

A Conversation

By: Timna Seligman and Nira Pereg

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Timna Seligman- Considering when and where we live, it is very hard to overlook our socio-political environment. Many of your works are shot in politically sensitive, divided sites. They are created through subtleties of division, dissonance, and conflict: whether through the physical divide created at the time of the Sabbath, or the absolute distinction between the use of sacred spaces by Jews and Muslims in Abraham Abraham Sarah Sarah. This must mean that you are regularly labeled a political artist whose works deal with the local politics of our region. Do you see yourself that way? Is this what you aim for in your works?

Nira Pereg- It is a complex, fundamental question. My Israeliness, like my Jewishness, is inherited. It is a very dominant inheritance, one that I question through my art. I know that this kind of dispute is not mine alone, just as most existential questions and conflicts are not only our own, but are assimilated in the neurotic relations of an individual towards society; it's embedded within the constant definitions of boundaries and structural relations.

This could be a simple answer to the question in regard to my art as political. I consider art as a political act, so I add my own to the collective pit, and this inevitably has public meanings. Therefore, I am less bothered by the title "political artist," and more bothered by the assumption that there is art that is not political. I set out to understand the place I inherited, in which I live. The Middle East is not only hot and exposed and loud externally; there are also many archaeological actions subversively occurring below the surface.

There is so much noise that it makes me raise the volume, and that amplification floods the political to the surface, sending me to the most concentrated, to the core extract. Everything revolves around the places visited by "God's" messengers, Abraham, Jesus, and Muhammad, and our severe situation today is umbilically connected to these sites. So I go there to stand on the edge of the abyss, the pit - the space into which everyone projects his or her existential fears, pleas, and desires. Hence, the distance you mentioned is always there, between that abyss and me. I am standing on its edge. In the work itself, this dissonance is manifested directly in the division between image and sound, as well as in the presentation of the one-off as repetitive. These elements are all essential to the medium and my decisions regarding it.

When I start editing, I bring in a sound designer,* who emulates the audiophonic element of what is seen in the image. This choice creates a narrative; it's a type of reverse engineering, which allows me to carefully re-examine the events, but this time through the sound. This allows me to bring out the unique relationship between the human and the inanimate in

these sites. The construct must be precise, since we aim for the most convincing lie, even though we know that the glue will inevitably be exposed. This flaw is for you, so that you too, as a viewer, may feel the distance. No matter how much I try to report, this distance will always be there for me, just like the distance between what is said to me and what I hear. A built-in, frustrating, existential distance. It is very much present, present to such an extent that the distance itself is that which exists. It is also a distance that enables something – possibly even the gaze itself.

TS- You opt for sites of faith, yet tend to show them in moments devoid of faith – not during rituals or prayers, but rather during their preparation and organization. What is it that you are looking for in these liminal areas? Does your inquiry or observation pursue faith? The lack of it? The practice of faith versus the spiritual? How do you distinguish between your artistic observation and a distant anthropological observation – or between the former and a tourist’s gaze – when you work in sites where your presence may be construed as a threat, as an attempt to undermine their very status and faith?

NP-As far as I’m concerned, every such place is a scaled-down model of the large space. In this respect, the museum is also a model, so is art. Therefore these places are very natural to me; they are actually a type of studio. Since the narrative of these places is very clear and accessible (anyone can read about the complex and conflicted history of the Cave of the Patriarchs or the Church of the Holy Sepulcher online), I became interested in how this narrative is sustained. How the same story is told over and over again on a daily basis, until there is no other story. The story is built out of repetition, memorization, and constant presence. I realized that my modus operandi must be the same. Repetition and constant presence. I think that a concept such as anthropology comes up precisely because of my long process of assimilation in the place. If on my first visit I am a tourist, on my second visit I am an amateur anthropologist, and on the third I am in a position that is parallel to the events, and I take on the status of a worker.

