

Petzel

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ARTFORUM

Yael Bartana

PETZEL

At once persuasive and complex, Yael Bartana's films and videos come off as more than mere intellectual exercises. Seeking to directly effect social change, Bartana enlists the services of actors and nonactors alike, whether for documentaries, as in her recent analysis of Finnish identity, *True Finn*, 2014, or for works that collapse fact and fiction, as in *Inferno*, 2013. Her latest New York exhibition featured both these videos, which allude, like her previous output, to the various "demographic threats" ongoing in the world; the thorny question of citizenship, of being a body that matters, has always been paramount in Bartana's practice.

Inferno—which premiered in Miami and later toured biennials and festivals in São Paulo, Berlin, and Sydney—riffs on a replica of Solomon's Temple currently under construction in São Paulo by a neo-Pentecostal congregation, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. The baroque twenty-two-minute film, a cinematic spectacle teeming with fire, brimstone, and lots of great costumes, addresses a salient reality through what Bartana has called a "historical preenactment." Though a fecund work, *Inferno* has already received an ample amount of ink, and the newer piece deserves more consideration.

Commissioned last year by Helsinki's annual Ihme Contemporary Art Festival, *True Finn* was presented simultaneously in January and February at Petzel in New York, Capitain Petzel in Berlin, and Sommer Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv. The fifty-minute documentary-cum-reality-TV project began with a single, seemingly simple question: Who is a true Finn? (And thus, by extension: What is a Finn? What counts as Finn?) Eight Finnish residents of differing ethnicities—including individuals born in Somalia, Japan, and Estonia—were selected via an open call to live together, *Real World* style, for a week in an idyllic woodland setting. What ensues: group and individual conversations about belonging ("If a true Finn is something other than skin color, then I'm a true Finn," says the man from Somalia); about personal experiences of discrimination ("The assumption is always that I'm stealing," notes the Roma participant); and about legal privileges of citizenship ("I think it's great that foreigners buy Finnish land," a woman from Germany asserts). Akin to Artur Żmijewski's film *Them*, 2007, for which the Warsaw-born artist invited various ideological groups in Poland



Yael Bartana,
True Finn, 2014.
HD video, color,
sound, 50 minutes.

to design banners representing their respective visions of the country, Bartana's project has the group create a new Finnish flag and national anthem, perform psychodrama exercises, deliver speeches, and then vote for the truest true Finn among them to raise their novel emblem (the Somalia-born man won). Though the group is generally harmonious—there is little bickering or personality clash—Bartana adds some razzmatazz by intercutting the work with campy clips from Finnish movies, replete with blonde women, reindeer, and barren landscapes, all bringing to mind the nationalist agenda of the country's populist, politically conservative Finns Party, previously known as the True Finns.

Although focused on the local, Bartana's latest work opens up to the global, spotlighting not just the artificiality of nationality but also its effects. Watching *True Finn*, I couldn't help but think about the headlines of the day—the rash of stories on the history of and backlash against Muslim immigration in France in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. Optimistic that art can spark conversations and peaceful change, Bartana gives us representations of egalitarianism that are at once necessary, complex, and, yes, true.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler