

# Smouldering

**Yael Bartana mixes fiction and reality in a deliberately manipulative way. So why does Gammel Strand do so little to qualify the audience's experiences?**

By Stense Andrea Lind-Valdan 19.02.24 Review Artikel på dansk



Installation view, Yael Bartana, *Malka Germania*, 2021, trekanalsvideoinstallation med lyd, 38 min. Gammel Strand, København 2024. Photo: David Stjernholm.

Named after the stretch of old shoreline on which it is located, the venerable Copenhagen art venue known since 2004 as “Gl. Strand” recently announced that it will take greater ownership of the rich history of the institution and its address. Thus, the venue’s new director, Nanna Hjortenbergt, has made the abbreviated name vanish in a feat of prestidigitation as deft as the hands of the fishwives who used to gut fish here, instead ushering in the more conservative-sounding “Gammel Strand.” While the name may smack of middle-management pseudo-change, Hjortenbergt assures us that this is the first step in the development of the art gallery of the future.

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## *Things to Come*

Yael Bartana

Gammel Strand, Copenhagen  
2 February – 20 May 2024

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Other than the change of name, everything looks much the same as ever. But perhaps we shouldn’t poo-poo the potential for creating something new through a restaging of the old. Such efforts manifest with a wider-ranging geopolitical focus in the newly opened exhibition *Things to Come* featuring Israel-born artist Yael Bartana. Presenting two major film works as well as a couple of photo series and sculptural objects spread out across the two upper floors, Gammel Strand showcases a wide selection of Bartana’s work from the past ten years or so.

The absolute centrepiece of the exhibition, bearing the Hebrew title *Malka Germania*, is a three-channel film that Bartana originally created for the Jewish Museum in Berlin in 2021. “Malka Germania,” which can be translated as “Queen of Germany,” tells the fictional story of Berlin’s salvation and redemption from its historical guilt through the arrival of an exceedingly Aryan-looking, donkey-riding, female messiah: Malka. She appears to come from nowhere, and brings nothing with her on her journey. But wherever Malka goes, all kinds of very concrete and indefinable distress and disquiet arise.

For example, over the course of her journey, she witnesses the conquest of Berlin by Jewish military forces, the destruction of bourgeois German heritage, and the birth of a new age of rule. A new parliament rises from the smouldering depths of Wannsee, the lake on whose shores the historic Wannsee Conference took place, where the Nazis’ systematic genocide of Europe’s Jews was finally decided and coordinated. But the new parliament looks exactly like the Volkshalle from the Nazi vision of Germania, world capital of the thousand-year Reich. What salvation does this female Jewish-Aryan Malka really bring? And for whom?



Yael Bartana, *Malka Germania*, 2021, video still.

Repetition is a pervasive theme in *Malka Germania*'s looped narrative, where end and beginning merge through a group of Germans waiting for a train that never arrives and who eventually wander off into the emptiness from which Malka emerges. What Bartana calls "pre-enactments" – here-and-now repetitions of historical experiences intended to create change in the future – are recurring devices in her practice.

Understanding Bartana's challenging works requires broad and in-depth knowledge of politics, religion, and cultural history. Her ambiguous use of Nazi, Zionist, and Jewish symbols and Talmudic assemblage-like conversational logic is fiercely complex. Unfortunately, there is no significant help to be had at Gammel Strand. Throughout the exhibition, the contextualization of the art unfruitfully sticks to the superficial level of concise facts. This holds true for *Malka Germania*, but even more so for the other works in the exhibition, several of which have not even been given wall labels.

In the photographic triptych *Herzl* (2015), Bartana poses in the guise of the Jewish journalist and writer Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), who is considered the father of the idea of a state for the displaced Jews. Gammel Strand tells us who Herzl was but offers no explanation as to why Bartana has photographed herself as him. Does Bartana identify with Herzl? What does it mean to photograph oneself as someone else? Is it important to know that Bartana, who lived a completely ordinary life in Israel until she moved to Europe as a young woman and – as she has reported on several occasions – became Jewish through the European gaze, considers herself left-wing and critical of Israel's policies? What is the message here?

