

# Israeli Artist Who Filmed IDF Soldiers Occupying Berlin Can't Imagine Living in Israel

[haaretz.com/life/.premium.MAGAZINE-israeli-artist-who-filmed-idf-soldiers-occupy-berlin-can-t-imagine-living-in-israel-1.10034394](https://www.haaretz.com/life/.premium.MAGAZINE-israeli-artist-who-filmed-idf-soldiers-occupy-berlin-can-t-imagine-living-in-israel-1.10034394)

27. Juli 2021

Multimedia artist Yael Bartana has a provocative new solo show in Berlin, a Kindertransport memorial and a theater piece about Hitler's Jewish clairvoyant. She talks with Haaretz about Israel's occupation vs. Nazi ideology – and the need for activist art



The character of Malka in Yael Bartana's 'The Book of Malka Germania.' Credit: Yael Bartana, Malka Germania, 20

After completing her military service, artist Yael Bartana went on a yearlong trip to Africa. Her dream was to be a National Geographic photographer and she took pictures nonstop. At a certain point during that year, she phoned her father back home in Israel and asked him to look into whether the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem would suit her, and whether she should apply there. “He went there, came back and said: It’s not for you. I don’t know why he said that but nevertheless I went on to study there,” she recalls.

The Jewish Museum in Berlin did not agree to show a series of Bartana's stills in which she appears as a photographer in a SS uniform, inspired by Leni Riefenstahl

Last week, 25 years after she completed her degree in photography at the academy, Bartana stood in the Mount Scopus amphitheater and received the prestigious Yakir Bezalel Award, which is parallel to an honorary doctorate, along with Supreme Court Justice Salim Joubran and Prof. (emeritus) Arye Kurzweil. The program notes stated that Bartana was receiving the award in appreciation for her cinematic and other artistic work, for her tenacious and courageous exploration of controversial issues that advance dialogue and critical thought, and for her many contributions to the realms of Israeli art and contemporary art in general.

Her father, who was a veterinarian – and an obsessive amateur photographer, according to Bartana – passed away from illness in 2009, so he was not able to see his youngest child become so honored by and identified with the Jerusalem institution that, in his view, was not right for her.



A shot from Yael Bartana's 'The Book of Malka Germania'. Credit: Yael Bartana, Malka Germania, 20

This was another high point in what is quite a crazy year for the acclaimed multimedia artist, and not only because of the coronavirus pandemic. In December she celebrated her 50th birthday. In June, her one-woman show opened at the Jewish Museum in Berlin, which though it is considered to be a topical exhibition and not a retrospective features most of her outstanding works, starting early in her career. In September, a new memorial that she's planned, in the form of an abandoned carousel, will be dedicated in Frankfurt to commemorate the Kindertransport. And in October in Graz, Austria, there will be a premier of a theater piece on which Bartana is currently collaborating with Israeli musician and screenwriter Yammi Wisler, focusing on the enigmatic figure of Erik Jan Hanussen, Adolf Hitler's Jewish clairvoyant.

”

Israel is in a profound crisis of political imagination. It suffers from an inability to imagine life that isn't based on racial superiority, violence, oppression and separation

Yael Bartana

Bartana has been active for nearly two decades in the international art scene and is considered one of Israel's most prominent and successful representatives there. Her National Geographic dream morphed from documenting animals to focusing on human rituals and from there to social and political mythologies and constructs. At the end of 2019, the British newspaper The Guardian ranked her video trilogy “And Europe Will Be Stunned” (2007-2011) in ninth place among the 25 items on its list of “the best art of the 21st century.” (Below her on the list were such luminaries as Gerhard Richter, Ai Weiwei and Steve McQueen.)

Earlier this month Bartana arrived in Israel after not having been here for over a year and a half due to the coronavirus crisis – both in order to accept the award from Bezalel and for the screening of her film “Two Minutes to Midnight” at the Docaviv International Documentary Film Festival. (The film is available for viewing on the Docaviv website until the end of the month .)



