

Nira Pereg's Frontier Zones

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From the exhibition catalogue Nira Pereg: Abraham Abraham, Sarah Sarah  
Publishers: Museum of Art and History of Judaism, Paris. 2014

An artist's true singularity can be perceived only in terms of the shared places of his or her time and the tacit injunctions with which he or she has to deal. When asked to describe his philosophical project, Michel Foucault spoke of the "long-sighted discourse" that enabled him to reveal what is immediately present yet invisible to the contemporary eye unless one adapts one's vision and decontextualizes one's point of view. Two of the invisible presuppositions that are part of contemporary artistic discourse are the infatuation with the documentary format that over the last twenty years has transformed exhibitions into projection rooms, and a new type of relationship between the artist and his or her immediate environment. Nira Pereg's singularity lies in her approach to these two elements, and if we are intrigued by her work's closeness to its time, we are also fascinated by the entirely original protocols with which she separates herself from it.

Thus a new type of realism has emerged since the 1990s, based on a documentarian commitment to capture the event, to follow the thread of a situation, to bear witness to the world outside the formats imposed by global communication. This ambition, formerly that of the films of Rossellini and the French New Wave, has gradually deserted the film world. Art, more flexible, less costly and more open, has become the place of asylum of the documentary impulse, so much so that it is now contemporary art exhibitions that show us daily life on the five continents and let us hear society's outcasts and inferiors.

Some artists accomplish this task by adopting an itinerant posture, by going in search of an "otherness" with which they are unfamiliar, a context sometimes traversed in haste. Others, like Nira Pereg, prefer to explore their immediate environment by delving into its contradictions and grey areas. In her documentarian approach, Nira Pereg is an artist who immerses herself in the cultural and religious tensions and the private or political dramas traversing the restricted space that she has chosen as "frame." She shows us Tel Aviv like Manet painted Paris and Canaletto Venice. And when she produces a work on a trip abroad it can only be understood in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and war: 67 Bows shows us pink flamingos, in captivity in a zoo, repeatedly subjected to the sound of a firearm detonating. The sound of the weapon reloading induces the Pavlovian reflex of ducking or "bowing", as if a crowd had learned how to "tame" danger.

What is close and what is far away in the globalised world? In Germany, Nira Pereg finds a Tel Aviv that she brought with her in her luggage. Her ethnological eye and documentary tools enable her to capture the essence of the contemporary, but she uses a more complex and more formalised

apparatus (a camera launching into the void from several of the city's buildings, à la Michael Snow) to modestly tell her own personal story. "The painter brings his body with him first and foremost", Paul Valéry said. Nira Pereg produces only images in which she has implicated herself and which are accounts of her relationships with others.

Kept Alive, filmed in a Jewish cemetery in which Palestinians gravediggers work daily, could be regarded merely as a politically committed documentary if one does not perceive the emotive thread running through the images and the artist's implication in the reality that she is feigning to describe with detachment. This apparently distant eye that Nira Pereg systematically applies to her subjects is the very form of her commitment. To show the mechanics of exclusion, to set up one's camera in front of the protocol of separation, as she does in Abraham Abraham Sarah Sarah, is to do much more than merely document a situation, it is to follow the thread of life running through socio-political mechanisms, to undertake an archaeology of the present.

The documentary urge is always associated with an idea of the faraway derived from ethnography, whose progressive collapse—the crisis of the faraway—we are witnessing. Social networks and mobile phones are proving this today: the documentary functions now from person to person—it has become interpersonal. It is a local tool, a personal, private project, a social injunction. Because responsibility for the documentary paradigm is now taken by all not by one: we are all witnesses, and our evidence appears online. The use of documentary by artists now involves the dismantling of the ideology within which it circulates, and implicates a formal construction via which the artist situates and positions his point of view.

Nira Pereg works by immersing herself in contexts that are both familiar and conflictual, thereby doing away with the notions of proximity and distance. Even more precisely, she takes her body and her vision into frontier zones such as the Tomb of the Patriarchs, and the resulting films could be regarded as traces of the process that constitutes the true subject of her work: a patient and sensitive approach to social ties. Nira Pereg delimits spaces. Her entire work has to do with places, delimitations, territories, and the encounters she seeks with their inhabitants. This is her immediate environment: a space which contains other types of space "out of frame," in which there exists conviviality, amorous relationships, dialogue and family life.

For the cubist painters, this environment consisted of a table and a few objects, for the Pop artists it was the consumer world. For Nira Pereg's generation, this immediate space is socio-political, and the world she describes is the invisible machinery that generates exclusions and inclusions, a social universe laid bare.