

Faithful Narratives

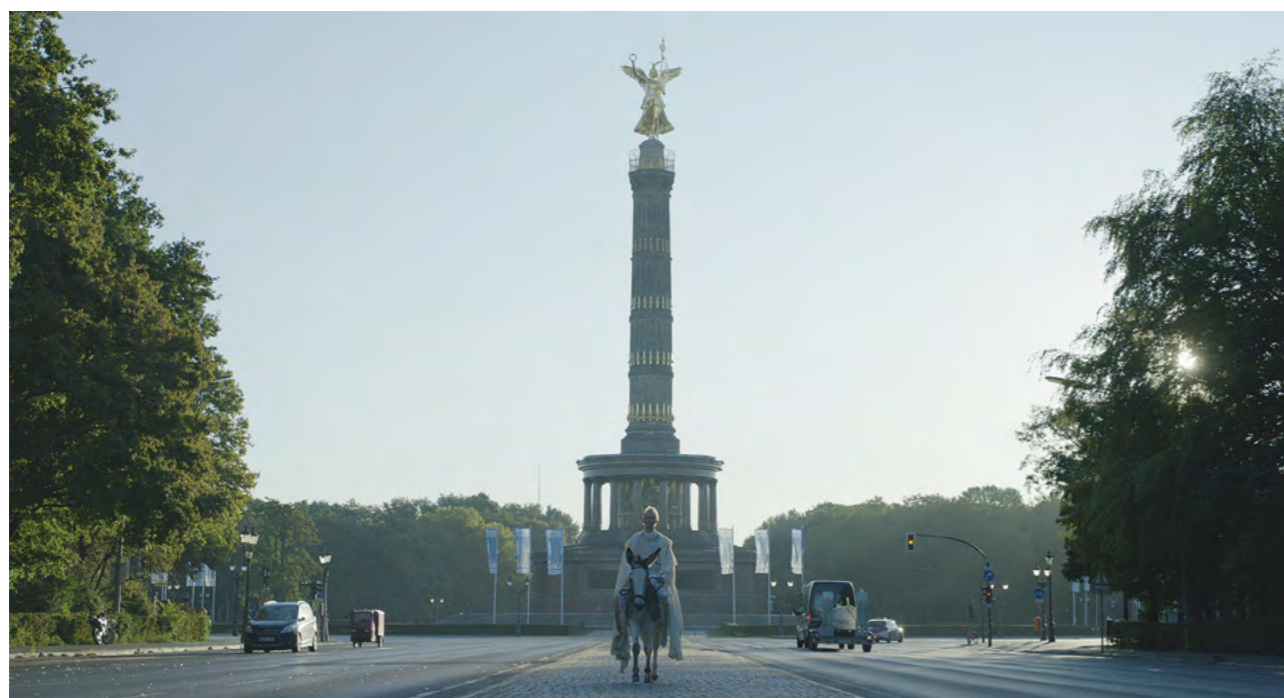
Yael Bartana
"REDEMPTION NOW"
JÜDISCHES MUSEUM BERLIN
4 JUNE – 21 NOV 2021

Yael Bartana (*1970), an artist born in Israel but based in Berlin, has been long overdue for her first solo museum exhibition in this city. And it is fitting, though perhaps for some provocative, that this institution is the Jewish Museum. The show spans twenty years of the artist's oeuvre, from her early videos that observe cultural rituals in the land she

complicated relationships between Jewish, German, Polish, and Arab identities throughout her work over the past twenty years. Her refusal to conform to the reductive historical narrative or take a clear stance towards the varied political movements she references (and sometimes invents) makes the experience of parsing her work difficult – an unease suitable for the complex territory that it treads.

