

The Hard Pulse of Regularity

By: Boris Groys and Nira Pereg

From the exhibition catalogue Nira Pereg: Kept Alive

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Boris Groys: What is characteristic in both your recent works, *Sabbath 2008* and *Kept Alive*, is that you refer to a certain kind of trans-historical repetitive time: time that is not the time of the event; it is not historical time of change, of progress, of revival; it is not lost times past; it is not expectation of the future; it is not experience of the present as being unique and unrepeatable—all these modern ideas which have been prominent from Heidegger to Badiou and contemporary philosophy. This kind of desire to experience a uniqueness of time, uniqueness of the moment, is actually what produced historical consciousness or history as we know it. We need change, we need progress, we need the event. What was interesting about these works is that you show people who actually defend the space of non-event—Sabbath—space as a time of non-event, time in which God didn't do anything, he rested. Even your diggers in fact create a space for rest. That is why I was fascinated with the idea of *Kept Alive*: It is not something that is an event in itself—as something which happens because one dies and gets this grave. What is interesting is that this void, this emptiness, signifies your place in the world. Your space of rest is created during your lifetime. So while you are living, actively, creating events, you are involved in history, but whatever you do in this fullness of life is actually regulated and controlled by this void, by this emptiness, by this form that the grave diggers already created for you. In a very interesting way, however, rest here is also labor. It is not something that is simply given, but through your involvement in life, you have to keep this void, you have to keep this emptiness from intervention of history, meaning from the event. In this case, the event is your own death. The labor that you show here actually produces emptiness, since it keeps this emptiness alive, it keeps this emptiness intact, so that this non-labor, anti-labor, defends this non-historical, trans-historical, asynchronous time of repetition. Time of no time. If you have strong repetition, then there is no difference between the “moment” and “time”; you can experience eternity and immortality at once. You can enter or visit. When you visit a grave, you are visiting the space of immortality, much like when you visit the Sabbath, you visit immortality, because you are visiting something that is absolutely repetitive and non-unique. So this non-uniqueness has its own promise—and it is, of course, a promise of the immortal.

Now, what's interesting to me is that on a formal level, your video actually repeats this gesture of labor defending emptiness. If you make a sculpture,

if you make a painting, you produce a material object that has material reality in the world. But if you make a film or a video, what you actually produce is emptiness. You produce a projection, which is fundamentally a light projection. Formally, technically, before every projection begins, you have a kind of grave for this artwork: It is usually in the shape of a rectangular form on a wall. This empty space actually keeps alive your artwork. So the visitor to your video installation is also practicing this kind of visiting of eternity or visiting of immortality, by visiting a certain pattern of repetitive non-labor or anti-labor that actually keeps certain images alive.

But this feeling is very unstable. For example, if you look at films by Andy Warhol such as *Sleep* or *Empire*, they show the same image for many hours, so why not just make a painting or a photograph? But if you make the painting or the photograph, you lose this “kept alive” feeling. You lose the feeling of that extreme instability of the image. It is an image that can disappear any moment, and then somehow come back, maybe as a shadow, but you cannot distinguish the shadow from the original—it is a shadow of the shadow of the shadow. So you have this kind of repetitive pattern that, actually, in the formal structure of the medium itself, repeats the same, repeats the repetition. That is what you actually show in your work. It is, in effect, a repetitive production of this anti-labor.

Nira Pereg: The actual process of making these works is almost the opposite because I work virtually like a documentarist, in the sense that I am witnessing “real” events. I am very much into the particularity of the event, almost in psychological terms, looking for the *sujet*: What keeps me filming for so long, again and again, is how this specific person will take these barriers in a very different way from another specific person. The act is the same, the reason is the same, the location is almost the same, even the light is the same—the only thing that changes is the particularity of the people, who make the event.

BG: Yes, of course. You are involved in this event of creation. But I think that what attracts my attention is that artists naturally attempt to look at what they are doing from the perspective of how they did it. So if you explain your work, you explain it in terms of how it was done.

NP: Well, once I decided in *Kept Alive* to take this position, to look at the living in that context, especially of being so close to the workers, I was then confined to whatever was being done or whatever was external/visible, because death, of course, is something that I cannot see. In a way, I have nothing to work with as actual “material” other than the things that I see being performed.

BG: If you look at what you have done, what's interesting about it is that it is, in itself, uneventful. Maybe the production is eventful, but in itself it is not eventful. I think it is very good because being uneventful, it underlines or stresses this kind of repetitive pattern. Of course, I think in general, all video works can be very roughly divided into eventful and non-eventful. For example, Andy Warhol's movies are non-eventful, but there are a lot of videos that document something—they are eventful, they have a clear beginning and end. I think your work is kind of soft uneventful. It is not simply uneventful as still life; a lot happens, but what happens creates this feeling of a "quotation from a process" that obviously does not begin or end with the end of your film, but is part of this repetitive historical chain of events.