A soldier draped in an Israeli flag: Part of Yael Bartana's video installation, The Book of Malka Germania, part of the 'Redemption Now' exhibition in Berlin's Jewish Museum. Credit: Una Hajdari

One German journalist even wondered aloud to Bartana whether it is possible to read the act of replacing the street name signs as an antisemitic statement



This visit, she tells Haaretz, has been a very confusing experience. “In the last round of fighting [referring to the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza in May] I said I wasn’t going near this place ever again. I felt it was already embarrassing for me to say that I am an Israeli. And on the other hand, there were demonstrations by Palestinians against Israel in Berlin, very extreme. And it was scary to walk around in those places. I also heard about Palestinians who said they were afraid to go to the demonstrations and didn’t identify with the violence. Amid all this, it’s hard to find your place. Ultimately, I am an artist, and my role is to communicate with the world. And I am not a big talker, as you may notice. Here and there, it all comes with a cost. I will never feel German. This foreignness serves me because I can ask questions about social structures and power structures and think about new paradigms. On the personal level, I have quiet there that I feel I will never have in Israel.”

Bartana’s decision to live in Berlin was also connected to another factor: When she decided together with her partner that they wanted to bring a child into the world, they thought about doing it in Israel but quickly realized that her because her partner is not Jewish, she would have convert so that Bartana would be able to adopt their child. They decided to give birth in Berlin, where there was nothing to prevent Bartana from adopting their son.

As a person whose political awareness strongly informs her work and whose opposition to Israel's occupation is one of the reasons she has been living abroad for more than two decades – it wasn’t easy for Bartana to accept the Bezalel prize in the amphitheater overlooking the Palestinian village of Isawiyah in East Jerusalem and the separation barrier.

“The Zionist institution gave me a prize,” she guffaws. “I was very emotional at the ceremony. My family and friends came to hear things said about me, and they were proud. This is a great honor. But I have a kind of complex about this place. You look around and it’s all occupied territories. As a person for whom this is a major concern, it’s hard. So I looked with mixed feelings at the landscape of this place where I myself had done creative work and where art is created – an enclave that is located in territories and is dependent on the Israeli separation and control mechanism. When I studied there [at Bezalel], I didn’t produce even one work that was connected to all this. Today there is more awareness, and I am glad that the academy is moving to the center of town,” from its premises on the Hebrew University's Mount Scopus campus.

‘I’m always hearing despair and people who simply leave Israel because things aren’t moving forward’





Artist Yael Bartana. 'I proposed stopping Cologne for two minutes of silence to reflect on the racism and fascism in Germany today.'Credit: Hadas Parush

Along with the uneasiness she feels here, however, Bartana stresses that she does harbor some optimism regarding Israel, which paradoxically also derives from her art.

“Over the years I’ve been creating art using political imagination, making an attempt to make a speculative future possible. I sense that Israel is in a profound crisis of political imagination, that is, suffering from an inability to imagine life in this expanse that isn’t based on racial superiority, violence, oppression and separation,” she explains. “An inability to break free of memory politics that is exploited to deepen fear and division. Art could have a role in developing this imagination. Art isn’t intended just to pose a mirror, to reflect or to document.”

*When you come here, do you feel that it is difficult to express this criticism?*



A scene from Yael Bartana's 'The Book of Malka Germania.'Credit: Yael Bartana, Malka Germania, 20

“People who live their everyday lives here, they don’t deal with this. There are the activists who are still trying to make a fundamental change. And I’m always hearing despair and people who simply leave because things aren’t moving forward and because they can’t exist within this situation. Over the years I’ve had very difficult political conversations with my family. At a certain stage I said, I’m never going to change them, that’s how it is.”

And yet, she would like to bring her 10-year-old son, Emil, to live in Israel: “I would like to give him the experience of living here for a while, of being in the environment of my family. It would do something to [his] personality, not being only in Germany with Germans, even though he has grown up in Berlin, a city with a lot of foreigners. But he talks about this, misses all kinds of places he once visited in Israel. He doesn’t really understand the politics here and it’s a little early to get him involved. The experience I had here when I was growing up – there’s no chance he will understand. It’s a different generation, a different situation.”



Credit: Yael Bartana, Malka Germania, 20

### **Then we take Berlin**

Bartana grew up in Kfar Yehezkel, a moshav in the north, and left Israel in 1997, after completing her studies at Bezalel. She got her master's at the School of Visual Arts, New York and then wound up in Amsterdam and Berlin. Her brother and her sister live in Israel but some of her nieces and nephews have also left: "They came to the conclusion that they had no future here, neither for them nor for their children."

One night a few years ago, she recalls, she dreamed that in the Berlin neighborhood where she lives, Prenzlauer Berg, all the street names were changed into Hebrew names. To this day it isn't clear to her whether that dream stemmed from homesickness for Israel or was actually a scary nightmare, but it did find its way into her new video work, "The Book of Malka Germania," which was commissioned for and is on display – projected on three huge screens – at her show at the Jewish Museum.