Bartana is perhaps best known for *The Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (JRMiP)*, which centres on the film trilogy *And Europe Will be Stunned* (begun in 2007 and first presented together in the Polish Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale) about a speculative political movement that calls for 3.3

leader, depicted as the (real) Polish leftist intellectual Sławomir Sierakowski. He delivers his empathic address for a utopian new beginning, asking Poland to acknowledge its complicity in the Jewish genocide and to invite the people of Israel to return. His speech, emphasizing the necessity of an inclusive multicultural society, is delivered in the almost-empty Decennial Stadium, the former site of demonstrations by the communist party. The sequence is followed by the erection of a Kibbutz-like fort in Warsaw's Ghetto Heroes Square amidst a booming sonic rendition of the Polish national anthem (*Wall and Tower*, 2009). In a morbid turn, it ends with the obsequies after Sierakowski's (fictional) assassination in a hypothetical near future.



Still from *Malka Germania*, 2021, 3-channel video and audio installation, 43 min.

grew up in to an epic new commission. "Redemption Now" evokes the eschatological idea of salvation through a messianic figure, a foundational myth that serves as common ground across all the Abrahamic religions. Like few other artists, Bartana has critically examined the

million Jews to relocate from Israel to Poland. The trilogy, in Bartana's signature "pre-enactment method" – drawing on historical accounts to anticipate possible futures rather than replaying the past – starts with a compassionate speech by JRMiP's charismatic young

The film is not only unsettling because of its conflation of historic fact and fiction and its comingling presence of rhetoric and aesthetics from socialism, fascism, and Zionism, but also because it poses the thought that if millions of Jews were to relocate (back) to Europe,

then Israeli land could be returned to the Palestinians. A bold line to take in the Jewish Museum.

At the core of the exhibition, which compiles fifty works including neons, photographs, sound, and theatre productions, is Bartana's latest film, commissioned this year by the Jewish Museum, *Malka Germania* (Queen Germania, 2021). The three-channel projection plays on a loop, working through a panoply of suggestive images: an androgynous, Aryan-looking female Messiah figure in a white cape, apparently a hybrid of Soviet and Fascist aesthetics, appears in the Brandenburg forest. She rides into Berlin on a donkey, passing by the city's landmarks like the Reichstag, Brandenburg Gate, and Siegessäule. Interlaced images show people exchanging the street signs in Mitte for Hebrew ones; objects reminiscent of typical German cultural assets – a cuckoo clock, dishes,

Photo: Yves Sucksdorff



View of "Redemption Now"
 Jüdisches Museum Berlin, 2021

walking down the railroad tracks. As a surreal counterpoint to these already mixed signifiers, a camel trudges through the scenes here and there.

The narrative culminates at Wannsee, where Nazi leadership met in



Still from *Malka Germania*, 2021

busts of Beethoven and Schiller, a portrait of Luther, Reclam books, passports – fall from bourgeois houses on the street. Armed Israeli soldiers gather at various points as a group of people with heavy suitcases and expressionless faces wait at an abandoned train station before

1942 to discuss the Final Solution to the "Jewish Question". Between casual bathers, a neoclassical dome slowly emerges from the water. (At first glance, I thought it was the newly constructed Humboldt Forum, until I noticed that instead of the Christian cross, there was an

imperial eagle with a swastika at the top.) What rises from the lake to greet these stunned onlookers – and a somewhat melancholy looking Malka Germania – is Albert Speer's model of Germania, the Third Reich's projected redesign of Berlin, in all its monstrosity. The scene is so overcharged that it defies interpretation – we are left in the dark as to what kind of fantasy or redemption we are confronted with here, almost like a collective dream or a group therapy session. As in earlier films, Bartana draws on a variety of cinematic inspirations, from Leni Riefenstahl to Quentin Tarantino, Claude Lanzmann's *Sboab* (1985) to propaganda films about the Zionist settlement movement such as Helmar Lerski's *Avodab* (Work, 1935). By linking these tropes into impossible new meanings fraught with familiar symbols in conflict, *Malka Germania* plays with the clichés we carry in our collective memory. In a niche next to the projection resembling a storage unit, iterations of the Malka Germania figure recur as statues. Crystallising this anxious clash of signifiers back into the realm of artefacts, they relocate the fiction into the past. Sealed off in space and time, Malka Germania still haunts us, the complexity of conflicting memories incarnate.

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