NP: I have decided to dig into real events in order to expose their unrealness or their artificiality or, as you said, their trans-historical quality. It is amplified during editing and also as the work is being installed in the context of an exhibition. Every segment is an event that is being either contrasted or erased by an event that happens simultaneously—especially in *Kept Alive*, because of the three channels. I think one does not necessarily compete with the other, but repeats—and therefore erases—whatever you can consider an "event."

BG: You are right. It seems that one image does not completely capture that.

NP: No, it can't, because the sounds create this spatial situation in which you have a competition of events that happen at the same time, which is kind of similar to what was happening all around us most of the time.

BG: But a repetitive event is like no event.

NP: Yes, exactly. I guess this is how I dismantle the event. I don't believe in it or I don't want to be attached to it. I avoid clear narrative progression. I avoid a cinematic peak, because I want to re-create a space which holds this intensity as a constant pulse. I am looking for that switch, so at first it can appear dramatic, but the repetition destroys that, so that you are left with the hard pulse of regularity.

BG: Precisely. I think you de-neutralize this eventfulness of the event, because you look at events that are so repetitive and are actually related to something that is metaphorically associated. Sabbath as a stop, a rest which comes every week, so it is a kind of "event as non event," "non event as event." It is in that logic.

NP: In both *Sabbath 2008* and *Kept Alive* I deal with events that have, in themselves, a repetition which is not my doing. In works such as *67 Bows* it

was me who repeated the same gesture 67 times and, more recently, in *And Melancholy* I repeated the same act of dropping the camera from six different Tel Aviv rooftops. They are much more performative. I often wonder what difference the source of repetition makes...

BG: I think that the difference is not so big. It is not so much that art imitates life; in fact, our life imitates art. Thus, you produce videos that are shown in loop, under the regime of permanent repetition, but at the same time you already practice this repetition in your life—at least, in your professional life. Here we have a kind of anticipation, the anticipation of the conditions under which the work is shown. These conditions, however, are already anticipated and reflected through the way in which the work is originally produced. It is actually a procedure of modernity: to reflect on the way in which the artwork is demonstrated in the structure of the artwork itself. In the case of video art, one can do it by practicing the repetition oneself or by looking for the repetitive in the world.

NP: One of the main things that you don't see in *Kept Alive* is death; you don't see burial or a funeral. This was an important decision, so that I don't actually have the event that makes this whole machine tick: somebody dies and then somebody is buried, somebody dies, somebody's buried. I took out the reason that all this exists, and I am left with its implication.

BG: Yeah, because somebody dying is an event, and it is actually inscribed in life. Sartre said that only others die. You never die. You never die because death, historically speaking, is only death of other people, you can't experience your own death as a historical event, in retrospect of your own history. So others die, but in your work, you yourself can die in a certain way, because there is a void, you create that empty space for you to lie in, so you make an opposite movement and turn your life into the moment of death. So already by living, it is not death turned to the moment of life, but life turned into the moment of death, because this place is already there, and you know that.

NP: Museums are places of void to be filled, or certainly places that preserve, "keep alive," certain perspectives.

BG: Preservation is almost a false promise today, since we have all these financial problems, it can all collapse any minute... But inside our system, the art system as it functions today, museums are a void, a place that you want to fill. One has this thought, as an artist, that after one's death you will still be exhibited there, precisely as you expect that you would, eventually, fill this void at the cemetery. So it is a cemetery, but it is a kind of symbolic grave, and people actually want to taste this grave, they actually fantasize about it. But, at the moment, we have Internet and all is digitized, and we

can look at your work now in my New York office on a computer screen. This kind of existence of a cinematic and a visual image doesn't need any museum; it is a museum in itself. So it has this kind of pure emptiness, pure void, pure light; this kind of structure that is already there.

NP: I find that the act of presenting or showing is already there in the act of filming. What we are talking about is amplified for me when we move the cinematic image into the art context. For example, I think of the size of projection while I am filming. I think of how it will be juxtaposed with another image of another size, at the same time. These are not aesthetic choices; this is the way in which the space of projection creates an option of an active viewer and allows me to build an autonomous structure.