Bartana relates that when the museum invited her to mount the one-woman show, her condition was that she be given a budget to create a new work that would be about Berlin. Even though she has been living in Berlin (alternately with Amsterdam) for several years, together with German artist Saskia Wendland and their son, until then she had never created any work that dealt with the city that's so steeped in history. As someone who deals intensively in her work with the fate of European Jewry, that Berlin moment was perhaps inevitable.



Nevertheless, Bartana hesitated as to whether to do the exhibition at the Jewish Museum. “Artists want to show their works in art museums and not at cultural institutions,” she says. “If I show there, the works are read through the prism of the Jewish Museum and the way the Germans talk about the story of the Jews. This raises questions about the relationship between the art and the museum, questions that don’t arise when I exhibit at an art museum. And of course, the story of being Jewish in Europe comes to the fore more strongly.”



Watching “Malka Germania” makes clear what it is that Bartana fears when she tries to avoid making decisive statements. Credit: Yael Bartana, Malka Germania, 20

*But you had dealt with this previously – it’s not new for you.*

“True, it wasn’t out of the blue that they invited me to the Jewish Museum. But because the works are so provocative and in Germany there is so much sensitivity to the story of the Jews and antisemitism, I was afraid it would take over the art. It’s important to me that it be clear that what is there is images. If you think in terms of psychoanalysis, the idea is to activate the viewer. The worlds of the unconscious are supposed to be brought to the surface, all the fears and traumas, the collective memory. But I also wanted to leave it open enough, so the viewers could ask new questions and look for the answers themselves. I want to think about the redeeming and activating role of art.”

That being so, it is no accident that the new show at the museum, curated by Dr. Shelley Harten and Dr. Gregor H. Lersch, is called “Redemption Now.” Dozens of works by Bartana are on display, spanning several decades of her career – works she created in the early years of this century that focus on rituals in Israel, like “When Adar Enters” and “Ad

Lo Yada,” which focus on Purim festivities in Bnei Brak, or “Kings of the Hill,” a film that documents the conquest of sand dunes by all-terrain vehicles. Also on view is her trilogy “And Europe Will Be Stunned,” in which Bartana imagines a movement that brings Jews back to Poland, including establishment of settlements according to the “tower and stockade” method used for founding kibbutzim. This video series was selected to be shown at the Polish pavilion in the 2011 Venice Biennale. In today’s Poland, where laws are being passed that aim to sever any connection between Polish history and the Holocaust, this apparently would probably not have come about.

Watching “Malka Germania” makes clear what it is that Bartana fears when she tries to avoid making decisive statements. The magnificent film follows the character of Malka, which means “king” in Aramaic, as she, or perhaps he, enters Berlin in role of the Messiah. Along with Malka’s arrival from the green, enchanted forests adjacent to the Wannsee lake, where nymphs from German mythology dance – a company of Israel Defense Force soldiers also arrives, emerging from sewers. They run through the streets of Berlin and arrive at the Reichstag wearing helmets and carrying the Israeli flag. As in Bartana’s dream, the street names change from Friedrichstrasse and the like to Hatekuma (Rebirth), Ha’atzmaut (Independence) and Hakovshim (Conquerors) streets.

A series of stunning images and events of multifaceted significance – re-enactments of iconic scenes from Israeli military history alongside Nazi fantasies that come true, like the megalomaniac city Germania, the new Berlin planned by architect Albert Speer for Hitler that rises from the waters of Wannsee – leave the viewer amazed. Bartana has daringly juxtaposed charged images side by side and thus raises many questions about her views on the similarity between the Israeli occupation and the sources of Nazi ideology.

Even before the new show opened there were voices, including within the Jewish community in Germany, that opposed it. But the museum did not fold. “The museum must have the ability to be critical,” she says. “This is not an institution that is supposed to cling to the identity of the Jew as victim. It understands its role: to talk about racism and not only antisemitism.”





Bartana relates that when the museum invited her to mount the one-woman show, her condition was that she be given a budget to create a new work that would be about Berlin. Credit: Jdisches Museum Berlin / Foto:

However, at the museum they did set a limit: They did not agree to show a beautiful series of Bartana's stills in which she appears as a photographer in a SS uniform, inspired by Leni Riefenstahl. Instead they allowed photos of her dressed up as Theodor Herzl.