In Sabbath 2008, for example, I returned to Jerusalem every Friday for a few months and witnessed the closing of the Sabbath barriers, each time in a different junction around the city. Thus, whether I wanted to or not, I was performing a ritual that corresponded to and paralleled the event. And so, I never felt like a tourist. A tourist visits once; I keep coming back in order to neutralize that first gaze and turn it into my own narrative.

The process of repeated filming is important, since through it I look at the particularities of each event and focus on what it is that makes each instance unique. That is where the human and humane factor of the works lies. This process of intense observation provided me with a different view of such questions as: what is reportage, what is the medium, and what is the role and power of repetition – as both an act of faith and an artistic act? Via repetition and presence I realized who the worker is and who the master is. Thus, the direct political act is perhaps an attempt to convey this range of forces. The child who closes the Sabbath barrier is a worker; his boss is not in the picture at all. I limit myself to the evidence, to the scratches on the road, the revelations after the fact – this exclusion is a political act. The

closing of the Sabbath barriers is a direct result of a decision from above. It is an act that succeeds the decision and precedes faith.

For me, these are the places I reach on my way to the pit. On the way to that void that we all face, there is a great deal of “material.” In Israel, there are policemen, border patrol officers, and IDF soldiers, just as on the way to the museum there is a cash register where you pay, which is also material. You may say that I came to observe the material from which the moment beginning the Sabbath is made, just as I came as a living person to observe death in *Kept Alive*, or how the material comprising the moment of crucifixion is maintained in *The Right to Clean*. It sounds dramatic, but every such gaze contains death; in Judaism the dead are buried, and in Christianity there is one tomb, and it is empty. That empty tomb is proof of existence.

I have never encountered strong objections by the people I filmed. I think it is because I believe in my right to work in the same space where others work: whether they serve their country, their commander, their rabbi, or their God. My mandate is work. We all work all the time. I have always regarded myself as an atheist, and today I think this is a slightly rebellious definition, a defensive response to monotheism. It is true but restrictive. I find it hard to “believe” in any narrative which is handed to me by any authority. But I do believe strongly in something; perhaps most of all I believe in language. So what is left for me to believe in is our will to mediate ourselves, and this mediation is language. In language there is a bureaucracy: syntax, structure, intonation that creates meaning. Maybe it is from there that I arrived at the “how” – at the maintenance, the subsistence processes of these places, rather than the religious ceremonies held within them.

TS- The male presence in and male domination of the sites are obvious in the works. You – a woman and an outsider – arrive at the place and observe them, you point your camera at them. How do you build trust in such situations? *The Right to Clean* focuses primarily on the woman and her role in the church system. Where you aware of a difference when observing and editing the footage? Because I feel a change, almost a different gaze, in that work. There is a softness, a closeness to the figure of the nun. Is this because the protagonist is a woman, or because of the prolonged work on this project? Unlike other projects, which were created within a fixed, limited time, here you came and went; you were on site for a number of years. Did the long duration provide you with a different perspective, a different reference to the place and the events taking place there?

NP- In Judaism and in Islam there is a division between the physical spaces allotted to women and to men in holy sites; spatially, most of the area is reserved for the male majority. So as a woman I am estranged from all this, and my position is different. I can only witness what is going on. In the church there is an additional discourse, because the “worker” is often a woman, and the master is a man – whether he is living person or a naked, broken, and anguished but always forgiving Jesus. Therefore, in the church I sensed a direct and natural eroticism, an eroticism that I had not come across under the blazing sun at Jerusalem’s Har ha-Menuhot cemetery, or in

the religious paraphernalia at the Cave of the Patriarchs. I approached the church with great caution. Caution is always built-in, but here I was dealing with Christians as a minority group in the Israeli sphere, and we all know it is very hard to be a minority in Israel. Therefore I felt my Israeliness differently compared to other places where, or through which, I have worked. I revisited the church over and over again until both my tourism and my Israeliness were shed. Had this been my subject, I would have dealt with an intersection of narratives, but for me this would have been too dry and academic. It is about the long shedding process.

