

Emily Rappaport, “Yael Bartana on Israel, the Myths Underlying Nation States, and Being a Political Artist,” *Artsy*, September 2015.



Yael Bartana on Israel, the Myths Underlying Nation States, and Being a Political Artist

ARTSY EDITORIAL
BY EMILY RAPPAPORT
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Photo by Fabio Braga

From the earliest days of her career, Yael Bartana has explored mythic narratives about nationality and statehood in highly produced video works. Her study of nation states is rooted in her background and experiences of different countries and cultures: she grew up in Israel, lives in the Netherlands, and is perhaps best known for *And Europe Will Be Stunned* (2007-2011), a tripartite video exhibition about the restoration of Poland’s Jewish community that she premiered as that country’s representative at the 2011 Venice Biennale. Her newest piece—a contribution to the Jerusalem Season of Culture’s public art fair—is a futuristic, site-specific sound installation about a male character who walks around Temple Mount, one of the holiest and most contentious places in the world, and, after an encounter with a pair of angels, becomes pregnant. “He becomes a threat to all monotheistic religions,” the artist explained to me in a wide-ranging conversation about political art, Messianism, and the general order of things. “I was trying to think about what could change the patriarchy we live in. I thought maybe a pregnant man could do that.”

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Yael Bartana, Simone the Hermetic. Photos by Snir Kazir

Emily Rappaport: When did your art practice begin and how has it evolved?

Yael Bartana: I began to make art again around 2000. I took a break for a while after school. It came out of the necessity to observe or understand or take a position on my biography, the biography of my home. My experience growing up in Israel is not unique. It belongs to many; it's collective. The individual experience and the collective experience—I wanted to explore that relationship, and also to take a more critical point of view towards my own history of the place. It started as what I call amateur anthropology, observing the rituals that I went through growing up there.

ER: What changed in 2000?

YB: I had been very mainstream in my way of thinking, but things changed. I became much more critical, and, I think, much sharper. I [developed] different ideas about the same place. There was a shift in my practice from documenting reality to staging rituals and fictions. Fact, fiction—trying to blur those, exploring how the mythos creates reality, reality doesn't create the mythos. I wanted



Yael Bartana
Untitled, 2014
Petzel Gallery



Yael Bartana
Inferno (2), 2014
Annet Gelink Gallery

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to show how reality is so liquid, and sometimes so much in the hands, unfortunately, of politicians.

ER: How does that original impulse, to make work about the place you’re from, translate to your reality now, living abroad and in multiple places, and being part of the global art market?

YB: I worked in Finland a year ago. I started to realize that many things are very similar when it comes to the question of nation states. The history is different, the mythos is different, but there is always the retroactive process of explaining why a nation belongs to a certain territory. There is always the act of writing history backwards.

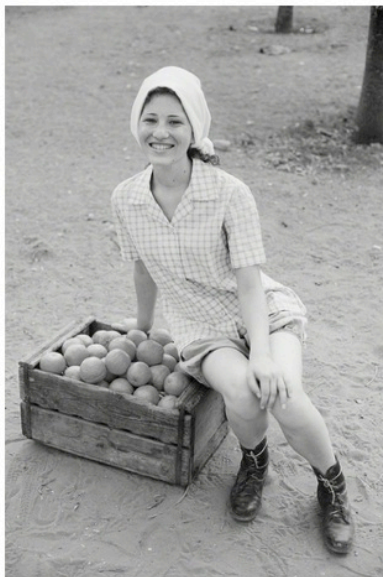
Growing up in Israel, the constant politics is very rich material—it’s somehow a laboratory for human conditions. I still explore that. At a later point, I worked in Poland, but again it was to explore the relationship between Poland and Israel, and the history of Jews in Poland and Europe, and how that affects people’s identities today and so forth.

ER: Do you ever feel pressure to make political work because of those conditions? Or does it always feel natural?

YB: It’s almost a necessity. If you come from such a background, there is no other way: either you’re a political artist or you’re an escapist.

ER: Does successful political art have an obligation to affect political life?

YB: If you can’t change it, you can at least participate. I don’t know if artists make change. It’s always been a question for me, how much we really affect. Because I feel like I’m always convincing the ones who are already convinced, you know? Open-minded [people] understand the experiments that I do.