*This wasn't the first time that Bartana has been accused of antisemitism in Germany.*

“I did a project in Cologne, as part of a theater festival. I proposed stopping the city for two minutes of silence to reflect on the racism and fascism in Germany today. Most of the racism there is directed at Muslims and the Turkish community. But it didn't take place because of opposition from a group called Antideutsche, a group founded in the 1990s after the unification of Germany. They support Israel unconditionally and are not prepared to accept a single word of criticism of Israel's policy in the territories and the occupation. They disseminated a letter in which they said I was a “useful Jew” in the hands of the antisemites.”

*What did they mean?*

“It's not clear. Overall, they didn't understand the project. The Germans are very into guilt feelings, so it's hard for them to distinguish where it's necessary to be critical. And also there are Germans who are a lot more Zionist than the Israelis. They are convinced that the State of Israel is the correct answer for the Jewish people. This is also a kind of antisemitism in the form of the continuation of a fantasy that there won't be Jews in Europe.”



## 'It's Zionism on steroids'

Bartana is seen as a supporter of the cultural boycott on Israeli institutions, after having signed a petition of artists calling for organizers of the 2014 São Paulo Biennale to return the financial support they had received from the Israeli embassy in Brazil. She does not like to remember that event nor is she certain that it was a particularly smart thing to do. “What came of it? Nothing. Apart from the fact that Jewish collectors in Bogota returned works of mine they had bought. People don’t differentiate between the State of Israel and its conduct, and artists who are Israeli citizens, who could have a critical position toward the state.”

In Berlin the reactions to the new show and especially the film have been fraught. One German journalist even wondered aloud to Bartana whether it is possible to read the act of replacing the street name signs as an antisemitic statement. Bartana thinks that perhaps the journalist was channeling “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” or a plan for a Jewish takeover of the world. She emphasizes, yet again, that from her perspective it is important to leave room for ambiguity.

“As viewers we come to works of art and films laden with knowledge and collective memory. I did a tour of my exhibition for a group of 15-year-old German students and they asked me about the end of the film, in which people are seen standing and waiting for a train. They said: You are expelling the Germans the way they did to the Jews. But if you analyze the scene, all you see there is a group of people waiting at a station. There is no violent action here. We draw conclusions because we know history and because we have seen similar images in the past.”



One of the stills in which Bartana appears as a photographer in a SS uniform, inspired by Leni Riefenstahl. Credit: Daniel Sheriff

*Maybe you're being disingenuous.*

“No. It’s not a matter of pretending innocence. It’s clear that all the references are there. But is it possible to read other stories into this story? It’s clear that there is the matter of the occupation and there is a fantasy. But is there a need to occupy Berlin? In any case people welcome Israelis there with open arms. So what is the place of those images? What do they serve?”

*You talk about ambiguity, but there aren't many different ways to understand those scenes in which helmeted Israeli soldiers and flak jackets are running through the streets of Berlin. This definitely looks like an occupation.*

“I read it as Zionism on steroids. We’ve occupied here, and we will continue to occupy. I wanted to ask to what extent this is dangerous. The question of whether Zionism and Israeliness are an integral part of the desire to occupy. This could stem from actions of survival, revenge, fulfilling a fantasy. I wanted to create confusion. When a soldier emerges from the sewer, you can’t help but think about the propaganda films in which the Jews are compared to rats coming out of the sewers. There is a lot here of Leni Riefenstahl’s aesthetic, of Nazi cinema. The obsession with the healthy Nazi body and nature, and how this is taking on all kinds of twists today.”

*To me it seems to relate to two kinds of aggressive ethos, maybe a connection between the Nazi fantasy and the Zionists' fantasy.*

“That’s always dangerous because the historical contest is different. But [the late Israeli philosopher Prof.] Yeshayahu Leibowitz already talked about concern about a Judeo-Nazi mentality after the territories were occupied.”

*So that’s what you wanted to do, talk about the Judeo-Nazi soldiers?*

“Not directly. You’re trying to get me to say unambiguous things but I like it when people leave the show and say: But what does she want? I want people to work to find the answer. But it is clear that in Israel there is apartheid and a military government and violation of human rights. We don’t look good from outside and we also don’t look good from inside.”

“Malka Germania” touches very deep nerves among German people. One of the scenes shows various household items being thrown out of a window and shattering on the sidewalk.

