

Tomb of the Patriarchs, Tomb of Ownness

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When we come face to face with this work, a priori it makes demands on our field of vision. Yet, between the images of Abraham Abraham and Sarah Sarah appearing simultaneously on either side, one cannot remain indifferent to what is being sought beyond the visual. In the heart of the visual a certain questioning is already making itself felt: that of escaping outside the visual horizon or fact, as if straightaway the question of know-ing whether vision is still the fundament and limit of our relationship to art were being posed. Because in this work, in which not a single voice is heard, there is a resounding appeal. One hears no voice yet everything appeals. This appeal does not command us to name this or that, a 'politically cor-rect' opinion or policy capable in return of giving us a good conscience. 'No designations', Nira Pereg would say. All the work does is appeal.

The work demands that we look. But this appeal to the eye is not a com-mand to see. The work neither orders seeing nor induces vision. It asks the eye to abandon vision, it appeals to the eye without transmuting it into a clear orientation, without transforming it into a position, without inscrib-ing it in a fixed dimension. The eye is thus taken beyond the snares of vision, and this shift engages it in a dyad. Nira Pereg constantly awakens this dyadic eye, not against but despite that other urge, known since Plato, to assemble everything into a unity, and thus into a vision. In this respect, the work is also a reminder, a reminder of the history of the eye, of the eye covered and forgotten. This is why this work cannot be understood as a direct presentation of seeing providing an unambiguous reading of reality. Yes, it is composed of images of reality, but in its installation and arrange-ment it constantly seeks to foil the determined modality by which reality usually imposes itself on us. It is as if for Nira Pereg the work, before being subjected to our vision, had looked at us. But to apprehend reality with-out vision is to be reminded of the duality of the eye, that there is always more than that which meets the eye. The question is not to imagine any-thing other than reality, but to show what awakens the real and therefore prevents it from extinguishing itself in that which is seen. The appeal to the dyadic eye is other than the command to see, because it involves seeing in reality the overflowing of the multiplicity always splitting it: the mul-tiple 'linings' of the real in reality. This is what Nira Pereg is showing us: that to consider reality as what is seen first and most usually, to pretend that one can apprehend it by confining it merely to the data viewed, would be to perpetually miss it and block out its inherent alternation. Everything happens here as if the eye is only appealed to if it is multiple, split between Patriarchs and Matriarchs, because, as the film shows, the Tomb is also that of Isaac and Rebecca, of Jacob and Leah, both of Judaism and Islam, whom Nira Pereg here doubly names Abraham Abraham and Sarah Sarah. It is this duality of the eye that scans the entire work, gives it its rhythm and movement. It does so even in the work's title,

in the double names invoking the multitude of other names in these names— Abram, Sarai, Ibrahim, etc.—and also recalling the many stories in the biblical narrative, the duality of the Abrahamic figure (coming from one place only to take another course, being both resident and foreigner, living without ever settling in one place, in a tent open to the four winds).

The first impression of the dyadic eye before the appeal of this work is a certain confusion stemming from a disorientation. So what is happening in these two films simultaneously projected opposite one another? There occurs the experience of a loss, the loss of any framed vision opening thus to a duality of the eye and also to its incessant instability. In this ocular duality and shift the work is in movement from its first images. It invites us to lose our reference points and therefore lose that sovereign assurance inherent in so many philosophical and political discourses claiming an ownership identity. Nira Pereg shows the shifts of one towards the other, of one dispossessing itself, expropriating itself for the benefit of the other. In doing so she engages art in an interminable dissidence and resistance vis-à-vis everything seeking to confine it to the affirmation of a circumscribed place and identity. It is an appeal to question and question again, where nothing is sheltered from the other and where everything is subjected to multiple shifts without fixity.