Yael Bartana
2. *The Missing Negatives of the Sonnenfeld Collection*, 2...
Annet Gelink Gallery



Yael Bartana
18. *The Missing Negatives of the Sonnenfeld Collection*, 2008
Annet Gelink Gallery

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Yael Bartana
Shrines - Freud / Jrmip! Herzl, 2012
Annet Gelink Gallery

The “Polish Trilogy” is a political, intellectual experiment. People could read it—they have the knowledge, they can grasp many ideas, they can relate to it from their own perspective. But at the same time, many people took it as a very realistic fact that tomorrow 3.3 million Jews are going back to Poland.

ER: Did that bother you?

YB: No! I think it’s fascinating. It never bothered me either that I was criticized many times and blamed for being an “anti-Zionist” and a “self-hating Jew.” I can take anything. It’s not a problem for me as long as it creates discussion. We create art to produce discourse.

ER: People found this work very compelling. A friend went to the Venice Biennale in 2011 and brought me back the poster from your exhibition. It has remained on my wall for years.

YB: I think it opens new ideas. It’s not closing [viewpoints]. It’s not giving one-way statements. My method is to keep things quite open, so that as a thinker or a writer, you can actually add to the work.

ER: What did it feel like to be representing Poland, a country that wasn’t your own, when you make so much work about your country? Especially at an event that’s all about nationalism.

YB: For the work, it was the best thing that could happen. The moment that the minister of culture in Poland agreed that my work would represent Poland, it created a new reality to the project. I always felt that Polish people—some, not everybody of course, but let’s say the Polish intelligentsia—were waiting for such a project. It was really amazing to see and experience their reactions when I started working on it.

I was in Poland, I had this idea in mind, and I started to meet more and more of the country’s intellectuals. These people grew up with a non-existent Jewish community because they were born after everything happened, so they never experienced that history. It was important for them to explore that. There was a lot they didn’t even know—everything was blocked during the Communist time. So they started to find out little things about their own place, their own nation.

ER: So you’re accused of being an anti-Zionist and a self-hating Jew. What is it like to be a politically active person on the Left who’s still associated with a nation that’s often boycotted by the Global Left?

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YB: In recent years the boycotting has gotten much stronger. It’s a tricky situation, it’s very stigmatizing. But politics thinks in very black-and-white terms, that’s its limitation. When people ask me if I’d go into politics with my project, I say no way. Because it really blocks the imagination. It doesn’t leave anywhere to move. That’s the power of art: we can imagine what politics cannot imagine.

People ask me if I’m an activist, and I would say I am not an activist. I have ideas and thoughts about politics, but I’m not promoting one idea. I think that’s where people get confused. I keep it quite open for interpretation. I don’t want to block any dialogues.

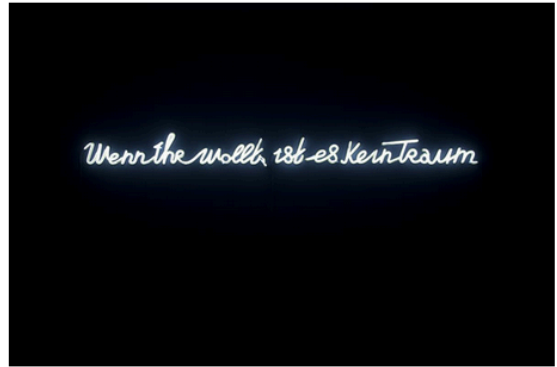
It seems as if fewer and fewer Israeli artists are getting invited to biennials, perhaps because the organizations don’t want to get in trouble. But many of us are Israeli leftists and very critical. At the same time, I understand, because if you boycott Israel, you have to boycott Israeli artists.



Yael Bartana
Next Year in New Jerusalem, 2014
Galleria Raffaella Cortese



Yael Bartana
And Europe Will Be Stunned (Neon), ...
Annet Gelink Gallery



Yael Bartana
Wenn ihr wollt, ist es kein Traum, 2012
Annet Gelink Gallery

ER: Are there any particular artists or thinkers who have had a strong influence on your work?

YB: Different times, different thinkers. Of course I read Hannah Arendt a lot. When I work on a project somewhere, I try to connect very much to the local thinkers. Now, since I’m into understanding Messianism and Judaism, I read Gershom Scholem. We live in 6000. It’s really the Messiah days. I’m trying to understand all the craziness going on around Messianism from the point of view of Evangelists and from the point of view of the Jews.

ER: There does seem to be a lot of craziness, doesn’t there?

YB: Look at ISIS! It’s kind of a messianic movement. There’s a lot to explore. That’s why I’m making art—I’m trying to make sense of all that.

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-yael-bartana-on-israel-the-myths-underlying-nation-states-and-being-a-political-artist>