Bartana: “It’s supposed to free them. I wanted to say: Come on, let’s throw all the objects that belonged to Nazi grandpa and grandma out the window and free ourselves. And if you are keeping it all in your homes, deal with it, talk with your grandchildren, don’t hide. Have stormy debates about who your grandfather was. Because there is a fear of talking about what was. There is repression.”



Credit: Yael Bartana, Mary Koszmary (Nig

She knows what she is talking about. Her partner Saskia’s grandfather was an architect in Potsdam and from 1931, a member of the Nazi Party. According to Bartana, his signature is on an order to close the Bauhaus school of architecture and design. “I am raising a child who is the great-grandson of a Nazi,” she says with a smile.

*Do they talk about this in her family?*



“Of course not. Her family was separated after the war, between East and West. I don’t know a lot of details about the grandfather, because they don’t tell me. It’s only with Saskia that I talk about this. But in the family, this is a difficult history. A few weeks ago, a cousin of Saskia’s died of cancer at the age of 55 and they held a family gathering after the funeral. So I’m sitting there and they are passing around a photo album in which you can also see the Nazi grandfather sitting there.”

*These issues are literally right inside your home.*

“This whole film comes both from inside and from outside. It’s personal and I’m also looking at it as a sociological political phenomenon. In the works I did in Israel, too, I was also both on the inside and on the outside, to enable a critical viewpoint for myself. In Germany my eyes and my heart have become honed to greater sharpness. I think this is the story of most of the Israelis who leave the country and, in general, of every citizens who leaves his country. All of a sudden you are seeing different things.”

A main concept that guides Bartana in her work – and about which she is also writing a doctoral thesis in a special program at the art academy in Malmo, Sweden, in conjunction with Lund University – is “pre-enactment,” as opposed to “re-enactment.

“Pre-enactment,” she explains, “is a historical event that hasn’t happened yet. An alternative to the present. What would happen if, what it means, what situation does it create, how does it subvert the status quo. It’s an attempt to imagine a situation and with the help of art to make it present.”

Indeed, another new film by Bartana, “Two Minutes to Midnight,” which was also screened at the recent Docaviv festival, imagines a reality that has not yet occurred: a world that is controlled by women. Though it has an international theme, it too emerged from Bartana’s observation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“I wondered what would happen if women were running things, if they were the people who held the power both on the Israeli side and the Palestinian side. Would this stop the occupation? Would the need for control disappear?” she says. “Control is one of the strongest things in a patriarchy. And it has gone from here, in Israel, to the world. It has become a broad question. At a certain stage I realized that I wasn’t really able to give an unambiguous answer to this question and say whether it would be better or worse when women rule the world. I wanted to create an experimental project in which there would be a multiplicity of voices.”



A scene from 'The Book of Malka Germania.' Was commissioned for and is on display at her show at the Jewish Museum. Credit: Yael Bartana, Zamach (Assassinat)

"Two Minutes" began in 2017 as a theater piece at a festival in Manchester, England, involving five actresses and another 40 women from around the world who are experts in various fields – from security and the military to society and law. Subsequently, with a nod to Stanley Kubrick's film "Dr. Strangelove," Bartana decided to introduce the issue of nuclear weapons into the performance and create an imaginary scenario of a situation room in which women have to decide how to deal with the ruler of another country – an extroverted man called Twitler who expresses himself crudely, mainly by means of tweets. Twitler threatens to sue atomic weapons on the country that is ruled by the women and they have little time to decide how to act.

*Do you believe that women are necessarily more pacifistic?*

"It seems to me that it very much depends on the circumstances. Our assumption was that our women want to disarm their country and they are pacifists, even if there are points of disagreement. I wanted to create a simulation of a reality that doesn't exist, to examine with it alternatives to a world that is run by men, and see what happens when women are sitting around the table. Is there a different agenda? What should feminism be doing today?"

*And what did you discover?*

"That in order to change the paradigm and the worldview and status, something very radical has to be done. I discovered that women's positions are very connected to the backgrounds from which they come and the level of urgency. There was one woman who came from Kenya, from a matriarchal society, and her whole worldview with regard to family, for example, was completely different. And there was a general from Denmark who was the first female pilot in the country and always enjoyed total equal rights, so she

doesn't even understand what there is to fight about. In order really to examine a world that is run by women, it is necessary to destroy everything and start all over at the beginning."