

Crisis of Narrative: The Video Art of Nira Pereg in Los Angeles

By Anat Ebgi

How could it be that a people with such powers of creativity, renewal and vivacity as ours, a people that knew how to rise from the ashes time and again, finds itself today, despite its great military might, at such a state of laxity and inanity, a state where it is the victim once more, but this time its own victim, of its anxieties, its short-sightedness? – Excerpt from Israeli author David Grossman's speech at the Rabin Memorial, Tel Aviv, 2006.

It's difficult to separate art made in Israel from the country's internal politics and conflicts. Fear of violence, disputes over the demarcation and expropriation of land, occupation, birthrights, and religious fanaticism have formed the familiar backdrop to Israeli life. The heart of Grossman's quote addresses a people caught up in their own self-inflicted cycles of repetition - a condition of collective behavioral feedback. Israeli-born video artist Nira Pereg fleshes out this notion by examining various societal microcosms and recording the actions of specific groups.

Pereg's videos are currently on view at three Los Angeles venues: *Kept Alive* (2010) at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, *Shabbat* (2008) at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, and *67 Bows* (2006) at the Pacific Design Center, a part of *Best of Loop: Remote Viewing*, an exhibition organized by Paul Young. In these three videos, Pereg seems to approach her work as a more traditional documentarian might – studying with seeming objectivity the activities of people and animals engaged in their daily lives and quotidian behaviors. By using the convention of the video loop, Pereg heightens the sense of a crisis in repetition – the activity of going through the motions without any indication of self-reflection. The narratives she presents are endlessly played out and accompanied by layered Foley sounds – sounds effects that are produced after the fact and often through means that bear little relationship to the actual things they are intended to imitate. This elegant method intensifies her intelligent juxtaposition of sound and image, and serves to create a sense of unease and artificial distance from the action at hand.

Perhaps Pereg's most ambitious video is *Kept Alive*, a 3-channel projection observing the yearlong expansion of a cemetery in Jerusalem's Mountain of Rest, one of the most valuable pieces of real estate in Israel and the place where many Jews wish to be buried. The video's title is borrowed from a marble plaque designating a burial plot that has already been chosen - a "reserved" space for the someone still living ensuring a final resting spot on a patch of earth in high demand. The 22-minute video documents various activities around the gravesite: family members visiting the deceased, Orthodox Jews absorbed in prayer, Arab gravediggers preparing and maintaining the grounds into which Jewish bodies will be deposited. Pereg reserves one screen for the activities of an Arab laborer, seen removing and replacing dirt from a grave, the monotonous sound of shoveling serving as a Sisyphean metronome for the whole installation.

Shabbat is a single channel video depicting each Friday's sundown ritual of fencing off the streets in various ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in Jerusalem. Pereg amplifies the grating sound of heavy steel barriers being dragged across the pavement, and captures little boys eagerly attempting to move the barricades to block cars from entering their devout enclave. Using her camera as a tool of surveillance, Pereg jumps from site to site focusing her attention on the sense of self-imposed isolation and delineation created by the shutting off of an entire neighborhood.

67 Bows is an exercise in observed Pavlovian action and reaction. The video opens with a peaceful image of a group of flamingos feeding in a shallow pool at the zoo. Moments later, a gun is first cocked and then fired and the heads of flamingos duck in tandem as the shot echoes out. The blast recurs throughout the 6:12 minute loop of the video, but with each round the birds become increasingly accustomed to the loud sound. They start to bow their heads even when the gun is simply cocked, anticipating the shots before they ring out.

Pereg's videos are programmed to endlessly loop. If not for the title card that introduce the videos, the seamless editing would blur the line between start and finish. The short format loop leaves resolution out of reach, a lack of any sort of conclusion to the myriad activities. It's as if these beings were stuck in an eternal present - no discernable progress or change occurs within the arc of each videos. Only the newly built cemetery in Kept Alive leaves one with any sense of completion.

With her detached and clinical eye, Pereg astutely examines various kinds of habits, actions and responses that, whether rational or heedless, can become engrained and unthinkingly automatic – a cautionary metaphor for human behavior generally and a warning for contemporary life in Israel. Her particular vision doesn't reflect, as does Grossman's, upon the long and storied legacy of Jewish reinvention and resiliency. Rather, Pereg's perceptible sense of unease is what guides an unflinching observation of the now.

Image: Nira Pereg, 1 Sleeps (2007), video still

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Anat Ebgi is an independent curator, writer, consultant, and gallery owner based in Los Angeles. She holds a Master of Arts degree from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, and Bachelor of Arts degree from the New School for Social Research, New York City. Anat worked with Rita Gonzalez (Assistant Curator, Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art) on curating the 2009 Cal Arts graduating M.F.A. class exhibition. In 2008, she co-founded The Company, a curatorial project space in Chinatown Los Angeles.