BG: One can say that video takes its grace with itself; it doesn't need to be buried, it is already a grave. It needs context, it needs space. But it does not necessarily need the museum because museums are traditionally spaces of conservation and restoration; museums were introduced by European civilization to keep things accessible. We don't need that for this kind of medium because of its repetitiveness and because we can make a literal copy, what wasn't possible before, when we had to keep the original intact. So the exhibition space, like an empty burial place to be filled, is not understood negatively. It is a condition of actually keeping things really alive by showing, presenting, exposing. This kind of void is a condition of life. Let us assume we are eternal, so we can't end our life—it is an incredible limitation of our possibilities, because if you can't commit suicide, if you can't end anything, whatever you do, you do that all the time.

NP: It's torture.

BG: Yes, not really an attractive perspective. So the possibility to end things is actually what keeps us alive. Marx understood labor as being involved in capitalism, and he saw that in terms of progress and in terms of production—so the value of an individual is a value of the labor that he can produce. But I think what happens to us, in general, is that there is a lot of labor, but it becomes less and less productive, especially in the West. It is a kind of repetitive labor that never leads to any product, to any result.

NP: But it is what keeps things alive and as a by-product creates something very temporal.

BG: A different temporality, but a different temporality of eternal repetition. It is this kind of everyday life, you know, it's like going to sleep, staying up, brushing your teeth... all these rituals. It is a repetition of the same. It is the same emptiness repeated, and it is fundamentally not a paradigm of Marx's 19th century, it is not something going forward, in fact.

NP: But we aspire for it to be different, or actually not?

BG: I don't know. I don't know to what we aspire. If somebody drops a nuclear bomb on us, it will be different, but we also won't like it. I don't know to what we aspire, I can only say what we are *de facto*. And *de facto*, we are in a phase in our civilization, our Western civilization which is global civilization, that more and more shift their attention from what is historically progressive to organize some kind of eternal patterns of the same. This was actually what Nietzsche predicted in the 19th century: after you lose faith, you start eternal repetition of the same. It is precisely what our civilization is doing: It practices eternal repetition of the same, and I wouldn't say we are out of that—we are also involved. You know, for example, my being a professor is also a repetition. It is incredible how we do not reflect on that. We are still thinking in terms of change, growth, but in fact our civilization is taking a completely different turn. In your works you investigate that. In some way, our whole civilization is beginning to be a civilization of organizing basic patterns of existence.

NP: While filming *Sabbath 2008* in particular, I felt that I joined this repetition, because I had to be in a specific time and there was no argument about it. I had to be in a different location in Jerusalem every Friday at 4 o'clock, in order to follow this ritual.

BG: Self-ritualization.

NP: Absolutely. And the same happened in *Kept Alive*—I made some rules for myself, of keeping almost the same light conditions throughout the work. I had to film a certain number of visitations and meetings, and a certain amount of construction. *Kept Alive* took a year to make. Filming and editing took quite a long time. Not only was I filming it, I actually kept repeating what I had been looking at out there, in the editing process. At the moment, I am very interested in rituals that happen during visitations of believers to holy sites, not just graves, but sites which exist as proof that what the Scriptures say actually did happen. People who visit these places either bring or take with them an object which has been “charged” by qualities from the holy site, whether by touch or in the form of an actual material souvenir. These phenomena made me think about my use of documentary footage. What I think is happening is that these objects are “charged” by the “real” mystical powers according to these believers. I started to think that it is analogous to my artistic strategy of using documentary-based footage. It is as though my works are being “charged” with the authority of this kind of “real.”

BG: Yes, I agree, but it is a general question concerning all three biblical religions, and especially Christianity: What are their texts? A documentation

of real events (in the pragmatic, positivist sense of this word) or a symbolic story as in old religions? Somehow it is a mixture—and duplicity—of both, and this duplicity is an actual ground for all the conflicts in which these religions are involved. In fact, there is only one conflict—between documentary and symbolic meaning. All the other conflicts, including military ones, are projections of this conflict on the outside world.

NP: For me, this is the conflict I face each time I go “out” to film the “real.” I am constantly aware of the fact that, as much as I can try to tell the story that is out there, I will actually be telling my story, but I need it to be “charged” in that particular way, by chance maybe. It is always a conflict of interests.

BG: Of course, the practice of documentation is always highly ambiguous: we never can know if what we document is something “out there,” some “real” story, something factually true, or is it, actually, our own process of documentation, subjective time of our own work of documenting life. This ambiguity makes every act of journalism suspicious. But within the framework of art, this kind of suspicion can be neutralized, because art is here precisely a way to thematize a tension between documented life and life in and through documentation. In art this ambiguity is revealed, and here lies the primary difference between documentation per se and art documentation.

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