For years now, I haven't had a proper studio, so that the outside becomes my studio, forcing me to go out just as one goes to work every morning. In between and in the course of other projects, the church was there: accessible, open, and very repetitive. It has a type of emotional architecture composed of patches, reconstructions, and mostly a kind of passive preservation of positions. Although I have spent time in all of its interiors over the years, I went back to stand on the threshold. In this church, at the entrance you already submit: you bend, kneel, tremble, implore; it is as though you stumble upon prayer. At the Stone of Unction, a rectangle of 3 x 1.5 meters, the full encounter between

the physical and the metaphysical takes place; between the material that composes the pit and the pit itself. For me, kissing the stone was a type of direct contact with the bottom of the pit. I couldn't dismiss it outright with such words as "crazies" or "idolaters." There were people from all over the world there; most of them saved money for a long time toward this journey, and came to pray for something, to make a wish. This alone slightly erased the distance between us, because I, too, have come a long way to request something. At the same time, I couldn't ignore the distance, because the distance was built into the church a priori.

The nineteenth-century status quo set the exact division of the church into areas of ownership controlled by the Christian factions in it. The stories about the harsh quarrels between them over every square meter and every flagstone are well known. Visitors to the church, however, do not notice these lines and conflicts; they are in the air. I decided to fuse these two states - the actual and the metaphysical boundaries - and this act of cleaning was the ultimate manifestation of it for me. The only way I could truly see the borders was when the various factions clean their sections alone and not the adjacent ones, although the physical space is ostensibly the same space, and there is no visible division except, at specific areas, the type of flooring.

I met the nun who cleans in the video Clare at an early stage in the work process. I knew that twice a week the church closes from 9 pm to 4 am for cleaning, and for rituals and for worship by the monks working there. Since the night was reserved exclusively for the workers, it was only natural to be confined there with them. This intimate confinement, and the approval I received to stay and shoot it, were the final affirmation that I had succeeded in being there not as a tourist or as a worshiper, but as a working person. As only the Orthodox archbishop gave me permission, I was restricted to shooting only in the Orthodox areas. Being confined to the

same area to which the nun was also confined, and the ability to feel its boundaries, felt right.

The decisive distance was between the erotic intimacy of prayer and the clinical cleanliness of the moment after. It is an abrupt two-second boundary. The nun kisses the stone before she cleans. If you watch the video and blink, you might miss that. The cleaner sustains the two moments that fascinate me: she infuses matter with spirit by kissing it, and a moment later, she pulls out the Ajax cleanser and starts spraying. This is how she maintains the narrative. You must clean everything. The fact that I have the same Ajax product at home signified the actual point between closeness and distance. The instant between that kiss and pulling out the cleaning utensils is the space in which I could work. I realized that all the boundaries in the church are like that. Thus, *The Right to Clean* is, for me, a contemplative gaze at lending meaning to matter. Perhaps more specifically than in other works, it has to do with art; it has to do with sculpture as an object that has both matter and presence, but also transcends it. It has to do with the image as something that generates meaning. For her, when she cleans glass, metal, and wood, she also cleans the body of Christ and, in fact, maintains the story of the place. So for me, her cleaning sustains the image much more than the pilgrims to the Stone of Unction, who mark themselves or collect splinters of sanctity from the stone itself as relics of Christ's anguished body.

Filming a woman is a different experience from filming a man. This is the first time that a woman who is not a passerby, but rather the protagonist, appears in my work. She is the one working in the "studio" instead of me; she maintains it but also adds a very emotional flavor of love. In this respect, in this work, the difference is between studio and museum.

In Abraham Abraham Sarah Sarah, the Cave of the Patriarchs, as it appears in its nakedness for a few seconds, could resemble a venue for changing exhibitions at the museum, whereas the church is akin to a studio, in the sense of performance documentation - private, and at the same time, always performed in front of an audience or in front of God. Most of the noise in the church is the sound of camera flashes at a mad rate, to provide evidence, as it were.

