

“Two Minutes to Midnight“

Interview with Yael Bartana, for Cecilia Hillstrom Gallery
by Anna-Lena Werner

The Doomsday clock shows two minutes to midnight, two minutes before global catastrophe. In the dark ‘Peace Room’ of an imaginary, pacifistic country, five actresses embody members of an all-female government, meeting dozens of real female experts who act as political counsellors throughout the film. Jointly they discuss strategies of preventing the succession of global nuclear war, as another country and its leader ‘President Twittler’ break an international disarmament deal and create an alarming dilemma. The film’s situation could hardly be pointing more directly at the current war in Ukraine and the threat of nuclear aggression from Russia. Yael Bartana’s film “Two Minutes to Midnight” (2021, 47min) is based on footage from live performances from her theatre play “What if women ruled the world?”, which took place twelve times in the cities of Manchester, Aarhus and Berlin – each time with five different female advisors.

Anna-Lena Werner: Yael, what was your original motivation to draft the play “What if women ruled the world”?

Yael Bartana: The project started in the context of thinking about the situation between Israel and Palestine. I wondered what would happen if on both sides there were women in charge – if this would end the occupation and the corruption, if it would change the political map. Would they be more pacifistic? Would they prioritize differently? That led me to ask: What if women ruled the world?

ALW: The fictional government and their real consultants discuss offensive versus diplomatic political strategies, as well as feminist approaches to solving the dilemma. Why did you choose this semi-fictional setting?

YB: Over the years I have dealt with large socio-political issues through mixing reality and fiction. It felt natural to employ it in this project. It is a way to challenge reality by creating new images and speculation. I wanted to create a think tank, to produce knowledge and create fantasy at the same time. Fiction allows to radicalize reality and to create a sense of urgency. I was interested in testing the limits of the medium; to keep it unclear what is fiction and what is real, in order to come up with a multiplicity of new and diverse ideas.

ALW: Who are these female professionals that you invited and how did you cast them?

YB: The process of curating the experts was very long. It was very important to be inclusive and to reach out to women with various experiences in the real world. Together with my team, we looked for experts working within political security, military, but also professionals from the humanitarian sectors and NGOs, women who are running organizations, women supporting women in war situations, human rights lawyers, women involved in the NATO or in the delegation of the nuclear agreement with Iran. All these women have been involved in real political issues.

ALW: How much of the play was scripted?

YB: The outline of the story was scripted to create an arch. But none of the conversations were scripted. The ‘Vice President’ is a journalist and activist, and she helped conducting the overall conversation. A lot of work was put into studying the experts, so that the actors would feel comfortable to ask questions and lead the conversation forwards.

ALW: You created the play and the movie at the same time. Did this affect your work?

YB: Mixing two worlds – film and theatre – was challenging as I constantly had to consider the pros and cons of each medium, to plan ahead. Since the play involved an alternation of the five non-actors in each performance, I imagined that only the film would eventually show the multiple voices I was searching for. For each live performance we used nine cameras. Three cameras were operated by cinematographers and the other six were controlled remotely. Another element to consider: In a theatre actors act for the audience, but I asked them to act for the camera.

ALW: “Two Minutes to Midnight” refers to Stanley Kubrick’s post-apocalyptic comedy “Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb” (1964). How is the film addressed in your play?

YB: “Dr. Strangelove” was the starting point for thinking about the images I wanted to create in the film. I produce alternative histories through images. The brilliant ‘War Room’ created by Ken Adam is a very simple way to show how our world is dominated by men only. I simply wanted to take out all the men and replace them with women. “Dr. Strangelove” is a film about a nuclear catastrophe, and at the time I felt this fear of a nuclear catastrophe being present during the Trump days. Replacing and reversing this setting is my way of critique. That’s why the film asks: Can women actually prevent the catastrophe?

ALW: Gender stereotypes from “Dr. Strangelove” are inverted, too: There is a half-naked tea boy, cabinet members eat bananas and smoke big cigars, they get calls from their children during the meeting. Were these inserts meant as provocations?

YB: They are theatrical tricks to surprise and to change the conversation from security strategies to gender issues, to talk about the role of women in power positions. The tea boy is another inverted reference to “Dr. Strangelove”, where the only woman is wearing a bikini, objectified by her role.

ALW: Is “Two Minutes to Midnight” a feminist work?

YB: I wanted to create a platform for the women to reflect on the role of feminism today. I don't really believe in binaries, but historically women did not have the opportunity to be ruling the world.

ALW: You used to be an activist and most of your art works address political subjects. Do you believe that art can change peoples’ thinking?

YB: My question is what art can do that politics cannot do. Activist cinema and art cannot stop wars. But political art can create a platform for people to be heard.

ALW: Particularly leadership and power are recurring themes in your films. Can you explain why these subjects are so productive for you?

YB: I think having power is a positive thing. The question is how power is used. I have the expectation that leaders use their power and imagination to fix the world. If that doesn't happen, I create my imaginative leader, a hero figure, fixing the world.

ALW: President Olwen Fouéré – the fictive hero of “Two Minutes to Midnight” – has several flashbacks to scenes in which she wanders around a graveyard, holding a speech, leading a demonstration with young people that proclaim “Bury our weapons not our bodies” and in

which her followers collectively throw weapons into a grave. All these scenes are actually excerpts from your film “The Undertaker”, that takes place in Philadelphia – the birthplace of American democracy. What kind of narrative do these flashbacks refer to, what is this ritual that these people perform?

YB: Although there is of course a discrepancy between nuclear weapons and rifles, this act is a symbolic gesture by the pacifist president. Philadelphia is also the place where the Second Amendment was written – the right to bear arms. I wanted to invert this into the right to bury arms. While the film will not indicate what the president will decide to do, amid the possible catastrophe, her flashbacks are my voice: bury the weapons.

ALW: You have previously referred to your practice as ‘pre-enactment’. Can you explain what this term means for your work?

YB: Pre-enactment is a method to question the present time and to enact a speculative future by mixing historical events with imagination and prophecy, reversing and displacing ideologies. Pre-enactments examine and reflect on mechanisms of power and shape images of a future memory.