads into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, Nira Pereg returned to the scene. This time she crossed the threshold, entered the shrine, and proceeded to look beyond the façade, behind the scenes, after hours. Over a period of five years, she repeatedly – perhaps obsessively – visited the church, spending days and nights observing the observant: pilgrims, tourists, clergy, and caretakers. The resulting multi-channel video work, *The Right to Clean*, 2015, is on view concurrently at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University and at Ticho House of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Installed as a unique site-specific exhibition in each venue, this complex work is the newest chapter in the artist’s relentless exploration of overlooked aspects of the religious histories and liturgies that activate the shared and contested spaces venerated by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Holy Land.

The Right to Clean, then, centers on Jerusalem’s Church of the Holy Sepulcher, believed to be the site of Golgotha, Adam’s grave, and of Christ’s crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Governed by what is known as the status quo – a delicate agreement reached in the nineteenth century – the Holy Sepulcher is divided

among several Christian denominations that zealously guard their designated territory as they reluctantly share custody of the shrine. (6) The core elements that comprise *The Right to Clean* are four interrelated video projections (see pp. 34–39), displayed in a compressed space which evokes the crowded, mazelike ambience of the original site. In the opening video, *Border* (pp. 40–45), the Romanian nun tasked with cleaning the areas controlled by the Orthodox Church delineates the virtually imperceptible borders that divide the church between the different sects. Pereg filmed this segment with the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich in mind, accentuating its formal affinity with geometric abstraction.

In *Surface* (pp. 46–51), the camera focuses on the Stone of Unction, upon which, according to Christian faith, the body of Jesus was prepared for burial. In this expansive, larger-than-life projection, Pereg captures private acts of devotion and idiosyncratic personal rituals enacted by anonymous individuals, who attempt to absorb an ephemeral spirit through sensual bodily gestures and quotidian objects.

The adjacent video, *Clare* (pp. 58–63), follows the nocturnal activities of the same nun who maps out the boundaries in *Border* as she cleans sections of the church, including the Stone of Unction, with ritualistic mindfulness, wiping off, sifting and sweeping away traces left by the visitors during the day. Finally – taking a temporal and spatial leap of faith – in *Francis* (pp. 52–57), Pereg documents a Romanian street artist on the banks of the river Thames in London and links his austere humility, sculptural presence, and tender relationship with birds to the mythical sanctity of St. Francis of Assisi.

The installation at Ticho House in Jerusalem includes *Object* (p. 64), a geometric construction that the artist placed upon a tall black pedestal in the arched hall that prefaces the video displays. *Object* is modeled after a makeshift plywood partition that temporarily blocks off a construction site within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Alluding (like *Border*) to the abstract art of Malevich, this crude and flimsy object embodies the strange amalgamation of mundane materials and spiritual aspirations that typify the shrine and fascinate the artist.

At the Rose Art Museum, Pereg chose to display an additional video as a gateway to the exhibition. Titled *The Drummer (Le Batteur)*, and referencing Edouard Manet's 1866 painting *The Fifer (Le Fifre)*, this video presents a member of the Bethlehem Boy Scout Band and provides an offbeat drum roll that escorts viewers into the video gallery. Originally part of a 2013 project titled *Mandatory Passage*, the uniformed teenage percussionist led a procession of Christian pilgrims to a baptism site on the banks of the Jordan River near the Israeli-Jordanian border. Standing at the edge of a minefield, en route to a site called "Castle of the Jews," the Palestinian youth was part of a Christian ritual. In *Mandatory Passage*, Pereg had utilized multiple scopic regimes, vantage points, and narratives to re-constitute an experience in which multiple faiths, as well as the secular and the divine, intersect and collide.(7) At the Rose, the isolated *Drummer* sets the stage for an encounter with a different space, also governed by confusing boundaries, paradoxes, complexities, and ritualistic practices.(8)

Pereg's nod to art-historical precedents is deliberate, as are her multivalent references to her earlier projects.(9) The tensions and divides within the Christian community at the Holy Sepulcher echo the internal cleavages among Jews that she had exposed in her iconic single-channel video, *Sabbath 2008*. *Sabbath 2008* highlights a weekly ritual performed by ultra-Orthodox boys and men every Friday just before sunset: a physical and noisy act of dragging police barricades from dumpsters and street corners, screeching across asphalt pavements, in order to block off the roads leading to Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods. The video condenses our sense of the tangible and audible territorial barriers that

sequester distinct Jewish communities. It captures temporal boundaries – clocked by the setting sun and wristwatches – that distinguish between the profane weekdays and the holy day of rest. But it also questions the rituals of liminality that lend sanctity to menial chores.