In that sense, when I document I am also one of the authenticators. It is inevitable. I do many actions in order to examine and to disturb this position. I usually work alone, perhaps to stand across from those I am filming as a colleague and not in an official capacity. We are working together, each doing our work side by side.

The Hebrew root ע-ב-ד carries several meanings: it can be a slave, a simple laborer, and also a "worker (worshiper) of God." It is to this dichotomy that I am referring. These places are not innocent. They are places that reflect all aspects of the root's meaning, from work to worship, under a specific power structure.

Once you cross the threshold, authentic moments take place. I am sure that such moments also occur at Rachel's Tomb, despite its unsettling context and characteristics. This is what these thresholds are for. The faithful cross

the threshold and enter another dimension. I do not cross it ... only from that point do I see the regularity of the place, the ordering of powers that allows it to exist. These can be seen through the workers who maintain the place, not through the employers. I have discovered that those who work don't object to being filmed. Maybe because momentarily, through film, Sisyphean work is raised to the level of a ritual, an act that enables something larger to take place, whether they keep "the Sabbath," uphold "state security," or clean as a state of "prayer."

TS-There are two works in the exhibition that stand out for different reasons: one, Francis, was shot in London in 2006, long before you began work at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher; the other is Object, a sculpture/model of a makeshift wall inside the church. For both, the exhibition installation places them in context, creating the comprehensive environment of a sculptural video installation. On the one hand, these works provide the visitor with a different experience of another place and another medium; on the other hand, they complement and conclude the narrative you devised for the exhibition.

NP-An exhibition always offers a state of simultaneity by virtue of its being an encounter between works as well as an encounter with the museum as context and matter. There is a trinity of sorts here: Jerusalem, which is present as context for the Church of the Holy Sepulcher; London, the world outside; and there is also the world of art - the echoes of Malevich and Duchamp, of course. In this exhibition it felt right to create an environment that is matter. The moving image, which is made of nothing but flickers of light, is perceived on and within various objects and materials. At the beginning of his text *The World as Objectlessness*, Malevich addressed the fundamental relation between movement in all its forms (life, industrialization, nature), and its freezing, both scholarly (enlightened) and unconscious (dark), in science, religion, and art. The makeshift wall I chose to realize and turn into an independent object as a scaled-down model is a reportage, and at the same time - it is also a playful allusion to a Supremacist composition vis-à-vis the composition of Orthodox Christian icons. At present, this is the only architectural component that is not a structural addition to the church, but rather a temporary element functioning as a concealing curtain, although it was no doubt constructed completely at random by the renovators.

The shift of place from Jerusalem to London, and from the interior to the exterior, allowed me to toy with customary notions of hierarchy and continuity. The power relations arise as a question and are asymmetrical; thus the images are not introduced as evidence, but as an alternative. In Francis I left the empty sepulcher to go into the open air for a moment. I owed it to myself, and perhaps to the viewer, too, to breathe in some life. I shot it during a visit to London in 2006, when I came across a street artist whose body was covered with pigeons. I stayed with him for two days, following his daily routine from morning till evening, trying to understand the "miracle" of the pigeons' loyalty to him. The "miracle" was quickly exposed, and yet, like any relationship between humans and animals, it remained miraculous. Naturally, in the course of my work at the church, I

was interested in miracles. When I came to the father of the Franciscan order, Saint Francis of Assisi, with his miraculous ability to communicate with animals, I was reminded of the pigeon man from London. He was, for me, the one who interrupts the dichotomy of matter and spirit. The street artist - a foreign immigrant, temporary, frozen - stands in London as one who is unable to act, to take part in events, to live. He is there to be observed, but he can also observe. Like Christ's figure, he is a frozen human figure in a posture that likely causes him suffering, and he has pilgrims of his own: the pigeons. The installation tries to echo this simultaneity. He is there to be observed, but he can definitely also observe.

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* Nati Zeidenstadt