

## Yael Bartana on the Politics of Collective Redemption

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In early 2020, as the first COVID-19 lockdowns were announced, social-media channels were filled with stories about nature's resurgence: dolphins in the Venetian lagoon, wild boar swarming Haifa and Barcelona, Elephants ambling through a remote Chinese village. With humans locked in, the world appeared to be healing itself. That many of these stories turned out to be fake didn't seem to matter. Call it millennial millenarianism, but who doesn't hope – faced with rising oceans, pandemics and wars – for salvation, or something close to it? All of which makes 'Redemption Now', Yael Bartana's expansive solo exhibition at the Jewish Museum Berlin, feel timelier than ever. Spanning over two decades of the Israeli-born, Berlin-and-Amsterdam-based artist's career, many of the more than 50 works on display grapple with political narratives of collective redemption.



Yael Bartana, *Malka Germania*, 2021, film still. Commissioned by the Jewish Museum Berlin

The visual grammar of messianic desire, and the way it has been mined by political movements, has long been at the heart of Bartana's body of work. Most memorably, the artist addressed such questions in her trilogy of films, *And Europe Will Be Stunned* (2007–11), included in this exhibition, which narrates the rise and fall of the fictive 'Jewish Renaissance Movement' in Poland, led by its charismatic leader. The artist's newly commissioned, three-channel video and sound installation, *Malka Germania* (Queen Germania, 2021), continues exploring these themes while extending their scope to the German postwar culture of remembrance (*Erinnerungskultur*), which, many argue, is increasingly beholden to a Christologically informed narrative that casts Jews in Germany as 'guests' representing the foreign state of Israel. In the film, a white-clad messianic figure with an 'Aryan' profile descends upon Berlin – Jewish commando in tow – and begins effecting changes: Lake Wannsee becomes the Hebrew חוף וואנזע; Zimmerstraße, once home to Checkpoint Charlie between East and West Berlin, is renamed after Jerusalem's heterogenous, east-west axis Street of the Prophets. Troops once again storm the Reichstag, but this time they carry an Israeli flag. Is this German-Jewish redemption, a righting of historical wrongs or, rather, a return of the repressed? Bartana is at her best when deftly working through such ambivalences and contradictions, so central to the current political discourse in Germany.





Yael Bartana, *The Undertaker*, 2019, film still. Courtesy: Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam; Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv; and Petzel Gallery, New York

Yet, if the iconography Bartana uses harks back to Christian visions of the end of time, her method and form seem to echo a very different tradition. In *The Coming Community* (1990), the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben recounts, via Walter Benjamin, a Hasidic story about the world to come, describing it in terms much less dramatic or violent. Everything there, we are told, will be 'as it is now, just a little different'. Similarly, throughout the exhibition, small shifts render uncanny an otherwise realistic narrative. In *Malka Germania*, this is achieved by way of the estranged familiarity of a transformed Berlin, whereas in *The Undertaker* (2019) – which depicts a procession as it follows an enigmatic leader across the charged historical landscape of Philadelphia, 'birthplace of American Democracy' – the processions' gestures, based on the notations of the late Israeli choreographer Noa Eshkol, seem to collapse politics into ritual, realism into fiction. And, in her earlier work, which often relies on documentary footage, this is done using simple material effects, such as the stretching of time or the fading of images (e.g. *When Adar Enters*, *Ad de'lo Yoda* and *Kings of the Hill*, all 2003, and her now-iconic *Trembling Time*, 2001). Perhaps therein lies Bartana's own redemption: redemption redeemed, to be seen not as 'the end of time' but, rather, its deferral, its stretching and trembling, the ability to render reality into something else – into fiction.

'Yael Bartana: Redemption Now' is on view at the Jewish Museum, Berlin, Germany, until 10 October.