Whereas *Sabbath 2008* and *The Right to Clean* expose internal schisms within Judaism and Christianity respectively, Pereg's two-screen video, *Abraham Abraham Sarah Sarah*, 2013, examines a well-coordinated and rarely seen interchange between Muslims and Jews. The installation positions viewers between two parallel walls upon which a succinct, efficient, and synchronized process of physical and symbolic transformation is projected. The location is the Tomb of the Patriarchs, according to tradition the burial site purchased by Abraham after the death of his wife Sarah (Genesis 23). Located in the violently contested city of Hebron, the site is revered by Jews and Muslims alike in honor of their common ancestor. Due to the tragic conflict between Israelis and Palestinians during the last decades, the Tomb, or Ibrahim Mosque, is segregated into separate areas of worship for each religion. However, ten times a year – in accordance with the religious calendars of both faiths – the entire cave is transformed into a synagogue or a mosque for 24 hours. It is these swift, temporary, and carefully choreographed transformations that Pereg's work captures. The unexpected collaborative actions performed in perfect harmony by Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians, ten times a year, hark back to biblical times, when upon the death of Abraham, his sons Isaac and Ishmael, the forebears of Jews and Muslims, joined forces to bury and honor their father (Genesis 25:8–9). (10)

Culminating with *The Right to Clean*, Nira Pereg has produced an impressive body of work which sheds light on mundane rituals and acts of devotion that precede the official, often sanctimonious, religious ceremonies of the Holy Land: sweeping the church floor, positioning plastic chairs in a synagogue, rolling out prayer rugs in a mosque, filling up well-used plastic bottles with turbid river water for baptism. These everyday actions were performed in tandem with the artist's own daily routine of filming the sites and following the rituals. Indeed, Pereg's videos also explore the nexus that links religious observance with the observant artist. Both faith and art are modes of meaning-making and world-making, as they share a desire to embody a non-physical concept, idea, or entity, or, conversely, to untether the sacred and spiritual from their profane, carnal, or tangible manifestation.

Postscript:

As Nira Pereg began to install *The Right to Clean* at Ticho House, the venue was undergoing extensive renovation. A middle-aged woman – part of the cleaning crew that was working in another part of the building – stopped to look at *Surface*, which was projected onto a dusty glass screen, still being tested, adjusted, and focused. The woman took a dust cloth and placed it on the glass screen, as if to clean it off. She crossed herself and then kissed the rag and put it in her pocket. When she saw me looking at her, she smiled and whispered softly “God is with us.”

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1. Pereg was born in Tel Aviv in 1969 and resided there until she moved to the US. She completed her BFA at Cooper Union, NY (1989–93) and enrolled in the newly established MFA program at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design (1998–2000).
2. See <http://nirapereg.net/Soil.html>

3. For example, Pereg photographed the Church of the Redeemer as seen from a rooftop in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhood Sanhedriyya; and the Dome of the Rock as seen from the Western Wall.
4. Returning to Israel after living abroad, along with notions of re-rooting in the soil of the Homeland, particularly as they relate to Israeli culture and veneration of the land, adds layers of meaning to the series.
5. For insightful articles about Pereg's practice see Sergio Edelsztein, "Consecrated Spaces," and Benjamin Seroussi, "Cut, Splice, Assemble: Re-editing the World," in Nira Pereg (exh. cat., Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, and Centro da Cultura Judaica, São Paulo, 2013), pp. 4-14.
6. The strife between the Christian sects has led to a situation whereby the keys to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher are in the possession of members of a Muslim family, who open the church doors every morning.
7. In a separate video component included in Mandatory Passage, night vision equipment was used to film the presence of wild animals on the banks of the Jordan River, engaged in their own feeding and mating rituals. See Nira Pereg (above, note 5).
8. In conjunction with the Rose exhibition, an educational display of Pereg's videos is on view at the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis University. See list of works (p. 6) for information.
9. The Rose installation in particular positions video art in a deliberate dialogue with painting (The Drummer appears like a framed painting; Clare evokes a monumental triptych), sculpture (Border is a minimalist 'box' and Francis sits on a cube pedestal that relates to the content of the video), film (Surface is screened on a large white wall), and architecture (the four components create a space in which the audience moves).
10. In addition to the obvious thematic link, dealing as they do with shared spaces of religious observation and the mundane acts that transform them in preparation for various religious rites, Abraham Abraham Sarah Sarah and The Right to Clean also focus on hollow and hallowed burial sites. In this respect they inevitably conjure up the mysterious boundaries between life and death, body and spirit. Pereg's monumental project Kept Alive, 2009-10 - filmed in Jerusalem's central cemetery - offers a fascinating though different perspective on this loaded issue. See Kept Alive - Nira Pereg (exh. cat., Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2011; essays by Boris Groys, Mignon Nixon, Hans Haacke, Philippe-Alain Michaud).