

Triumph of the Cleaning Lady

By: Boris Groys

From the exhibition catalogue Nira Pereg: The right to Clean

Publishers: The Israel Museum Jerusalem | The Rose Museum Brandeis University.
2016

In the religious tradition that Christianity shares with Judaism, the transition from the profane to sacral space is connected with the concepts of purity and purification. By entering the sacral space one is supposed to purify one's soul from the dark stains that were left on it by sinful thoughts and desires. This is the function of sacral objects understood as spiritual things: to purify the human spirit. But what about the same sacral objects understood as material things? The spirit can become dirty only in the spiritual sense. But sacral space and sacral things can become dirty and dusty in the direct, material, positivistic way. Here the cleaning lady comes - and purifies the sacral space with broom and water. The videos by Nira Pereg thematize this material purification of the tools of spiritual purification. By purifying the symbols of spiritual purity, the cleaning lady demonstrates their material, profane dimension.

That is true for the sacral spaces of different religions - but that is also true for the art spaces which are supposed to transport the visitor into the state of "pure contemplation." However, even if the visitor to the art spaces sees the artworks as isolated from profane, practical life, the museum staff never experiences the artworks in this sacralized way. The museum staff does not contemplate artworks, but regulates the temperature and humidity level in the museum spaces, restores these artworks, removes the dust and dirt from them. In dealing with the artworks there is a perspective of the museum visitor - but there is also a perspective of a cleaning lady who cleans the museum space as she would clean every other space. Conservation, restoration, and exhibition are profane technologies - even if they produce the objects of aesthetic contemplation. There is a profane life inside the museum as there is profane life inside a temple or a church - and it is precisely this profane life that allows things and spaces to function as sacral or aesthetic ones. These spaces do not need any additional profanization, any additional effort to bring religion or art into life or life into religion or art - the church and museum are already profane through and through.

Usually, this profane life of religion and art is protected from public view. Of course, different iconoclastic movements demonstrated the thingly, material character of the sacral objects by desecrating and destroying them. These iconoclastic movements started almost simultaneously with the rise of biblical religions and continue until the present day. The same can be said about art. At least since the beginning of the twentieth century, art of the historical avant-garde became iconoclastic and tried to thematize, to reveal the factual, material, profane dimension of art. However, the avant-garde has never fully succeeded in its quest for the real because the reality of art, its material side that the avant-garde tried to thematize, was permanently re-aestheticized - these thematizations having been subsumed to the standard conditions of art representation.

However, the cleaning lady succeeds where the religious iconoclastic movements and the historical avant-garde fail. The cleaning lady desacralizes the sacral objects not by destroying them, but by cleaning them. She reveals the profane, material dimension of the sacral space - and at the same time leaves this space intact. So the question emerges: what would be the art practice that would do the same that the cleaning lady does? The answer is, actually, well known: it is art documentation. In recent decades, art documentation has been included more and more in art exhibitions and art museums, alongside the traditional artworks. But

art documentation is not art in the traditional sense of this word: it merely refers to an art event, or exhibition, or installation, or project of which we assume that they have “really” taken place. Thus, art documentation functions as a medium of information and can be used for the practical purpose of knowledge production and transmission. Roman Jakobson famously stated that language can be used as an aesthetic object only if its informational function is suspended – so that only the aesthetic function remains. According to Jakobson, this definition is valid also for the visual language. However, we are able to experience a video documentation as “beautiful” even if it remains informative. Here the aesthetization does not mean an act of purification of the visual language from its profane, informational function but precisely the realization of this function in a clean, simple, rhetorically correct fashion.

The videos by Nira Pereg are clean in this sense: cleaned from any kind of rhetorical dirt and dust. And, thus, these videos can easily cross the line between the art space and profane reality in both directions. Thus, her video on St. Francis shows a London guy who impersonates St. Francis as a living statue. But what looks like a profane impersonation bordering on parody reveals its more authentic character: the guy loves pigeons and cares about them as St. Francis did – and so the pigeons are, indeed, following him. Or Nira Pereg shows the parallels between a view of renovation on one of the church’s sides and Malevich’s images and architectons. These parallels correspond, indeed, to the main project of Malevich’s Suprematism. Malevich has often indicated the similarity of the geometrical forms that he used in his works to the use of geometrical elements in the context of the Byzantine and Russian tradition of icon painting. Thus, the ambivalence between the informational and aesthetic functions of her videos and other works opens the possibility to see them in the context of both art and profane information – profane information that could also be a sacral narrative.

Boris Groys is Global Distinguished Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University and Senior Research Fellow at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design in Karlsruhe, Germany.