

The Believer

Christopher Bedford

From the exhibition catalogue *Nira Pereg: The right to Clean*

Publishers: The Israel Museum Jerusalem | The Rose Museum Brandeis University.

2016

Nira Pereg's video installation *The Right to Clean*, 2015, is a searching account of the human capacity to believe, and of the rituals we enact to instantiate and attest to that belief. Three of the four videos focus on the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and the rituals – both formal and informal – that unfold daily inside the walls of Christianity's most sacred consecrated site. The fourth is of a starkly different character. At its center is a Romanian street artist. Pereg follows the progress of this man's quietly gripping performance from preparation to presentation using an uninflected documentary vocabulary, relying entirely on the magnetism of her subject to generate interest.

Pereg refers to the fourth video and its central protagonist as Francis, after Saint Francis of Assisi, the thirteenth-century friar and patron saint renowned for his devotion to animals, particularly birds. Like his namesake, Pereg's Francis has a fondness for birds, and they for him. The video begins with Francis methodically disentangling wire from a pigeon's leg next to the Thames in London, then washing his hands with bottled water and beginning preparations for his performance. Slowly, and with clear familiarity, he gathers his props, dons a metallic trench coat, replete with matching gloves and mask, and trudges toward the waterfront to begin his performance. As he walks, scores of pigeons flock in a grey cloud behind him, some fluttering next to him, others walking hurriedly at his feet. Francis stops at a short pedestal surrounded by a low, metal fence, carefully checks his appearance in a handheld mirror, then steps onto the well-worn pedestal and assumes a static, regal pose, one hand on hip, the other at his lapel. In fading light and against a moody English sky he stands, occasionally attended by his pigeons, attracting the attention of a few passersby. Once he judges his performance over for the day, Francis descends from his perch, stows his props, and disappears from the frame.

Francis's actions are as eccentric as they are inexplicable. He performs for a limited audience whose fleeting attention borders on disregard, the financial rewards are next to nothing, yet the performance requires considerable patience and fortitude, and the action itself exerts no measurable effect on the world, nor does it obviously mean anything. So why do it? What motivates Francis? This is Pereg's unspoken question, and it cuts across time and place from Jerusalem to the banks of the Thames. Her video does not unlock and expose the inner life of her protagonist to offer a reason for his belief in what he does. Rather, she focuses without editorializing or inflection on the wonder of his unflinching persistence absent reward, recognition, or proof that he is making a difference. The beauty of his performance does not emanate from the action itself, but rather from the stoic faith that subtends it. Like pilgrims at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Francis's belief in what he does is as unavailable to us as it is deeply held to him. One might say that Pereg's subject here is the vast distance between the actions of the

deeply devout – the believer – and the subjectivity of the observer. The instrument used to measure and inhabit this space-in-between is the work of art. Whether the viewers of the video are skeptics or believers, their subjectivity is formed in relation to Pereg's images. The Right to Clean suggests the possibility of a third point between observer and observed where discourse and empathy are more important than devotion or disbelief. Pereg trusts in this means of analysis and the space it creates, making her, like Francis, and her pilgrim subjects, a believer.