I had to view the exhibition three times, invest 67 EUR in the *Malka Germania* catalogue, listen to several podcast interviews with the artist, delve into her previous projects, and finally take a look at it all through the prism of Bartana's peer, Austrian artist Elke Krystufek, before I found an explanation on the level Gammel Strand ought to have offered its audience of its own accord.



Installation view, Yael Bartana, Herzl, 2015. Fotografi, 60 x 40 cm, Gammel Strand, København 2024. Photo: David Stjernholm.

During the 1990s and 2000s Krystufek worked, as Bartana does now, with historical anti-Semitic guilt, but from the German-Austrian perspective. Krystufek's artistic idiom is less academic, yet is no less complex when, like Bartana, she works with a form of subversive hyper-identification. Take, for example, the photographic self-portrait *Europa Arbeitet in Deutschland* (Europe Works in Germany, 2001). Wearing only a platinum blonde wig, the artist sits naked on the floor in front of a mirror through which she photographs herself. With a direct view of her genitalia, we also see the Nazi propaganda book from which the work takes its title propped on her stomach. Krystufek has inherited original sin, reborn Nazism and, through the reversal of photography, possibly (or possibly not) dispelled it. In another work from the collage series *Economical Love* (1998), she quotes from the semi-autobiographical novel *I Love Dick* (1997) by Jewish American author Chris Kraus. Krystufek juxtaposes bits of text from the book with painted self-portraits and photos of actors dressed as Nazis: "Jews don't like images, I said / Because images are charged. / Believing in the transcendental power of the image and its Beauty is like wanting to be an Abstract Expressionist or a Cowboy." With whose mouth does Krystufek speak? And what about Herzl-Bartana? Both artists believe in images and are aware of their potential for manipulation as well as change. For the same reason, both artists very commendably refrain from instrumentalising art, from imposing an explicit moral lesson, or from dressing art, faith, hope, or beauty in a cloak of goodness.

In Bartana's work, anti-Semitism and Zionism blend and merge, speaking with a double-tongued voice about guilt, about being a victim, about the snares of pious smugness and the dubious justification of colonialism. It is all quite confusing and uncomfortable in a powerfully challenging, productive way.

In the press release, Hjortenbergs expresses a desire to facilitate democratic conversation, just as Bartana also considers her works a starting point for further conversation on social and societal issues. It is all the more unfortunate, then, that Gammel Strand largely fails to unpack Bartana's high level of abstraction, her method, and her insistence on letting the ambiguous fictional tentacles of art penetrate the domain of the "real." The introductory text to the exhibition states that the works require us to familiarise ourselves with their many layers of meaning, and that it is also difficult not to "have the current war and its aftermath in both the Middle East and Europe in mind when exploring the exhibition." Which is all that Gammel Strand has to say about that matter, without even mentioning Palestine by name.

But what are Gammel Strand's thoughts on giving an Israeli artist the floor at this particular time? To me, the unwillingness to address the immediate, current situation and Israel's obvious military supremacy suggests a fear of conflict. Not on the part of the artist, but on the part of the art institution, which, after all, acts in a political setting that is far more specific and down-to-earth. For that reason alone, I believe we can reasonably demand a clear political stance from the institution, especially when presenting an artist of Bartana's complexity. The works in the exhibition mix fiction and reality in a deliberately manipulative way. Why does Gammel Strand do so little to qualify the audience's experiences, both artistically and in a wider sense?

I cannot be the only one who feels both uncomfortable and very lost. And I actually knew a little about Bartana beforehand; I work with difficult art on a daily basis and thus have a far more privileged starting point than the casual viewer. Unfortunately, Gammel Strand has dropped the ball on not only Bartana's future-oriented potential, but also its own newfound democratic ambitions, making it difficult to see how we should move on from *Things to Come*.



Yael Bartana, *The Missing Negatives of the Sonnenfeld Collection 1*, 2008, black and white gelatin silver print, 32,3 x 48,3cm, courtesy of Captain Petzel Gallery, Berlin; Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv

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