To view Abraham Abraham and Sarah Sarah with this dual eye is to engage in an experience of this loss. Jews and Muslims, each in the parts of the Tomb of the Patriarchs they respectively occupy, go about arranging their religious articles and ritual objects. A Jew closes the ark containing the Torah scrolls; Muslims carry away enormous prayer carpets; from a closed gate a Jew takes down a sign indicating that this is the tomb of 'Abraham our father', then the same Jew, in front of another door leading to the tomb of 'Jacob our father', takes down a prayer banner; Muslims stack books on a small, glass-fronted bookshelf; Jews take down frames; two Muslims rotate a bookshelf; a Jew sways in prayer; Muslims pile carpets in a room where chairs and ventilators have also been stored, then one of them removes a clock. Jews place prayer books in cupboards whose doors they lock, then desks, chairs and benches are assembled and surrounded with large wooden panels. Jews and Muslims tidy up and store away their belongings. The first free up the walls, the second clear the floor. Why are they all stowing away their stuff? Because, some ten times a year, for each religion's major holidays, either Jews or Muslims occupy the entire Tomb of the Patriarchs. Depending on the holiday, Jews or Muslims must disappropriate their respective spaces, vacate them, empty them and strip them bare of all traces of belonging and identity to allow the other to entirely occupy and thus appropriate the vacated Tomb.

Because, like so many other holy places in this so-called Holy Land, this is a shared place. On a daily basis eighty per cent of the Tomb of the Patriarchs is reserved for Muslims and twenty per cent for Jews. But for each religion's major holidays a handover takes place. Jews and Muslims vacate their respective spaces to allow the other to occupy the entire Tomb of the Patriarchs. To celebrate their holidays, the Muslims enter the part assigned to the Jews, and to celebrate theirs the Jews inhabit the space reserved for Muslims.

The time has come for the handover from Jews to Muslims, which a young female soldier marks by opening the door between the two spaces. Muslims begin appropriating the space disappropriated by the Jews, covering it with their carpets. A young soldier marks the handover from Muslims to Jews by opening the door between the two spaces. Jews then hurriedly appropriate the part of the tomb disappropriated by the Muslims, covering the Arabic inscriptions engraved in the walls with felt standards embroidered with blessings and prayers. Thus on the date of their respective religious holidays, both Jews and Muslims benefit from the entire Tomb of the Patriarchs. But this handover, this game of appropriation and disappropriation is in many respects facilitated by another symmetry between Jews and Muslims: their mutual prohibition of representation. Both share the same suspicion of the temptation to idolise a place, refusing to impose an immutable name on it and consign it to an eternal present. Thus Jews and Muslims both refuse any human, all too human temptation to embody a place.

An unexpected third party takes part in this handover: the Israeli army. Its role is to ensure justice is being done. This place has been stricken by too many murderous outbursts of anger, too many deaths haunt the walls of these sepulchres for them to be left to the religious authorities alone. Before opening the doors separating Jews and Muslims, before this dual, split place is transformed into the place of one or the other, the soldiers inspect it. They first make sure that the space has been satisfactorily cleared, occasionally intervening to remove an object forgotten by one occupant or the other. This meticulous inspection process takes place in silence. Automatically, the soldiers inspect each room. The cool neutrality of this inspection conveys a certain indifference to the place inspected, a certain detachment vis-à-vis the sacred meaning it may have, and above all an abstraction of the sacrificial urge that could set the Tomb of the Patriarchs ablaze at any moment. There is no enthusiasm in this justice. The silence of the officers supervising this disappropriation by either Jews or Muslims liberates the possibility for each to live the effervescences of their religious devotion ordained by the religious calendar.

One could even believe that in this game of disappropriation and appropriation of place, the cold, neutral administration of justice reveals the banality of this handover. But this banality is not insignificance. On the contrary, it emphasises why this place is never entirely appropriable. Like any place, the Tomb of the Patriarchs can never in fact be appropriated at all, and this is why Jews and Muslims can indulge in this handover game, in this game of disappropriation and appropriation. Everything takes place as if this place's inappropriability had created the possibility of appropriating or disappropriating it. And Nira Pereg's work asks us to look at this inappropriability, at the bottomless abyss of every place. Everything here is suspended in this void. It is only what it is because it emanates from the void. Because this void—shown in the middle of the projection as the Tomb of the Patriarchs is emptied of its contents and occupants—cries out to us. Just as the work appeals to the eye to look, what cries out to us in this work is this void. Nira Pereg calls this void the 'secular moment'. But what this last term

conceals is nothing less than a mise en abîme of ownership, of property: the enucleation of any identification with a place whatsoever. It is as if the abyss of the place kept something of the past and future by leaving for the present only the infinite game of appropriation and disappropriation of places that only 'placeless' people can engage in.

The tragic aspect of this is that this game is too often regarded as the sole reality. But the 'hope'—a word dear to Nira Pereg—would be to always see in all places everywhere the inappropriable void overflowing the places we most pretend to be ours.